



Cavalli – ‘Music from a time of plague’.

Francesco Cavalli, who composed this music, was born in Crema in northern Italy in the 17th-century. He was an excellent boy soprano and from the age of 14 he went to sing and train in the famous church known as St Mark’s Basilica in Venice. Venice is built on 100 small islands on the north-east coast of Italy.



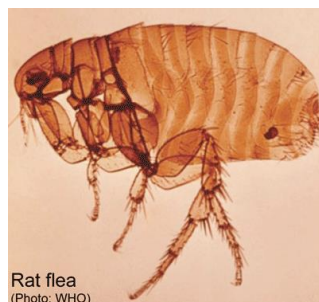
Plague.

You may have learned about the arrival of a plague called the Black Death in the 14th-century which killed half the population of Europe and Asia. But plague outbreaks also occurred at regular intervals after that, and a major outbreak of bubonic plague hit Europe in the 17th-century. Cavalli lived through several outbreaks of plague in Italy: he endured lockdowns, witnessed the death of friends and colleagues, and even lost his job during one of the worse outbreaks.

Bubonic plague was caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* which initially infected rats. The fleas who bit the rats became infected, and when the fleas jumped from rats to humans, they spread the infection. This bacterium caused fever, vomiting, and black apple-size swellings in the armpits, neck, and groin (between your legs). Many people died within two weeks of falling ill. Towns and cities lived in constant fear of the arrival of new waves of disease which killed thousands of people.

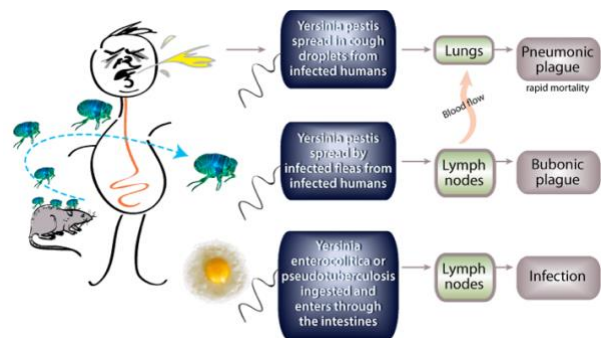


Yersinia pestis



Rat flea
(Photo: WHO)

Rat flea

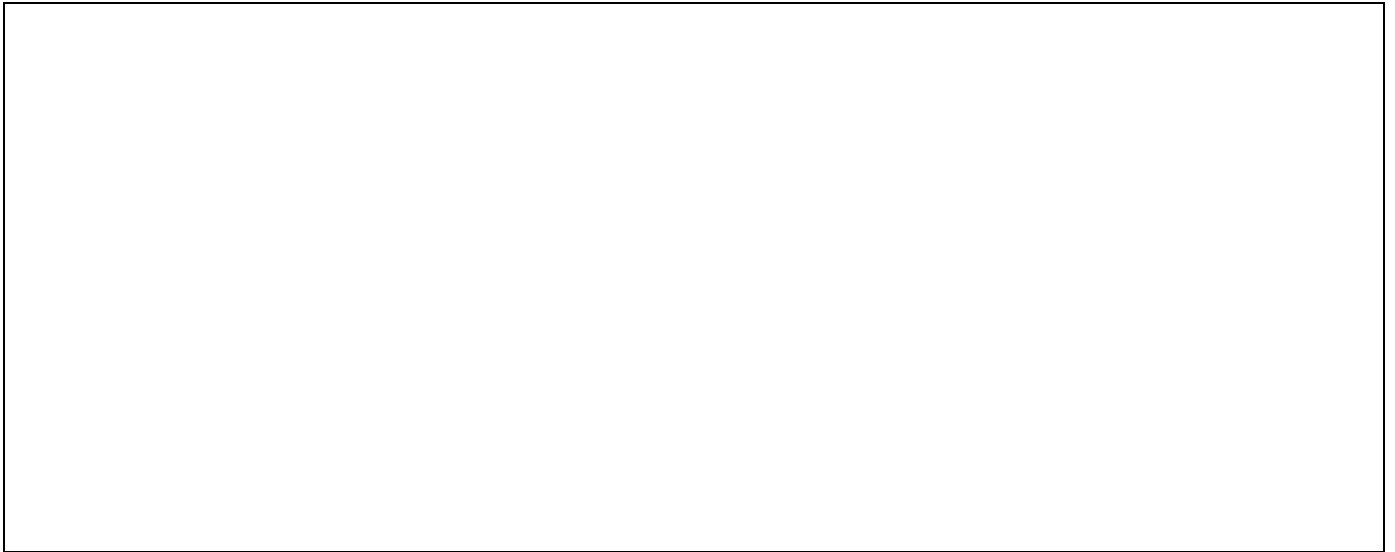


Possible means of infection

The bubonic plague ravaged large cities and towns in northern and central Italy from 1629 to 1631. 45,000 people died in Venice (one third of its population), and so did 50% of the population Parma, and 60% of the population of Verona.

1. THINK:

How do you think people felt about the plague in 17th-century Italy? Write some words or draw some faces to show your ideas.



Some Italian cities introduced public health actions to try to stop the spread of disease. These included: a lockdown making people stay at home, closing city gates, building plague hospitals (*lazaretti*) outside the gates, asking people to carry identification papers (*fedi* - proofs) to show that they had come from a plague-free zone, and sweeping the streets clean, rubbing an oily cream made of herbs and scorpion venom into their skin, and spraying perfume in houses to stop 'foul air' (the miasma theory) spreading the disease. But people were still frightened and very sad when friends and family members died.



Religion was important to people in the 17th-century. In Italy the Christian church offered help and hope in difficult times. During a plague outbreak, public gatherings were forbidden, but once they were allowed to meet up again, people went to church to share their feelings and to look for comfort.

Music helped too.

Most people didn't understand the Latin words they heard, but they liked listening to music. It was important that the music they heard reflected the drama and troubles in their lives – the sadness and the suffering, the fears, and the worries, but also the joys they shared, and their hopes for the future. It was also important that music was full of variety and was enjoyable to listen to.

Cavalli understood how to get drama into his music. He wrote many operas, and these brought lots of different characters to life. His music is full of a wide range of human emotions. He used his experience of composing opera to help him to compose this music so that it would show the things that people had experienced during the time of plague and the mixture of emotions and responses that they shared.

Cavalli was also a professional singer, so he knew how to write good tunes and challenging rhythms to make the music interesting to sing.

2. THINK:

What have been your favourite things about this music? Try to think of **THREE** things to write.

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3. Brainpower: DETECTIVE WORK.

As you listen to the music, tick when you spot each of the things on the table. As an extra challenge, there are some special music words and some Italian words – there is a key at the bottom to help you.

a solo	antiphonal singing	a hymn	a motet	a rhythm change
Instrumental <i>ritornelli</i>	<i>cori spezzati</i>	a monody	a strophe	a dance-like melody
a spectacular motet	a quiet motet	a <i>tutti</i> section		*BONUS: a hemiola

- ✓ cori spezzati – split choirs;
- ✓ antiphonal singing – alternate singing by two choirs (taking it in turns to sing).
- ✓ solo – one voice;
- ✓ a hymn – a religious song
- ✓ instrumental ritornelli – a section that keeps coming back with a contrasting section.
- ✓ motet – a movement for several voice parts.
- ✓ a monody – a single melodic line with instrumental accompaniment.
- ✓ a strophe – a verse (of a poem or song)
- ✓ tutti – everyone singing together
- * **BONUS challenge:** * a hemiola - rhythmic variation, where 6 notes are heard as 3 groups of 2, or 2 groups of 3; Cavalli used these to make the music seem more vital and alive.

4. Extension – DIGGING DEEPER.

The Plague Doctor

A plague doctor was a physician who treated victims of bubonic plague during epidemics mainly in the 16th and 17th centuries. These physicians were hired by cities to treat infected patients, especially the poor that could not afford to pay. They thought the plague was due to an 'imbalance' in the body so the treatment given was taking blood from the arm of a patient (to let out impure fluids). They also lanced (pierced), rubbed toads on, or applied blood sucking leeches to the swellings to try to remove the illness.

The outfit of the Plague Doctor was first developed in the 17th-century by Charles d'Orme, in 1630. He was well thought of as a physician and served as doctor to three French kings: Henry IV, Louis XIII and Louis XIV. He based it on a soldier's canvas gown. It covered the individual from head to toe.



He describes the outfit like this:

The nose [is] half a foot long, shaped like a beak, filled with perfume with only two holes, one on each side near the nostrils... Under the [waxed] coat we wear boots made in Moroccan leather [goat leather] from the front of the breeches in smooth skin that are attached to said boots, and a short-sleeved blouse in smooth skin, the bottom of which is tucked into the breeches. The hat and gloves are also made of the same skin... with spectacles over the eyes.

The clothes, especially the mask, were designed in that way because of the miasma theory (a miasma is an unpleasant or unhealthy smell). He thought that, if there was a foul air spreading disease, the best way to counter it is with a more pleasant scent. The beak was designed to hold herbs and flowers. Anything with a strong smell was used, such as camphor, cloves, mint, and myrrh.

The rest of the outfit was designed to protect the doctor from the miasma and fluids of the victim. The waxed coat was covered in a layer of suet (cow or sheep fat) to seal it against anything that might come into contact the doctor's skin. The thick leather boots, coat and gloves add another layer of protection.

Sometimes a wide-brimmed hat was added as a sign of their importance as doctors. Plague Doctors would also carry a wooden cane which allowed them to move clothing and bed sheets or guide their patients, without having to make physical contact. They could also be used in self-defence!

So, this is 17th-century PPE (Personal Protective Equipment)! The layer of suet and thickness of the clothes might have given some degree of protection from the fleas that spread the plague. But Plague Doctors might also have spread disease – think about the fluids that made contact with their coats and the fact that their canes poked and prodded multiple plague victims.

EXTENSION TASK – can you find out about plague doctors in 17th-century England. Did we have them? What did they wear? You could try making a Plague Doctor mask too.

PS: Don't worry. Today, modern antibiotics are effective in treating plague. Although human plague infections sometimes occur in the western United States, and in some parts of Africa and Asia, because we have effective treatments, there are no plague pandemics.