



Saint-Saens' Danse Macabre
as presented by Judy Suvak

Danse Macabre -- Theme B

Camille Saint-Saens



Heer Heer



For nearly twenty years I have been sharing the symphonic poem, Danse Macabre by Camille Saint-Saens with elementary school children. I can't begin to imagine how many times I have listened to this composition in the process of studying to teach it and listening with the students. This fall when my grade 5 - 7 students began their study of the music, I was still hearing things in the music that I hadn't heard before. My respect of Saint-Saens continues to build.

The study of the music can encompass several years. I often present this music in the primary grades and return to it with older students who can study it in more sophisticated ways. The idea here is twofold: to help people really hear what is in the music and to help them build a love of music by becoming very familiar with a few compositions.

Saint-Saens drew inspiration for his symphonic poem from a set of macabre verses bearing the same title by Henri Cazalis. He first wrote music for the words, publishing the song and then discarded it as "un-sing-able" in favor of an orchestral piece. As such it was completed in 1874 and premiered in 1875, when it was promptly encored. The poem (translated meaning :)

Zig, zig, zig
Death is striking a tomb with his heel in cadence.
Death is playing a dance tune on his violin at midnight.
The winter wind blows and the night is dark.
From the linden trees come moans.
White skeletons move across the shadows, running and leaping in their shrouds.
Zig, zig, zig, each one gives a tremor and the dancers' bones rattle.
Hush! they suddenly leave off dancing,
They jostle one another,
The cock has crowed.

The Program:

In the symphonic poem, after midnight strikes on the harp, Death begins to tune his fiddle (with one string tuned flat). With the flute taking up a theme, the weird dance gets underway. Death unreels a melody as the whirling grows in intensity and the xylophone rattles bonily. The scarcely recognizable "Dies Irae" is brought in. The themes merge as the pace quickens feverishly. The horns suddenly announce dawn. The cock crows via the oboe, and the grisly crowd disbands to the vanishing strains of Death's tune. The music is in rondo form with two themes played simultaneously at one point.

When introducing the music to children, I usually begin with a map of what I call Theme B or the Ghost Theme. This is the waltz music that occurs often in the composition. The students study, discuss, the trace the map; they make predictions about what the music will sound like. Then I chin the melody while the students follow the map. Depending upon the group, I sometimes lead them through the map a few times. Some students like the challenge of fitting the map to the music without teacher help. The goal is learning to sing and recognize the melody.

Another way of introducing the music is to play the recording of just the twelve clock chimes (harp) and ask the children what they hear and what they think it might be. There is usually a lot of discussion and repeated listening. Nowadays, children don't often hear clocks ticking and chiming, so the idea of a clock chiming twelve takes some discussion and listening. After it has been established that it is a clock, I ask; "Do you think it is twelve noon or twelve midnight?" The eerie quality of the string chord at the end of the music certainly suggests midnight, when anything can happen!

Groups are formed to develop silent movements for the music. During planning the music is played a number of times. Then the groups practice and ideas are shared. This year my student choreographed the entire piece.

Continuing

When the students begin to know the composition, we hear a wonderful short theme which occurs only once. The rhythm fits exactly with those profound words many of us sang as children, "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out; the ants play pinochle on your snout." The deprived children of today don't all know that song! There is more to study in this piece, and we do, but this enough to begin!

Addendum:

Tomi Kent recently shared a way she uses movement in this composition. With the lights off, she assumes the role of the fiddle-playing Death. After she tunes her violin, she begins to dance around the room. One-by-one she touches the children who are thereby invited to dance with her. This can be especially effective with children who are reluctant to move to the music; the teacher's modeling can give both ideas and confidence.