

the word on the street

Mark Fishlock roots out some of the stories that didn't make the front page



Life, it has been said, is the only human condition with a 100% fatality rate. Try as we might to avoid the inevitable, the Grim Reaper eventually pays us all a visit, with a casual "That's your lot, mate" and a terminal swish of his scythe.

5 June would appear to be a popular day for composers to become decomposers, as *The Times* noted in its anniversary column. Carl Maria von Weber departed on this day in 1826, breathing his last in a house in London's Great Portland Street.

The Italian composer Giovanni Paisiello understood the importance of having friends in high places and in his time worked for Catherine the Great, King Ferdinand IV of Naples and Napoleon Bonaparte. But death has little respect for rank and when the call came on 5 June 1816, Paisiello's powerful employers proved ultimately to be powerless.

The writing was on the wall, however, because on the same day almost 200 years before, the English organist and composer Orlando Gibbons pulled out his last stop in Canterbury.

Our fascination with death makes the obituary columns among the most popular sections of national newspapers. In June, the *Telegraph* noted the passing of Genichi Kawakami. Not a household name admittedly, until you read that it was this energetic nonagenarian who transformed a small family piano-making business into the company we now know as Yamaha.

Diversification was Kawakami's mantra and as well as continuing to make superb pianos, Yamaha is also the name found on motorbikes, outboard motors, golf carts, unmanned helicopters, bows and arrows, and of course a full range of musical instruments, from flutes to drum kits. Given the company's historical affinity with woodworking, Kawakami might even have considered going into coffins – although in a sense, he already has.

But don't be downhearted. *The Times* ran a lifestyle piece in March on the prospects for older men – and composers fared quite well. Even though "in earlier centuries ... many fell prey to syphilis or some other ghastly lurgy", if you did manage to survive an early exit, the evidence for continued creativity is impressive. At the age of nearly 80, Verdi came out of a 17-year retirement to write the operas *Otello* and *Falstaff*. The chances of a snog with Desdemona were somewhat reduced, however.

Death can be a great career move and the *Guardian's* web hack, Mike Anderiesz, wrote an article in April about how the lack of a pulse is no barrier to a full and healthy life on the Internet. The first port of call for anyone interested in those who have swapped Fender Stratocaster for celestial harp is the Dead Rock Stars Club (<http://users.efortress.com/doc-rock/deadrock.html>).

If you feel life is too short to type in this web address, there are plenty of more accessible e-bituaries to be found, including sites devoted to Jim Morrison, Marc Bolan, Phil Lynott and, of course, Kurt Cobain.

New life was breathed into the long-dead Scott Joplin in 1973, when his tune *The Entertainer* was used in the film *The Sting*. However, Joplin's resurrection was threatened in May when the *Express* ran a story under the headline: "Ice-cream vans cause a ripple of discord."

Apparently, residents of Hartford, Connecticut were suing the operators of Mister Softee ice cream trucks for continuous playing of the ragtime masterpiece. "Every night it's the same song over and over. It drives you crazy," said spokeswoman Hyacinth Yennie. However, Mister Softee showed his tough side and the company fought back, claiming legitimacy under the right for free speech.

Writers may not be immortal, but perhaps their creations are. With Gareth Gates joining the expanding club of singers who have recorded *Unchained Melody*, the former Searcher Frank Allen wrote a piece for the *Express* about the Alex North/Hy Zaret classic.

The song has been covered almost 700 times by artists ranging from Jimmy Young to ZZ Top. What is less well known is that it was originally written as the theme for a 1955 movie, a stark prison drama called *Unchained*.

The words "working" and "title" spring to mind. Presumably North and Zaret didn't think their song would live much beyond 1956. How wrong they were. **tw**



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