

Danse Macabre

Camille Saint-Saens

{san-sahns', ca-mee'}

Camille Saint-Saens, b. Paris, Oct. 9, 1835, d. Dec. 16, 1921, was a French composer. He was brought up by his mother, who gave him his first music lessons. His natural musical endowments showed at a very early age and were hardly less remarkable than those of Mozart and Mendelssohn as children. He gave his first public piano recital in 1846, and excelled in all his studies at the Paris Conservatory. A virtuoso pianist and organist, at the age of 22 he became organist at the church of the Madeleine but was already earning fame as a composer of orchestral symphonic music.

Most notable are four symphonic poems (including *Danse macabre*, 1875) composed under the influence of Liszt, who took great interest in his career and was later (1877) responsible for the first performance of his *Samson et Dalila*, the only one of his dozen operas to achieve a lasting success. His early symphonic music was modeled on Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn, but his later works show a distinctively French character--a good-natured charm with a touch of deliberately assumed triviality combined with a remarkable technical fluency. Outstanding among these are the third of three violin concertos, the second and fourth of five piano concertos, the second of two cello concertos, and the third of three symphonies. He wrote copiously in all genres, but few of his chamber works or songs survived him, although he is still remembered for his *Variations on a Theme by Beethoven* (1874) for two pianos, the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* (1870) for violin and orchestra, and *The Carnival of the Animals* (1886). Alone among French composers of his generation, he enjoyed a European reputation both as composer and performer, and his long career marked the reemergence in France of an interest in instrumental music after a century of almost exclusive concern with opera.

The Dance of Death

The Dance of Death, also called *Danse Macabre*, *Danse des Morts*, or *Totentanz*, emerged in medieval movement, theater, art, and literature as a spontaneous reaction to the hardships of the feudal system and the horrors of the BUBONIC PLAGUE, which from 1347 to 1350 killed a quarter of Europe's population. Sufferers of the plague (and of war, famine, and poverty) danced with

desperate gaiety in graveyards--surrounded by skeletons, crosses, dead animals, and black draperies--as if enacting the superstition that the dead danced on their graves to lure the living. Although death was personified in paintings, poetry, and pageant as a dancer, the living dancers, originally only men, represented emperors, bishops, and peasants--all equal when facing death as nowhere else. In their macabre celebrations they confronted their mortality and championed death as the avenger over their masters and their hardships. Whatever physical form the allegorical dance assumed, it dealt consistently with death's universal inevitability, the equality of all people facing it, and the vanity of wealth and rank. Hans HOLBEIN the Younger's series of woodcuts, Totentanz (1538), magnificently illustrates these themes.

[DMACABR2.xxx](#) is the original arrangement of the Danse Macabre for 4 hands by Henri Cazalis. This is nice for people who like Grand Pianos. My favorite, though, is [DMACABR1.xxx](#) which is an arrangement for full orchestra (MIDI) and was taken from Cazalis' piano arrangement.

Be careful of your equipment. This piece gets very BIG in places and you should have good solid speakers to get the right effect.

I hope you enjoy it.
Ric Dexter
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