

## “Danse Macabre”— Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

**Lesson assumes:** Student’s have a good understanding of melodic contour and can differentiate thematic changes. Students have had experience with AB form, introductions and endings and some experience following a listening map.

**Connection to prior knowledge:** Review familiar binary songs. Discuss how composers can develop thematic material.

### Possible avenues for discussion and exploration:

Affect, Instruments of the Orchestra, Violin solo, xylophones, Form, symphonic form, symphonic poem, program music, texture, dynamics,  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter, echo instruments on the melody, Short—Long, and Long—Short Rhythm, tritone, mixed meter (intro in 2, main body in 3). Waltz, (Strong beat), minor tonality, What did the composer use to have variety?

**1. Symphonic Poem**—is an orchestral piece of music inspired by a poem—or extra musical idea. Sometimes called tone poem, usually one movement. Saint-Saens was inspired by this poem “The Dance of Death” a poem by French poet *Henri Cazalis*—(1840-1909).

**Zig-a Zig, Zig a zig a zig**

Death sits on the tombstone and **drums** with **heel**.

**Zig a zig zig a zig a zig**

Death **tunes** up his **fiddle** and plays a weird **reel**.

Tis **midnight** and sadly the winter wind **moans**;

From shadowy lindens, with **loud** sighs and groans, the **skelton** dancers in white, whirling crowds. Come **leaping** and **skipping** and waving their shrouds. Zig a zig, what a horrible sound. The **rattle** of bones as they dance ‘round and ‘round!

But hark Bold young **Chanticleer** heralds the day and death and his dancers have **vanished** away.

Ask students about some descriptive phrases in the poem. What do you think the music is going to sound like? Discuss the poem, e.g. how will the music sound to zig a zig, (draw on board, jack o lantern teeth). Write their descriptions on the board.

2. Explore the listening map from beginning to end with students. Discuss this and take more descriptive phrases to the web we have started on the board. Discuss the signs and symbols on the map. Have students move their finger to the melodic contour. Some ideas to offer to help students:

**Strategies for listening:** What is going on in the introduction? *Harp strikes 12 (telling us it is midnight—tip toes)* during Halloween, in a spooky cemetery a clock chimes midnight. “Death sits on a tombstone tunes the violin and plays an eerie waltz.

- Death tunes his fiddle, getting ready for the dance (waltz) that is to follow. The dance begins with a jiglike melody play by the flute, then by the violins, sounds like a waltz. What happens on the repeats?
- Solo violin plays a second mournful sounding melody.
- Jiggling tune returns with the xylophone suggesting the rattling of the skeleton’s bones---mark this in your map. Skeletons suddenly appear and dance to the music, the xylophone makes the sound of “bones” dancing.

- As music continues, the dance grows wilder and more exciting. Then you will hear some strings making the sounds of wind blowing, high and low. The dance gets faster and faster, almost out of control, louder and louder they play.
- Near the end of the piece, a sharp shrill call is heard played on oboe (the crowing rooster heralds the dawn). The fiddle plays one last weepy tune and the skeletons scamper back to the grave just as the dawn breaks.
- With the last soft sounds from the strings, the skeleton dancers vanish.

3. For the first listening assign students one or more of these strategies (depending on student experience) to help them to focus on the piece. They will have to listen to it several times.

- What is going on in the introduction?
- How is the A section different from the B section? *A section is choppy and the B section is smooth and melodic. Why are there so many repeats?*
- Fill in the blanks on your listening map—with a partner

#### 4. Lesson ideas and objectives—Problem solving:

1. **Beginning composers:** Student's will compose a Halloween poem, (either whole class or in partners) and create music to a Halloween poem like Saint-Saëns did.
2. Students will create a piece that uses varying instruments in an echo fashion like Saint-Saëns used on the repeats.
3. **Experienced composers:** Students will develop an original composition that moves in AB form and includes an introduction and ending. Students should be aware that the B section must contain contrasting melodic material from the A section.
4. Create a dance piece in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. Body percussion. Create a movement piece—divide student's up into 2 groups. Students will work together to create 2 contrasting movements and work together to expand these movements during the development section.
5. If the focus is affect, after discussion on how Saint-Saëns achieved this (dynamics, timbre, articulations, dissonance, violin alternate tunings, E string is tune down to Eb to produce the tritone from A-Eb. etc) generate a list of ideas on how this could be achieved and use it to create a piece that employs these ideas, using either number 1-3 above.
6. Students should share finished products with class and be prepared to discuss their compositions.

**Assessment idea for #3 above:** Students will show their understanding of binary form through compositional processes and products. The compositions and performances will also reflect their understanding of simultaneity and ensemble performance.

#### Extensions:

1. Study other symphonic poems: Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet, Debussy's Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune, and La Mer, Gershwin, An American in Paris, Honegger's Pacific 231. Mussorovsky: Night on Bald Mountain, Dukas, The Sorcerer's Apprentice.

#### Website:

Short video from Emil de Cou (associate conductor, National symphony)

[http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/?fuseaction=composition&composition\\_id=2628#](http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/?fuseaction=composition&composition_id=2628#)