

Charles Camille Saint-Saens
 b. October 9, 1835; Paris
 d. December 16, 1921; Algiers

Symphonic Poem, “Danse Macabre,” Opus 40

Written in 1874, this captivating eight-minute dance of Death was first performed—and immediately encored—at a Châtelet concert on January 24, 1875, under the direction of Édouard Colonne. It is scored for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), pairs of oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trumpets, tuba, timpani, xylophone, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, harp and strings. Throughout, the concertmaster’s instrument is retuned with its highest string pitched a half-step lower, producing an eerie, “Death’s fiddle” sound. These are the first performances of this music on our series.

An extraordinary man and musician, Saint-Saens was a child prodigy who quickly achieved stature as a composer, pianist and organist. A sparkling conversationalist, he had many interests, including art, science, mathematics, astronomy, criticism, traveling and archaeology. Saint-Saens was a prolific composer who wrote in virtually every 19th-century musical genre; in 1908, he even became the first established composer to write film music (*L’assassinat du Duc de Guise*). In the latter years of his life, he was widely regarded as the greatest living composer.

Impressed by some macabre verses of Henri Cazalis (1840-1909), Saint-Saens wrote a song utilizing the poet’s words. In 1874, he became dissatisfied with this effort and reshaped his inspiration into the symphonic poem, *Danse Macabre*. This grisly dance of fantasy follows the plot of the poem, reproduced here in a prose translation:

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, they flee--the cock has crowed.

The poem ends with the mocking motto: *Vive la Mort et l’Égalité* (“Long Live Death and Equality”).

Charles Camille Saint-Saëns

Concerto No. 2 in G minor, for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 22

This concerto was composed within seventeen days of its first performance in Paris, with Saint-Saëns as soloist, on May 13, 1868. About 23 minutes in duration, the work utilizes an orchestra with pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, plus timpani, cymbals and strings. Pianist André Watts and guest conductor János Furst were featured in the last series performance of this work in May of 1999.

Among the most intellectually gifted musicians of the Romantic era, Saint-Saëns was too restless to be content with the boundaries of life as a virtuoso pianist and composer. His formidable wit enlivened his activities as a writer, critic and conversationalist; he loved mathematics, was an accomplished astronomer, and throughout his extensive travels became something of an archaeologist. If this remarkable man had a creative fault, it would seem to lie in the realm of excessive facility; he assimilated the styles of other composers so readily that the “real” Saint-Saëns was difficult to pinpoint.

A brilliant pianist, Saint-Saëns was the soloist for the premieres of all five of his piano concertos. He had begun to play the instrument before the age of three, and at five played a Gretry opera from the full score. Wagner was amazed in 1860, when the young musician sat down and played long sections of *Tristan und Isolde* from memory. Seven years later, his talents were so impressive that Berlioz called him “one of the greatest musicians of our epoch.”

The *Piano Concerto No. 2* is an excellent example of Saint-Saëns’ compositional facility. Anton Rubinstein, the noted Russian pianist and composer, invited the French composer to be the

soloist in a concert that he was conducting at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. Despite the fact that the concert was only three weeks away, Saint-Saëns decided to write a new concerto for the occasion. He then proceeded to complete the work in a mere seventeen days. When the concerto was premiered on May 13, 1868, the audience response was favorable, but the critics were less enthusiastic; they said that the work was too reminiscent of Rubinstein and Mendelssohn (not to mention Bach) and that the composer's performance was dry and unsure. Despite these initial reservations, the work has endured the test of time and has become one of the most popular French concertos of the period.

- I. *Andante sostenuto*; G minor, 4/4. Saint-Saëns' originality in compositional organization is immediately apparent in the opening of the concerto, as the soloist presents a toccata-like introduction filled with echoes of Bach's keyboard fantasias. The orchestra plays a sturdy phrase and then the soloist introduces the lyrically charming first theme. Recent scholars have suggested that this theme was not Saint-Saëns' own, but apparently came from a *Tantum ergo* that Fauré composed in Saint-Saëns' class at the Ecole Niedermeyer. Apart from the origin of the theme, it must be admitted that the elder composer used it to greater effect. A romantic theme serves as the second subject. Virtuoso material abounds as the movement progresses to the cadenza. Restricted to thematic ideas, the cadenza leads to a return of the introspective opening section.

- II. *Allegro scherzando*; E-flat major, 6/8. A breezy scherzo in sonata form, the movement begins with timpani setting the rhythm and piano presenting the first theme. A second subject in B-flat is announced on the way to a brief, witty development section. After the themes are recounted, the movement is closed by a wisp of a coda.

- III. *Presto*; G minor, 2/2. Always seeking to end his concertos with tremendous rhythmic drive, Saint-Saëns begins this finale with a bustling *saltarello*. This dance movement of Italian origin is contrasted by an angular second theme. Progressing in sonata form, the finale trills happily to its conclusion.

Charles Camille Saint-Saëns

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Opus 78 ("Organ Symphony")

Composed in the early months of 1886, this symphony was premiered by the composer and the London Philharmonic Society on May 19, 1886. This 37-minute work is scored for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, two percussionists (bass drum, cymbals, suspended cymbal, triangle), organ, piano (four-hands) and strings. Andreas Delfs led the last series presentations of the work at concerts in June of 2006.

An enormously gifted and vital musician, Saint-Saëns was a dominant figure in French music during the latter part of the 19th century. Arising from a bourgeois background through his abilities as a pianist and organist, he attended the Paris Conservatory and developed into an indefatigable performer, composer and teacher. In retrospect, it appears that Saint-Saëns' greatest contribution was his promotion of French instrumental music at a time when his country was totally infatuated with opera. Although he wrote thirteen operas, most notably, *Samson et Dalila*, Saint-Saëns devoted the majority of his talents to writing instrumental music and encouraging other composers to do likewise. Largely because of Saint-Saëns' influence, French instrumental music arose to the forefront of European music by the turn of the century.

Saint-Saëns' own finest achievement in the area of instrumental music was his brilliant *Symphony No. 3*. Commissioned by the London Philharmonic Society for the concerts of its seventy-third season, the work was begun early in 1886; it was completed in time for its premiere performance on May 19 of the same year. That concert was particularly noteworthy, for Saint-Saëns not only

conducted his new work, but also appeared as soloist in the Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 4* in G major. Another illustrious musical personage also took part in the concert: Sir Arthur Sullivan — of Gilbert and Sullivan fame— conducted the rest of the program.

That Saint-Saëns was championing a cause is fairly evident from his remarks about this, his last symphony: “The composer thinks that the time has come for the symphony to benefit by the progress of modern instrumentation, and he therefore establishes his orchestra as follows: three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, three kettledrums, organ, pianoforte (now for two hands and now for four), triangle, a pair of cymbals, bass drum, and the usual strings.” Because the organ plays such an imposing role in the musical fabric, the symphony is frequently known as the *Organ Symphony*. It is dedicated “to the memory of Franz Liszt.” The theme of its last movement was used to charming effect in the 1995 porcine saga *Babe*.

Realizing that the novel elements of his work might invite adverse criticism, Saint-Saëns carefully set forth the following analysis for the world premiere: “This symphony is divided into two parts, after the manner of Saint-Saëns’ Fourth concerto for piano and orchestra and the Sonata for piano and violin. Nevertheless, it includes practically the traditional four movements: the first, checked in development, serves as an introduction to the *Adagio*, and the *Scherzo* is connected, after the same manner, with the *Finale*. The composer has thus sought to shun in a certain measure the interminable repetitions which are more and more disappearing from instrumental music.

“After an introduction (*adagio*) of a few plaintive measures the string quartet exposes the initial theme, which is somber and agitated (*allegro moderato*). The first transformation of this theme leads to a second motive, which is distinguished by a greater tranquillity; after a short development, in which the two themes are presented simultaneously, the motive appears in a characteristic form for full orchestra, but only for a short time. A second transformation of the initial theme includes now and then the plaintive notes of the introduction. Varied episodes gradually bring calm, and thus prepare the *adagio* in D flat. The extremely peaceful and contemplative theme is given to the violins, violas, and violoncellos, which are supported by organ chords. This theme is then taken by clarinet, horn, and trombone, accompanied by strings divided into several parts. After a variation (in arabesques) performed by the violins, the second transformation of the initial theme of the *allegro* appears again, and brings with it a vague feeling of unrest, which is enlarged by dissonant harmonies. These soon give way to the theme of the *adagio*, performed this time by some of the violins, violas, and violoncellos, with organ accompaniment and with a persistent rhythm of triplets presented by the preceding episode. This first movement ends in a *coda* of mystical character, in which are heard alternately the chords of D-flat major and E minor.

“The second movement begins with an energetic phrase (*allegro moderato*), which is followed immediately by a third transformation of the initial theme in the first movement, more agitated than it was before, and into which enters a fantastic spirit that is frankly disclosed in the *presto*. Here arpeggios and scales, swift as lightning, on the pianoforte, are accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the orchestra, and each time they are in a different tonality (F, E, E-flat, G). This tricky gaiety is interrupted by an expressive phrase (strings). The repetition of the *allegro moderato* is followed by a second *presto*; but scarcely has it begun before a new theme is heard, grave, austere (trombone, tuba, double basses), strongly contrasted with the fantastic music. There is a struggle for the mastery, and this struggle ends in the defeat of the restless, diabolical element. The phrase rises to orchestral heights, and rests there as in the blue of a clear sky. After a vague reminiscence of the initial theme of the first movement, wholly transformed, is now exposed by divided strings and the pianoforte (four hands), and repeated by the organ with the full strength of the orchestra. Then follows a development built in a rhythm of three measures. An episode of a tranquil and pastoral character (oboe, English horn, clarinet) is twice repeated. A brilliant *coda*, in which the initial theme by a last transformation takes the form of a violin figure, ends the work; the rhythm of three measures becomes naturally and logically a huge measure of three beats; each beat is represented by a whole note, and twelve quarters form the complete measure.”