

Danse macabre, opus 40

Camille Saint-Saëns

Born in Paris, October 9, 1835; died in Algiers, Algeria, December 16, 1921

The ghoulish theme of the midnight witches' sabbath was especially alluring to many 19th century Romantic artists. Just last year we heard Mussorgsky's spine-tingling version, *Night on Bald Mountain*, and later this season we'll encounter Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique* with its brilliantly devilish finale. The French composer Camille Saint-Saëns was not immune to this temptation, and in 1874 he produced the amusing version we'll hear tonight, *Danse macabre*.

Usually, Saint-Saëns was a thoroughly serious composer devoted to weighty, classically constructed symphonies, concertos, church music, and operas — not long after this piece he created his Biblical epic *Samson et Delilah*. But there was also an antic entertainer in his psychological makeup, which inspired his popular musical spoof *Carnival of the Animals*, and *Danse macabre* definitely belongs to this world. During the 1870s, the composer was writing a number of descriptive tone poems — *Phaëton*, *Omphale's Spinning Wheel*, *La Jeunesse d'Hercule* — which used to be very popular on concert programs, but are now largely forgotten. The shortest and lightest of them, *Danse macabre* proved to be the hardy survivor.

A crazy little poem by Henri Cazalis, which would fit very nicely into HK Gruber's *Frankenstein!!*, provided the scenario; Saint-Saëns quoted it in his score. "Zig and zig and zag, Death sets the rhythm/ Striking a tombstone with his heel/ Death at midnight plays a dance/Zig and zig and zag, on his violin/ One hears the rattling bones of the dancers/ But psitt! Suddenly the dance ceases/They push each other, they flee, the cock has crowed."

The harp strikes midnight. Death tunes up his violin, but the E string has been lowered a half step, producing a raucous tritone, the interval traditionally known as "the devil in music." We hear two themes: a whirling waltz melody and a creepy tune that

descends by half steps; near the end of the piece, Saint-Saëns cleverly has them played simultaneously. At the end, the oboe portrays the crowing cock.

To represent the rattling bones of the dancing skeletons, *Danse macabre* introduced the xylophone to symphonic music. It was so new to European musicians that the composer actually wrote into the score where it could be purchased.