

## Fantasy Opera: Mischief at the Masquerade

# Behind the Game

---

Although this game is not “historically accurate” — in that it takes place in an imaginary setting populated by fantasy species! — the setting of Fantasy Opera was heavily inspired by the Baroque arts and culture of Venice, Italy in the 17th century. Especially its music.

This article goes “behind the game” to describe the real-world historical inspirations for the game’s story, setting, and characters.

**Warning:** This article contains some light spoilers for the game, so you might want to play BEFORE you read this.

---

## Venetian Opera

The turn of the 17th century saw the birth of opera with Jacopo Peri’s *Dafne* and Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*.

A few decades later in the 1630s, opera impresarios in Venice produced the first commercial operas: opera funded by a ticket-buying public, rather than a royal court. Thus began the golden age of opera.

As in the game, these opera performances were scheduled during Carnival season: a popular time for tourists and wealthy Venetians seeking entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

The game’s fictional Teatro della Fantasia is inspired in part by Teatro San Cassiano, which was the world’s first public opera house.<sup>2</sup>



Teatro San Cassiano (1637):  
historically-informed visualisation

Secchi Smith, ©Teatro San Cassiano Ltd,  
[CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.metopera.org/discover/education/educator-guides/agrippina/follow-the-money/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.teatrosancassiano.it/>

## Voices

Angelo is a countertenor. In Italian Baroque music, male *castrati* singers were prized for their beautiful high-register voices, they were cast in leading roles, and were major celebrities. Because of the cruelty of the *castrati* tradition, however, I instead chose to envision a version of this period where countertenors — male singers who use their natural head voice — took the spotlight. (Today, historically informed revivals of Baroque opera generally cast countertenors, and sometimes women, in roles that were originally written for *castrati*.)<sup>3</sup>

🎵 [Listen to this recording](#) on Spotify to hear countertenor Philippe Jaroussky.

Sofia, on the other hand, is a contralto: the lowest (and rarest) female voice type. While this voice type is perhaps more commonly associated with later operatic repertoire, contraltos certainly appear in operas of the 17th century (especially by Claudio Monteverdi).

🎵 [Listen to this recording](#) on Spotify to hear contralto Sara Mingardo.



Still from a 1996 production of *La Calisto* (1651) by Francesco Cavalli. ([Video](#))

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.santoshavoicegroup.com/blog/the-castrato>

# The Orchestra

The cornetto (also known as the “cornett” or “zink”) was a wind instrument used heavily in Italian music in the first half of the 17th century (and earlier),<sup>4</sup> but which did not survive into the modern orchestra. It was a soloistic instrument, often given the spotlight.



[Listen to this recording](#) on Spotify to hear cornetto player Bruce Dickey.

The theorbo<sup>5</sup> is a type of lute with a bass register, facilitated by its long neck extension. It was used prominently in the *basso continuo* section of 17th century opera, typically alongside viola da gamba and/or harpsichord, and persisted into the 18th century.



[Listen to this recording](#) on Spotify to hear theorbo player Rolf Lislevand.

One of the clues in Fantasy Opera revolves around the use of the key A-flat minor. It is historically one of the least-used keys in classical music. Probably at least in part because it has seven flats, which makes it difficult to sight-read. But in the 17th century, there was another reason why a composer would stay away from this key. This is some pretty technical music theory stuff, but I will attempt a summary! ([Here's](#) a deeper dive into the topic.)

The modern Western tuning system makes it possible for the pitch relationships between all twelve notes of the chromatic scale to remain consistent, no matter which key you are in. You can “transpose” (that is, shift a composition from one key to another) to your heart’s content. Western musicians settled on this compromise solution, which allows everything to sound equally in-tune or out-of-tune. Think of it as an “everything sounds good enough” tuning system.



But orchestras in 17th century Europe used meantone tuning (or “temperament”). In this kind of tuning system, the exact distances between individual pitches were variable and *not* equal. Tunings were instead optimized for certain intervals, chords, and keys to resonate in a more “pure” concordance. The tradeoff was that all the *other* intervals, chords, and keys would sound noticeably discordant — and so they were generally avoided. Think of it as a “some things sound fantastic and other things sound awful” tuning system.

Suffice it to say, an opera aria in A-flat minor would have raised some eyebrows at the time!

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornett>

<sup>5</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theorbo>

# Carnival

Venetian Carnival is an annual festival, famous around the world for its costumes and masks. Carnival precedes the beginning of Lent in the Christian liturgical tradition.

The 17th and 18th century represent the golden age of this tradition, although it was revived in the 20th century and continues today.



## Names

Many of the characters in Fantasy Opera: Mischief at the Masquerade are named after important figures in Italian music and art, or they have some special meaning or significance.

**Bernini Twins** - Named after [Gian Lorenzo Bernini](#), sculptor.

**Chiara Canaletto** - Named after [Canaletto](#), painter.

**Angelo Cavalli** - Named after [Francesco Cavalli](#), composer.

**Claudio** - Named after [Claudio Monteverdi](#), composer.

**Francesca Fata** - Fata means “fairy” in Italian.

**Frescobaldi** - Named after [Girolamo Frescobaldi](#), composer.

**Leo** - Named after Leonardo Da Vinci, Renaissance painter.

**Sofia Strozzi** - Named after [Barbara Strozzi](#), composer.

**Cecilia Tiepolo** - Named after the [patron saint of music](#) and [Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo](#), painter.



Still from a 2002 production of *L'Orfeo* (1607) by Claudio Monteverdi. ([Video](#))