

Story Telling in Music



The Symphonic Poem

Musical Storytelling

- instrumental music can tell a story, *without words*
- *aka Tone Painting, Programme Music*
- “An ancient Greek story tells of a master of the double-piped aulos who improvised a musical description of a battle so hair-raising that people were talking about it for the next 200 years.” - NPR

Principal Techniques

- **Mood, Feeling or Emotion - rhythm, melody, harmony**
- **Imitation/Onomatopoeia**
- **Quotation/Reference**

examples:

Antonio Vivaldi - The Four Seasons - La Primavera

"Vivaldi provided instructions such as "The barking dog" (in the second movement of "Spring"), "Languor caused by the heat" (in the first movement of "Summer"), and "the drunkards have fallen asleep" (in the second movement of "Autumn")." - Wikipedia, The Four Seasons (Vivaldi)

La Primavera

*"Joyful spring has arrived,
the birds greet it with their cheerful song,
and the brooks in the gentle breezes flow with a sweet murmur.
The sky is covered with a black mantle,
and thunder and lightning announce a storm.
When they fall silent, the little birds
take up again their melodious song."*

Examples:

measure 1 - (0:00) joy of springtime

measure 14 (0:34) - birds — Canto de gl'Augelli



measure 31 (1:16) - flowing spring or fountain — Fonti allo spirar de Zeffiretti Con dolce mormorio Scorrono intanto

measure 44 - Thunder & Lightning Vengon' coprendo l'aer di nero amanto E Lampi, e tuoni ad annuntiarla eletti

examples:

Olivier Messiaen - Le Merle Noir (1952)



LE MERLE NOIR
pour Flûte et Piano

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

Flûte: Motif, Motif, Un peu vite, avec fouettée

Piano: *pp*, *f*, *ff*, *ppp*

Presque lent, tendre

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examples:

George Gershwin - An American in Paris (1928)

- a) Walking theme (mood, feeling)***
- b) Paris traffic - Car horns (imitative)***
- c) Blues - homesick (quotation/reference)***

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- film adaptation won 1951 Best Picture Oscar***
- new live adaptation planned for Broadway, 2015***



The Symphonic Poem

“A symphonic poem or tone poem is a piece of orchestral music in a single continuous section in which the content of a poem, a story or novel, a painting, a landscape or another non-musical source is illustrated or evoked. The term was first applied by Hungarian composer Franz Liszt to his 13 works in this vein. In its aesthetic objectives, the symphonic poem is in some ways related to opera; whilst it does not use a sung text, it seeks, like opera, a union of music and drama.” - wikipedia article for “Symphonic Poem”

The Symphonic poem attempts to use **instrumental music** to tell a story, or describe a scene or mythological figure.

- a characteristic musical product of 19th century Romanticism.
- also known as *program music*, *tone poem* or *descriptive music*
- a popular form of musical entertainment from the 1840s to the 1920s

Examples include:

Modeste Mussorgsky, *A Night on Bald Mountain* (1867)

short story by Gogol, in which a peasant witnesses a witches Sabbath on Bald Mountain near Kiev, Saint John's Eve

Paul Dukas, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1897)

inspired by a poem of Goethe (1797), inspired by a poem of Lucian of Samosata (AD 150)

Camille Saint-Saens, *Danse Macabre* (1874), *Carnival of the Animals* (1884)

Richard Strauss - *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896), *A Hero's Life*

Origins of the Symphonic Poem

CULTURAL SOURCES

19th century Romanticism - a reaction against the Industrial Revolution and scientific rationalization, emphasized intuition, imagination, and feeling.

“the mystical landscape”

political revolutions in America and France, the idea of the Hero or Genius

rising interest in folk stories and myths (e.g. The Brothers Grimm)

emotional extremes in literature - Edgar Allen Poe, Victor Hugo, Byron

MUSICAL SOURCES:

Opera & Ballet

Theatrical *incidental music* to stage works such as Mendelsohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music (1830) for Shakespeare's play
dramatic style of early romantic symphonic composers such as Beethoven and Berlioz

Franz Liszt was an early experimenter in the style, which he called *Tone Poems*



E.A.Poe, illustration from *The Raven* (1845)

Romanticism in Painting

The Mystical Landscape

John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral* (1831)



Joseph Turner, *Sunrise, Norham Castle* (1840)



D.F. Caspar, *Morning on the Rirsingebirge* (1810)

Romanticism in Painting

*Romanticism and
Revolution
The Hero,
'The Genius'*



Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon at the St. Bernard Pass* (1801)



Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830)

Romanticism in Painting

Fairy Tales and Myth



Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Children* (1823)



Arnold Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead* (1880)



Arthur Rackham, Illustrations from
Grimm's Fairy Tales (1907)

Danse Macabre (Dance of Death)

La Danse Macabre, also called *Dance of death*, *La Danza Macabra*, or *Totentanz*, is a late-medieval allegory on the universality of death: no matter one's station in life, the dance of death united all. *La Danse Macabre* consists of the personified death leading a row of dancing figures from all walks of life to the grave—typically with an emperor, king, pope, monk, youngster, beautiful girl, all in skeleton-state. They were produced under the impact of the Black Death, reminding people of how fragile their lives were and how vain the glories of earthly life were.

The final shots of the film *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman depict a kind of *Danse Macabre*.

- Wikipedia article, "Danse Macabre"



Dance of Death, (1538), Hans Holbein



Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (1957) disc 127

Dance of Death, (1538), Hans Holbein the Younger



The Dance of Death



Totentanz in Pinzolo
by Simone Baschenis, 1539

Dance of Death by Bernt Notke ca.1475, Tallin, Estonia



Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Camille Saint-Saëns' long life spanned nearly the entire duration of the Romantic period of music. He was part of the heyday of the movement and witnessed its death and the dawn of 20th-century music.

- born in Paris
- a gifted child prodigy, started piano at the age of two, started composing shortly after

Saint-Saëns was a multi-faceted intellectual. From an early age, he studied geology, archaeology, botany, and lepidoptery. He was an expert at mathematics. Later, in addition to composing, performing, and writing musical criticism, he held discussions with Europe's finest scientists and wrote scholarly articles on acoustics, occult sciences, Roman theatre decoration, and ancient instruments. He wrote a philosophical work, *Problèmes et Mystères*, which spoke of science and art replacing religion; Saint-Saëns' pessimistic and atheistic ideas foreshadowed Existentialism.

Saint-Saëns' 86 years provided him with time to write hundreds of compositions; during his long career, he wrote many dramatic works, including four symphonic poems, and thirteen operas, of which *Samson et Dalila* and the symphonic poem *Danse Macabre* are among his most famous. In all, he composed over three hundred works and was the first major composer to write music specifically for the cinema, for Henri Lavedan's film *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise*.

(source: wikipedia article on Camille Saint-Saëns)



Danse Macabre, Op. 40 (1874)

The composition is based upon a poem by Henri Cazalis, on an old French superstition:

*Zig, zig, zig, Death in a cadence,
Striking with his heel a tomb,
Death at midnight plays a dance-tune,
Zig, zig, zig, on his violin.
The winter wind blows and the night is dark;
Moans are heard in the linden trees.
Through the gloom, white skeletons pass,
Running and leaping in their shrouds.
Zig, zig, zig, each one is frisking,
The bones of the dancers are heard to crack—
But hist! of a sudden they quit the round,
They push forward, they fly; the cock 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 (represented by a solo violin tuned G-D-A-E-flat - an example of scordatura tuning). His skeletons dance for him until the first break of dawn, when they must return to their graves until the next year.

The piece makes particular use of the xylophone to imitate the sounds of rattling bones and chromatic scales to imitate a howling wind.

Danse Macabre is the musical theme of probably the most popular of Disney's Silly Symphonies animated shorts, the "Skeleton Dance" (disk 131) , which illustrates the original theme with antics of four skeletons in a graveyard.

It was the first title in the Silly Symphonies series to be produced.

In 1994, it was voted #18 of the 50 Greatest Cartoons of all time by members of the animation field. (*Wikipedia*)



The Old Mill

composer: Leigh Harline

Disney, Silly Symphonies, 1937



- music was composed for the film, in the style of a Symphonic Poem
- Academy Award - Best Short Subject: Cartoon (1937)
- first use of *multi-plane animation*
- test for techniques later used in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938) and *Fantasia* (1939)
- Naturalistic animation and effects animation - animals, water drops, wind, rain, dew drops, etc.
- “less enjoyable as a cartoon than as a showcase of Disney animation” - *Dr. Grob's Animation Review*
- ranked #14 in *The 50 Greatest Cartoons Ranked by Animation Professionals*
- Leigh Harline also wrote the score for *Pinocchio* (1940)

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

composer: Paul Dukas
Disney's Fantasia, 1939



from a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1797)

story synopsis (from Wikipedia)

The poem begins as an old sorcerer departs his workshop, leaving his apprentice with chores to perform. Tired of fetching water by pail, the apprentice enchants a broom to do the work for him — using magic in which he is not yet fully trained. The floor is soon awash with water, and the apprentice realizes that he cannot stop the broom because he does not know how.

Not knowing how to control the enchanted broom, the apprentice splits it in two with an axe, but each of the pieces becomes a new broom and takes up a pail and continues fetching water, now at twice the speed. When all seems lost, the old sorcerer returns, quickly breaks the spell and saves the day. The poem finishes with the old sorcerer's statement that powerful spirits should only be called by the master himself.

Saint-Saens, *Carnival of the Animals* (1886)

1. Introduction et Marche Royale du Lion (Introduction and Royal March of the Lion)
2. Poules et Coqs (Hens and Roosters)
3. Hémiones (animaux véloces) (Wild Asses)
4. Tortues (Tortoises)
5. L'Éléphant (The Elephant)
6. Kangourous (Kangaroos)
7. Aquarium
8. Personnages à longues oreilles (People with Long Ears)
9. Le coucou au fond des bois (The Cuckoo in the Depths of the Woods)
10. Volière (Aviary)
11. Pianistes (Pianists)
12. Fossiles (Fossils) ~~disc 126~~
13. Le Cygne (The Swan)
14. Final (used in *Fantasia 2000*)

Ogden Nash, *Fossils*

Last night in the museum hall
The fossils gathered for a ball
There were no drums or saxophones,
But just the clatter of their bones,
A rolling, rattling, carefree circus
Of mammoth polkas and mazurkas.
Pterodactyls and brontosaurus
Sang ghostly prehistoric choruses.
Amid the mastodonic wassail
I caught the eye of one small fossil.
Cheer up, sad world, he said, and winked-
It's kind of fun to be extinct.