

Reviewed by Carol McDowell

## Saint-Saëns' Danse Macabre

By Anna Harwell Celenza

Illustrated by JoAnn E. Kitchel

Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge Publishing Company (2013)

Would you walk down 83 steps into an underground cemetery where bones of all shapes and sizes lined the stone walls? Anna Harwell Celenza's recreation of *Saint-Saëns' Danse Macabre* tells the story of how composer Camille Saint-Saëns and his poet-friend Henri Cazalis did just that. They descended underground to visit the catacombs underneath the streets of Paris—the resting place of the brave souls who fought in the French Revolution.

“What if these bones came to life?” asked Camille. Henri immediately grabbed two bones and began rubbing them together, as if playing a violin, and chanted a poem about Maestro Death. Camille ordered Henri to stop this behavior because it was disrespectful towards the dead. But weeks later, Camille asked Henri for a copy of that poem. He wanted to set the words about Maestro Death and the dancing skeletons to music. Within a few days, Camille asked his singer friend Augusta Holmes to perform his new song. But upon hearing Augusta sing, Camille was disappointed with her interpretation of his work and stormed out of the room.

Several weeks later, Camille apologized to Augusta. Augusta explained to Camille that it is the performer, not the composer, who brings the music to life. It was then that Camille decided to rewrite his music without lyrics, to

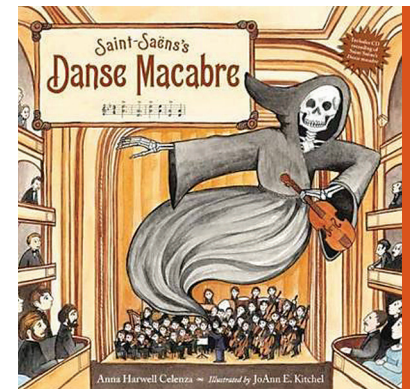
portray his original idea of dancing skeletons.

Two years later, his composition was complete. His instrumentation included a xylophone, an instrument new to the orchestra at that time, to capture the sounds of waltzing skeletons. On January 24, 1875, Camille's *Danse Macabre* (“dance from the grave”) premiered before 2,000 people. The performance received very little applause, but Camille did not care: his music had finally been performed the way he wanted it to be performed. His dancing skeletons had finally come to life.

This book provides a variety of topics to discuss in the music classroom. Camille's insistence that his audience know that his music was about dancing skeletons allows for a discussion of program music. He instructed the first violinist to tune the E string a half-step lower, creating the tritone—the devil in music (Maestro Death)—which may lead to a discussion about musical intervals. Because it was such a new instrument to the orchestra, Camille wrote in the score where a xylophone could be purchased; this could spark a conversation about the history of this instrument. He also asked the violins to play with the wood of the bow, which provides the opportunity

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for another prompting question: what are other different ways to play instruments? As a creative activity, students might invent a “new” technique for playing an instrument. Teachers may also introduce different instrument families. The book also allows students to analyze performance criticism by comparing the audience's reaction to *Danse Macabre* to the audience's reaction to *The Rite of Spring*. The history of the French



Revolution is another potential area for exploration: why was it fought, what was happening in the world at that time, and what would it have been like to live during that time? ■

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