

Teacher's Notes

Danse Macabre **Camille Saint-Saëns**

Background

Danse Macabre, one of Saint-Saëns' most popular works, is a tone poem—an orchestral piece designed to tell a story or describe a scene. Saint-Saëns was drawn to this type of program music while still in his teens, when he met and became friendly with Franz Liszt, a pioneer in the development of the tone poem.

Composed in 1874, the work started out as a song, with the lyrics derived from a poem by Henri Cazalis:

Zig, zig, zig, Death in cadence,
Striking with his heel a tomb.
Death at midnight plays a dance tune,
Zig, zig, zig, on his violin.
The winter wind blows and the night is dark;
Moans are heard in the linden trees.
Through the gloom, white skeletons pass,
Running and leaping in their shrouds.
Zig, zig, zig, each one is frisking,
The bones of the dancers are heard to
 crack—
But hist! of a sudden they quit the round,
They push forward, they fly; the cock has
 crowed.

Although the vocal version of *Danse Macabre* was well received, most singers found it far too difficult, so the composer rewrote it as the orchestral piece we know today.

Visuals Used in the Program

Saint-Saëns' music gives the ghostly revelry a cheerful quality, which is reflected in the illustrations created by talented artist David Prebenna to depict the story.



The Music

The music begins with midnight striking (a single note held by the horn and struck twelve times by the harp) and immediately Death is heard tuning his fiddle as though to call all the skeletons to leave their graves and join the fun. The discordant sound of Death's fiddle is

achieved by tuning the top string of the violin a half-step flat.

The skeletons gradually emerge to a cheerful theme in staccato eighth notes, played first by the flutes, then by the violins, and eventually by almost all the instruments of the orchestra. Then Death's fiddle plays a long, chromatic melody.

These three bits of musical material—the fiddle tuning up, the eighth-note theme of the skeletons, and the long descending melody first played by Death—provide the basis for the whole work. They are heard again and again, tossed from instrument to instrument and key to key. The xylophone in the skeleton theme suggests the rattling of bones. The dance builds to a climax and abruptly ceases as, with the approach of dawn, the ghosts fade away. Death himself has time only for a few farewell phrases on his fiddle before he, too, is gone.

The Composer

Saint-Saëns was one of the most precocious composers in history. Born in Paris in 1835, he began piano lessons at age two and a half. At three he composed his first piece, writing music for the next eighty years “as an apple tree produces

apples,” he said. His accomplishments as a piano virtuoso were equally astounding: he performed publicly at age ten, playing Mozart and Beethoven concertos. As an encore he offered to play any of Beethoven’s thirty-two sonatas the audience requested.

Saint-Saëns’ prodigious musical output includes twelve operas, ten concertos, and well over a hundred symphonic, choral, chamber, and solo works. Yet only a few—*Danse Macabre* and *Carnival of Animals* among them—are performed today.

The composer, who strove for fluency and grace and dismissed emotion and inspiration as irrelevant, summed up his musical creed in saying, “The artist who does not feel completely satisfied by elegant lines, by harmonious colors, and by a beautiful succession of chords does not understand the art of music.”

Besides his musical accomplishments, he wrote poetry, plays, and philosophical tracts, often provoking controversy with his outspoken opinions. He lived until 1921, traveling widely and pursuing an avid interest in the sciences, particularly astronomy.

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