

Presentation of 'Telling a Story'

The song 'Danse Macabre op.40' was written by a French composer named Camille Saint-Saëns in the year of 1874. The composition is played in the key of G Minor. The piece was originally created for an art song for voice and piano in 1872, with an additional French poem by Henri Cazalis. In the piece, the solo violin is utilized in order to represent the dancing of the death, also seen in the original poem: 'Zig-Zig-Zig' relates to the sound of the violin. The violin is conveyed to be associated with death in the Western culture. In the ancient Greek religious cults, it was associated that instruments often related to ethical aspects, in this situation the violin represented the aspect of dancing and the devil was blamed by the writers for the creation of dancing; which had an influence on this composition as well, the specific instrument (violin) was utilized to convey the association with death from the cultural influences.

The translated version of the poem is as follows:

Zig, zig, zig, Death in cadence,
Striking a tomb with his heel,
Death at midnight plays a dance-tune,
Zig, zig, zag, on his violin.

The winter wind blows, and the night is dark;

Moans are heard in the linden trees.

White skeletons pass through the gloom,
Running and leaping in their shrouds.

Zig, zig, zig, each one is frisking,
You can hear the cracking of the bones of the dancers.

A lustful couple sits on the moss
So as to taste long lost delights.

Zig zig, zig, Death continues
The unending scraping on his instrument.
A veil has fallen! The dancer is naked.
Her partner grasps her amorously.

The lady, it's said, is a marchioness or baroness
And her green gallant, a poor cartwright.
Horror! Look how she gives herself to him,
Like the rustic was a baron.

Zig, zig, zig. What a saraband!
They all hold hands and dance in circles.
Zig, zig, zag. You can see in the crowd
The king dancing among the peasants.

But hist! All of a sudden, they leave the dance,
They push forward, they fly; the cock has crowed.
Oh what a beautiful night for the poor world!
Long live death and equality!

The tritone; also known as the Devil in music during the Baroque period with the notes of A and E flat creates a dissonance together which doesn't create a pleasant melody. In the beginning of the song, the harp plays the D note for 12 times between same time intervals in order to represent the midnight at 12 AM when the dead awakens. The start of the song is played with a fast tempo, but the song builds up and becomes louder as it reaches the middle. After the first climax, the song repeats from the calm but mysterious part to the climax with a louder and quicker notes such as the eighth notes including accents and staccatos. The melody line played by the solo violin is heard continuously throughout the piece to represent the dead dancing along. The single note is played to represent the opening of the dance of the death, and as the poem describes the development such as the white skeletons "running and leaping in their shrouds", the story develops as the composition builds up as well by being louder and faster in tempo. After the composition and story hits the climax of the skeletons, it becomes a downfall to a resolution. The story mentions that "they leave the dance" meaning that less skeletons/deaths are existent of dancing, and the story comes to an end. This is shown in the composition as well, as the music slows down in tempo and volume, with the texture of the composition being more

calm and smooth. This represents the night being over, where the deaths are to leave and celebrate again the next year.

The piece *Danse Macabre* is scored for the solo, obbligato violin and the orchestra instruments including a piccolo, two flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, four French horns, three trombones and one tuba. In addition with the percussion section containing of the bass drum, triangles, cymbals, xylophone, timpani with one harp and strings.

The event and situation the song applies context on is Halloween. Halloween first originated from Ireland, and nowadays most of the European countries celebrate Halloween. Halloween is the day (October 31) the dead comes alive on the lively land, it is believed that “Death” appears on the midnight of Halloween in order to call the dead bodies from the graves to dance to the fiddle; which is the melody of the solo violin in the song. The dead bodies and skeletons dance until the sun comes up the next day when they are to go back to their graves until the next year of Halloween. Camille Saint-Saëns created the song ‘*Danse Macabre*’ in order to depict the story of the dead dancing along to the fiddle of the “Death”. The program music is intended to express the specific event. Saint Saens purposely utilizes the obbligato violin to portray the ‘Zig, zig, zig’ fiddle of the “Death”. The solo violinist plays a section, then eventually the strings play a section which replies to the solo violin. The specific part of music represents the “Death” playing the fiddle and the skeletons following up and dancing along to the sound. In addition, from the poem where it states ‘The winter wind blows’, the music itself contains a part where the sound of the wind is imitated. ‘You can hear the cracking of the bones of the dancers’ match with the music piece where the song reaches the climax with a crescendo

and additional instruments playing along, which indicates the audience that the dancing of the skeletons reach it's highest peak of celebrations. The song Danse Macabre fundamentally follows the flow of the poem, and tells the exact story of the poem through music.

'The Carnival of the Animals', also written by the same composer; Camille Saint-Saëns, contains of an overall of Fourteen Movements, each movement representing a specific animal or a group of animals. The composition was completed in the year of 1886, and is played originally with 11 instrumentalist but could be also played with the full string section from the orchestra. The 14 Movements of the piece represent the Lion, Hens and Roosters, Swift Animals (Donkeys), Tortoises, The Elephant, Kangaroos, Aquarium, Personages with Long Ears, The Cuckoo in the Depths of the Woods, Aviary, Pianists, Fossils, The Swan and the Finale. The piece is able to convey a variety of motifs within each movements. The composition was created while Saint Saens was travelling in a small village in Austria. It is assumed that Saint Saens was slightly worried about the specific composition juxtaposing his solemn style of composing music and ruining his dignity.

Two pianos and the strings section are utilized in order to convey the lion, the roar of the lion is imitated through the pianos playing low runs of octaves from time to time. In the second movement, the hens and roosters are portrayed with the strings excluding the double bass and cello, additionally the two pianos with a clarinet. The pianos and strings in the movement imitate the pecking motif which represents the chickens pecking on the grains. The donkeys are represented by the fast tempo of the two pianos playing down and up the two octaves. The string

play an interpretation with a slow tempo of the 'Galop infernal' from the operetta 'Orpheus in the Underworld' by Offenbach, which display the slow movements of a turtle. Also, the elephants are highlighted with a double bass and a piano; a lot of the low pitched notes are used to represent the heavy massive movement of the elephant. The kangaroos are depicted by the two pianos that play short notes utilizing staccatos to provide a hopping movement of the kangaroos. The 'aquarium' is displayed with strings excluding double bass, glass harmonica, flute and the two pianos. The movement of the fishes are shown with the melody of the flute, with the background of the strings and runs in the piano. The next movement is played with the two violins alternating from high and loud notes to low, buzzing notes to imitate the "hee-haw" onomatopoeia of the donkeys. To imitate the cuckoo birds' calls, the clarinet is set to play a single two-note ostinato repetitively with the notes A flat and C, and the piano playing large and soft chords. The background noise of the jungle is mimicked by the buzz sound of the high strings (violin, viola), while the piano creates the sound of the other birds in the jungle. The next movement is a showcase of the pianists playing the scales. For the fossils, Saint Saens applies his style of Danse Macabre to convey the skeletons playing card games, and he showcases this by the use of the xylophones to depict the sound of the bones clacking. The swan is exposed by an elegant and romantic melody of the cello which mimics the image of the swan swimming on the surface of the water. The final movement begins similarly with the introduction, wraps up the tension and replays some of the animals.

The similarities between the two pieces are that both are capable of conveying a story or a message through the utilization of music. Danse Macabre depicts the specific event

(Halloween) and the story from the French poem, while The Carnival of the Animals display each animal's characteristics within the manipulation of tempo, articulations, pitch, dynamics and texture. The significant differences include the atmosphere and mood of the two pieces; Danse Macabre has a creepy, suspense and aggressive atmosphere whereas The Carnival of Animals has a pure, graceful texture where each animal conveys their own unique style of characteristics. In addition the way the two pieces tell a story varies as well, Danse macabre follows the plot of the story from the poem and the music contains the structure and flow of the story itself in one piece whereas the Carnival of the Animals are separated into 14 Movements of each representing an animal, and each movement is played with different instruments unlike in Danse Macabre where the instruments play one piece all together without significantly abundant rests.

The two compositions created by Saint Saens is based on the Western environment, where many cultural aspects influenced the creation of the compositions. Saint Saens' compositions were also influenced by his personal life history; his private life wasn't very pleasant. He stayed as a bachelor until he was married at 40 years old, his marriage didn't result in a great manner and his first son died by an accident. His devastating past influenced him to be aware of other people's judgements; as he thought The Carnival of Animals could've possible ruined his reputation, he only had a several private performances of the composition until after his death. On the other hand, The Carnival of Animals remain as one of the best composition which contains beautiful harmonious colors of his music. The western culture; relating to the Greek cult, abundant associations were created for the relations between specific musical instruments with different aspects. With this cultural influence, Saint Saens created Danse

Macabre based on death relating to the violin, and the variety of animals being represented by different instruments in The Carnival of Animals.

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97>

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