



### The Background and the Story

*Dance Macabre* is an orchestral tone poem, similar to a program symphony in that the musical events follow a specific narrative idea or set of images. Camille Saint-Saens composed many programmatic pieces, including the much-loved *Carnival of the Animals*. The inspiration for *Danse Macabre* was a poem, by Henri Cazalis, based upon an old French superstition.

The following is a free translation of the poem:

“At midnight, Death plays a dance tune on his violin.  
The winter wind blows and the night is gloomy.  
Mysterious moans come from the trees.  
White skeletons fly through the shadows, leaping in their huge shrouds.  
Each one gives a tremor and their bones rattle as they dance.  
But hush!  
Suddenly they stop dancing and run away.  
The rooster has crowed.”

According to the ancient superstition, “Death” appears at midnight every year on Halloween. Death has the power to call forth the dead from their graves to dance for him while he plays his fiddle (violin). The dead, skeletons, dance for him until the first break of dawn, when they must return to their graves until the next year.

Apparently, when *Danse Macabre* first premiered, it was not greeted with praise and appreciative audiences. In fact, the audiences were quite unsettled by the disturbing, though very innovative, sounds that Saint-Saens elicited from the orchestra. A story, that circulated through Paris at the time, was that Saint-Saen’s own mother fainted from fright at the first performance of *Danse Macabre* !

### The Music

Listen for:

- Which instrument do you think plays the first notes of the piece?
- Raise your hand when you first hear the instrument which represents “Death”? Which instrument represents this character?
- At several points, the skeletons who are dancing are represented by an unusual choice of instrument. Which instrument do you think it is? (Hint: It belongs to the percussion family)
- A soft, gentle version of the melody is played about halfway through the work. Which of the following characters do you think is dancing: skeletons, ghosts, or Death? Think about the kind of movement and corresponding music for each character.
- Sunrise signal the end of the dance, when the dead must return to their graves. One instrument (and usually a particular animal) signals the break of day – which instrument do you think plays that? And which animal is represented by that instrument?