

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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