

Section 5 | Danse macabre

Camille Saint-Saëns

Who Wrote the Music?

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) is one of France's greatest composers.

As a very young boy, Camille Saint-Saëns was fascinated by all kinds of sounds. He loved to listen to clocks chiming, doors creaking, and especially to the sound of a large kettle boiling.

When he was only 2 ½ years old, he began playing his great-aunt's piano. He loved the sound of each note, letting it die away before playing another. His great-aunt gave him his first piano lessons and by age five, he was playing "serious" music by great composers.

At the same time, he began to compose his own music. When he composed, he wrote music without using a piano, just from the sound in his head!

When he was seven, he began to work with a professional piano teacher. By age ten, he played Mozart and Beethoven concertos with an orchestra. His teachers wanted him to give more concerts, but his mother did not give her permission, wanting him to grow up more like other boys his age.

When he was older, Camille studied at the Paris Conservatory of Music, where he began to play the organ. In his mid-twenties, he was organist at the Madeleine Church in Paris.

By the time he was in his thirties, he was very well known. He was so famous, he was often recognized by his fans, much like a movie or television star is today.

Among Saint-Saëns' most famous pieces are *Dance macabre*, *Carnival of the Animals* and the Third Symphony, written for organ and orchestra.

What is the music about?

Danse macabre is based on a poem by French poet Henri Cazalis (1840-1909).

Dance macabre (Dance of Death) 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.

- *Cadence: In rhythm, as in tapping a foot in time
- *Frisking: Skipping or leaping about.
- *Round: Round-dance

Danse macabre is a *Symphonic Poem*, meaning it uses music instead of words to tell a story. Saint-Saëns was one of the first French composers to write a symphonic poem.

The word "macabre" (ma-COB) is a French word that means *horrible, gruesome* or involving death in some way. After listening to the piece and studying the story, help students understand that Saint-Saëns wrote music that is scary in a fun or make-believe way, not in a seriously scary way.

Here's the story of Danse macabre, as told in Saint-Saëns' music:

At Halloween, in a spooky cemetery, a clock chimes midnight. The figure of Death appears, first tuning his violin, then playing an eerie waltz. As he plays, skeletons come out of their graves and dance to the music. The xylophone makes the sound of the dry bones dancing. The strings make the sound of the wind blowing, and the skeletons laughing as they dance. The dance gets faster and faster, louder and louder. As morning breaks, the rooster crows. Death plays one last sad tune. The skeletons scamper back to their graves as the sun comes up, and we hear the last two coffin covers shut.

Listening Map

Timings refer to the Minnesota Orchestra's recording of Dance macabre (Reference Recordings RR-82CD. Eiji Oue, conductor. Jorja Fleezanis, solo violin).

0:00

The Harp makes the sound of the chimes from the clock-tower. Ask students to count the chimes. How do we know it is midnight? What else in the music tells us it might be dark, or in a spooky place?

0:14

The character "Death" tiptoes into the cemetery (plucked notes from the cellos and basses) and then tunes his violin.

More about tuning...

- The first thing a musician does when he/she plays is to tune their instrument.
- At the concert, right before the conductor enters, you will hear everyone in the orchestra tune their instruments.
- Violin players tune by playing the strings of the instrument two at a time, listening to make sure the strings are in tune with each other.
- The four strings of the violin, from low to high, are G (4 notes below middle C), and moving upwards: D, A and E.
- The open strings of the violin are five notes apart, and when perfectly in tune produce an open, ringing sound.
- This piece contains many violin solos, and the soloist's violin is tuned in a very unusual way. The player is instructed to tune the E string one half-step lower, to E-flat. Instead of the very clean interval of A-E, we get a dissonant interval of A- E flat.

- This interval is known as a *tritone* because it is made up of three whole steps.
- Hundreds of years ago, in church music, the tritone interval was not allowed because it was thought to be too dissonant. It was referred to as “the devil in music.” Saint-Saëns is making a kind of musical “inside joke” by having the character of death tune his violin in this way.

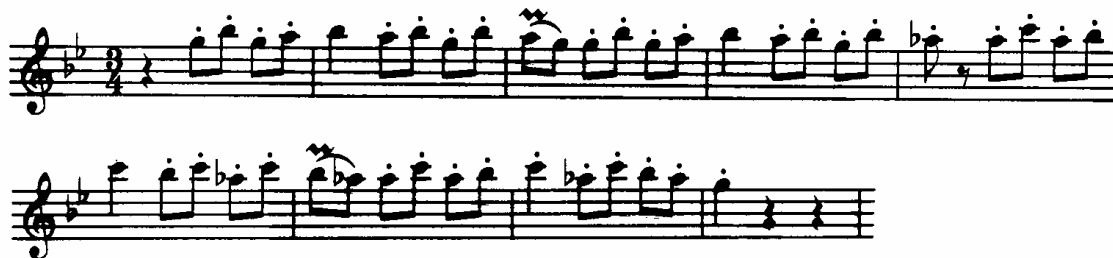
0:27 The Dance Begins

After the solo violin is tuned, the flute plays the first dance melody (Melody A). This dance is in the form of a *waltz*. A waltz is a kind of dance that has a three-beat pattern, with stress on the first beat. Students can get the feel of a waltz by saying: ONE- two-three, ONE-two-three. Or, quietly pat hands on lap on the first beat and clap softly on beats two and three. (pat-clap-clap- pat-clap clap).

Often, waltzes are played as part of big fancy ballroom dances, with everyone in fancy outfits and in a happy, festive mood. Since he chooses a waltz for the skeletons to dance to, Saint-Saëns gives us another clue that his piece is about being scary in a fun way.

If you have studied major and minor tonality, point out to students that even though the melody is light and dance-like, it is in a minor key which gives it kind of a dark quality, and the perfect combination of scary and fun at the same time. Melody A consists of short, choppy notes (staccato).

Melody A



0:42

The second melody (Melody B) is also a waltz, and has a much smoother character than the first melody.

Melody B



Both melodies are heard throughout the piece, in various forms.

The violin soloist you hear will be the first chair player in the first violin section. This person is known as the *concertmaster*. Many years ago, orchestras were much smaller than they were today, and did not need a conductor. The concertmaster was in charge of leading the orchestra. In fact, orchestras in England simply call the concertmaster the “leader.”

Today, the concertmaster is the person who comes out on stage before the conductor and leads the tuning of the instruments. He/she also plays any solo violin parts, as in *Dance macabre*. During rehearsals, the concertmaster decides which direction the string players will move their bows. He/she also helps communicate what the conductor has in mind to the rest of the orchestra.

As the dance continues, the music alternates between violin solos and the entire orchestra.

- 1:40** Listen for the brittle sound of the xylophone, which sounds like dry bones!
- 1:46** The string players strike their strings with the wood part of the bow. This is known as *Col legno* (Col LEN-yo), which means “with the wood.” This also makes a dry, brittle sound, and might represent Death tapping his bony foot on a gravestone as he plays. (This may be difficult to hear on the recording, but watch and listen for it at the concert.)
- 1:53** A short, choppy version of Melody B is played as a canon (round).
- 3:15** A version of Melody A in the lower instruments, while the violins play scales up and down very fast, making the sound of the wind in the linden-trees in the cemetery.
- 4:38** Mysterious moans come from the trees around the cemetery.
- 5:05** Both Melody A and B are heard at the same time. The strings and woodwinds play melody A, while the trombones play Melody B.
- 5:25** The violins make the sound of the skeletons laughing, both eerie and spooky.
- 5:38** The dance gets faster and faster, louder and louder.
- 5:55** The frenzied dance stops suddenly: it is morning, and the rooster (oboe) is crowing.
- 6:20** Death plays one more sad little tune on his violin, after which the skeletons scamper back into their graves. Some people think the last two notes of the piece represent the last two coffin lids quietly slamming shut for another year.

Activities:

One - Instruments of the Orchestra.

- Using BOMAR or other instrument charts or student drawn pictures, have students hold up the corresponding chart showing the harp, violin, xylophone, oboe, and full orchestra as each play prominent parts throughout the piece.

Two - Respond to the poem.

- Read the Henry Cazalis poem to students in the most dramatic way you can. Make the most of special spots like "winter wind blows", "moans are heard", or "running and leaping."
- Brainstorm a list of especially musical words in the Cazalis poem. (zig, hist, moan, crack, etc.)
- Using classroom instruments, body percussion and/or other found sounds, make a classroom orchestra to provide music as an accompaniment to a dramatic reading of the poem. Discuss which sounds might go best with each line of the poem.

Three - Respond to the story.

- Have students make story cards, with pictures that depict the various parts of the story. Display these around the room and feature each card in some way at the appropriate time while listening to the music. Or, use story cards in combination with instrument pictures so that students connect the story with the instruments of the orchestra.

Story card sequence (see timings above):

Clock strikes midnight	(harp)
Death tunes his violin	(violin)
The dance begins, one skeleton appears	(flute)
More skeletons are dancing	
The xylophone makes the sound of dry bones	(xylophone)
The wind blows through the dark trees	(string instruments)
The skeletons laugh as they dance	(violins)
Mysterious moans come from the trees	(string instruments)
The dance reaches its loudest and fastest point	(all)
A rooster crows	(oboe)
The dance ends, all the skeletons return to their graves.	

- Have students draw their own scene for the entire piece. Begin with the clock tower with hands at midnight, fill in dark trees, gravestones, Death playing his violin, skeletons dancing, and finally the rooster crowing. Use glow-in-the-dark markers for an extra spooky lights-out display.
- Ask students to give examples of other fun-scary stories they may know. Discuss fun-scary Halloween characters.

Four - Respond to the music.

- With students, brainstorm a "word bank" of words that describe the music at various points you select. Or, while listening to the piece, choose 10 points at which students write a descriptor word. Then, compare the words that the students chose for each spot. Or, arrange students in groups of two. While listening to the piece, indicate 10 spots where students share a descriptor word with their partner.
- Divide the class into a "Violin" group and an "Orchestra" (or "not violin") group. The Violin group moves, waves streamers, or plays "air violins" when the violin solo plays. The "Orchestra" group responds when the violin solo is not playing.

Five - Explore the two primary melodies:

- Brainstorm a list of descriptor words that describe the character of Melody A (short, choppy etc.) and Melody B (smooth, snaky etc.) as they are heard for the first time at the beginning of the piece.
- Listen to the entire piece, first for all forms of Melody A, then for all forms of Melody B. Brainstorm a list of words that describe the various transformations of each.

Create words for each melody, or use these, found on-line:

Melody A: "Baby shake your bones, baby shake your bones up, baby shake your bones, baby shake your bones. Baby shake your bones, baby shake your bones up, baby shake your bones, baby shake your bones."

Melody B: "The ghosts, the ghosts, the ghosts, the ghosts, whirling and swirling all through the air. The ghosts, the ghosts, the ghosts, the ghosts, whirling and swirling all through the air."

Divide the class into two groups, one for Melody A and one for Melody B. Have each group raise hands, move to the music, use streamers, or any other activity when their melody is heard, in any form. Movements should be in the character of the music. The entire class will move when the melodies are combined.

Six - Other activities

- Brainstorm a list of other stories that Saint-Saëns might have wanted to set to music as another symphonic poem. Decide which instruments Saint-Saëns might have chosen to represent characters in this new piece.
- Read the book "Rattlebone Rock" by Sylvia Andrews, illustrated by Jennifer Plecas. (Published 1997, Harper Collins Publishers). It loosely resembles the story of Danse macabre.
- Listen to other examples of symphonic poems, some of which also have a Halloween theme. Suggestions:
Mussorgsky: Night on Bald Mountain
Dukas: The Sorcerer's Apprentice