Camille Saint-Saëns’ life was so long that it spanned almost the entire Romantic period (he lived to be eighty-six years old); he even witnessed the rise of jazz and modern music in the 20th Century.

Saint-Saëns was born in Paris on October 9, 1835, and was a talented musician from an early age. His aunt began teaching him piano lessons when he was two years old, and he began composing almost immediately afterwards, finishing his first piano piece at age three.

Besides music, Saint-Saëns was interested in many subjects—the study of plants and insects, mathematics, geology, archeology, astronomy and music history.

As a composer, Saint-Saëns had very French characteristics, he wrote elegant music that was considered neat, clean, polished and never excessive. As a performer, he was considered to be a great organist and one of the best pianists of his time. Even while he played, he sat very still at the piano, and was always restrained, graceful and cool.

During the years that Saint-Saëns was composing, many beautiful buildings (including the Eiffel Tower), churches and instruments were being built in France. The compositions that Saint-Saëns is most known for include Carnival of the Animals, Danse Macabre and his Symphony No. 3, which features an organ just like the ones that were being built at that time.

In particular, Danse Macabre is a spooky piece that depicts an old French superstition. On Halloween night, skeletons rise from their graves and dance to the music of a violin. Here, Saint-Saëns uses the xylophone to imitate the sound of their rattling bones! The skeletons dance all night until dawn; when they must return to their graves until next year.

In his relationships with other composers Saint-Saëns was either a good friend or an enemy – he held very strong opinions about music, and expressed them openly. During his later years, he became a grumpy sort of man, who fought the modern, more jazzy styles of music that were becoming popular.
Lesson Plan for *Danse Macabre* by Camille Saint-Saëns

**Standards Addressed:**
Standard 1: Creating, Performing and Participating in the Arts

**Performance Indicators:**
Students will:
- compose simple pieces that reflect a knowledge of melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, timbral and dynamic elements. (1a)
- improvise short musical compositions that exhibit cohesiveness and musical expression. (1c)
- discuss the current and past cultural, social and political uses for the music they listen to and perform. (4c)

**Objectives:**
- To have students understand that music can depict both character and plot and to have them create their own musical story.

**Materials:**
- Prep CD
- CD player
- Listening Map (included)
- *Danse Macabre* poem by Henri Cazalis (included)

**Listening Repertoire:**
- *Danse Macabre* by Camille Saint-Saëns

**Procedure:**
**Preparatory Activity:** Explain the concept behind this piece.
*Danse Macabre* or “Dance of Death” is a medieval allegory on the universality of death. It has been depicted for centuries in paintings and poetry. Some Hispanic cultures celebrate it as *Dia de los Muertos*. It came into being during a time when people in Europe were facing difficult situations like the Black Plague, famine and wars. *Danse Macabre* reminds us that life is precious and fleeting.

Introduce this piece as a work that tells a story. If you like, you can read the poem that goes with it. Outline the scenes that are depicted and describe the characters. The students will listen to the piece while following the listening map. As they are listening, call out to them when each character and scene is heard. How does the story resolve?

Teach students the two themes as shown on the next page.
How does Saint-Saëns use various instruments to depict the action and characters in the music?
- Harp: Bell tolling. Have students count the number of times it sounds. Ask them if they think the story occurs in the daytime or nighttime.
- Violin: Death. What about the way this is played gives you a clue as to what this character is like?
- Xylophone: Bones of dancing skeletons
- Oboe: Crowing rooster
Have students create their own musical story by choosing instruments that represent specific characters and then building a story around that. Their story doesn’t have to have the same theme of *Danse Macabre*. It could depict something very ordinary that your students encounter everyday. For example, they could build a story based on what they see when they walk or ride to school everyday.

They could follow this procedure:
- Divide your class into groups of four or five students.
- With each group, improvise on various percussion, Orff or orchestral instruments finding interesting sounds and asking students to brainstorm various characters it could represent.
- When a student responds with an answer, hand them the instrument and ask them to be that character.
- Then teacher asks students for actions that each character could do, students play instruments according to the actions.
- Have student groups perform their “stories” for one another, giving constructive feedback to their classmates and making suggestions for improvement or expansion on ideas.

**Lesson Extensions:** (Optional)
Draw out the scenes that are depicted in the piece.
Follow the listening map according to the arrows. Listen for the two themes that were outlined on the previous page.

We wish to thank the Reno Philharmonic for the use of this listening map.
On a sounding stone
With a blanched thigh-bone
The bone of a saint, I fear;
Death strikes the hour
Of his Wizard power
And the specters make haste to appear.  

From their tombs they rise
In their deathly guise
Obeying the summons dread.
And gathering round
With reverence profound
They salute the King of the Dead.

Then he stands in the middle
And tunes up his fiddle
And plays them a gruesome strain.
And each gibbering wight
In the moon’s pale light
Music dance to that wild refrain.

Now the fiddle tells
As the music swells
Of the graveyard’s ghastly pleasures.
And they clatter their bones
As with hideous groans
They reel to those maddening measures.

The churchyard quakes.
And the old abbey shakes
To the tread of that midnight host.
And the sod turns black
On each circling track
Where a skeleton whirls with a ghost.

The night wind moans
In shuddering tones
Through the gloom of the cypress tree.
While the mad mob raves
Over yawning graves
And the fiddle bow leaps with glee

So the swift hours fly
‘Til the reddening sky
Gives warning of daylight near.
Then the first rooster crow
Sends them scurrying below
To sleep for another year.