

Both 'Dance Macabre' and 'Night On A Bare Mountain' describe the 'Dance of Death'. Which piece do you think is most effective, and why ?

Programme Music is a piece of music which can describe something. It has many advantages in a way because you could be looking at an image or words i.e. (a poem) and it can instantly interpret through the various types of musical instruments (Strings, Percussion, Woodwind & Brass) what you are reading or looking at. This can be done by varying the usage of tempo, rhythm, pitch, melody, accompaniment, & dynamics etc. You may find that the sound an instrument creates can effect the way we feel. An example :a flute could be classed as harmonious because the flute plays a high-pitched note that can give the effect of cheeriness. The complete opposite sound to the Flute would be the Double bass as this instrument plays a very low note (hence the name - as Bass actually means deep) therefore it could make you feel unhappy. You could class all the high -pitched instruments as spring & summer-because this time of the year is usually associated with happiness and well-being. All the low-pitched instruments could be classed as Autumn & Winter -because it is the most bitter and drastic time of the year. Both 'Dance Macabre' and 'Night on the Bare Mountain' have one thing in common this is that both pieces describe the 'Dance Of Death'.

Dance Macabre was based on folklore in around the 14 & 15th century. It was written by a French composer called Saint-Saens. The piece describes the gruesome happenings in the churchyard of a small French Village on Halloween. Dance Macabre was based on a poem which was written by another Frenchman called Henri Cazalis. The Piece is very clever because the instruments used almost certainly Sounded like the poem itself examples of which are; "Zig-a-zig-a-Zig" This sounds like death is tuning his violin. "His heels tap the tomb stones" this line in the poem could of influenced the composer to use the Timpani - it really had a good effect. The line "Death at midnight playing a dance tune" could have been referring to tempo -dance tune associated would have a fast tempo. Before we actually listened to Dance Macabre we were instructed to write down

what instruments we expected to hear. As this piece was describing the dance of death I expected to hear the Violin being played as it is associated with mourning and death. I also expected to hear woodwind (the Flutes, Bassoons, Oboes etc...) being played because the poem line "The Winter wind whistles and the Lime-trees moan", made me think of woodwind instruments because Woodwind is associated with blowing in order to produce the instrument's sound. When I actually heard Dance Macabre it was similar to how I imagined it to sound like. The piece was firstly introduced by the Strings being played (Harp + Violin) then the Timpani was played to represent the heels tapping the tomb stones. Towards the middle of the piece Woodwind was used to symbolise the Winter wind whistling. When the Skeletons were introduced I was expecting to hear the Double Bass being played as it would of created a creeping up on you effect. In actual fact the skeletons were represented by the Xylophone this is very clever because you could visualize the clattering of bones from the Skeletons dancing just by hearing the Xylophone. The ending of Dance Macabre it was very effective as when the Skeletons stopped dancing the wild music stopped. When the Skeletons scattered a tremor was produced this sounded very effective to me ,then when the Cock crowed Violin strings were plucked.

"Night on The Bare mountain" this piece is really based on the title-it says it all. This piece was composed by Mussorgsky. As this piece too was describing the dance of death I thought it would have been comparable to Dance Macabre I also thought this piece would not of been too dramatic as the title Night On The Bare Mountain made me think of this piece being tranquil as bare is associated with emptiness. When I actually listened to Night On The Bare Mountain it sounded nothing like Dance Macabre it had a great usage of dynamics which I found really effective, the piece got louder then softer repeatedly. The piece began with the Woodwind Category and a glissando was played there was a Crescendo produced from the strings this perhaps was describing the mountain. Towards the middle of the piece when the spirits and death appeared and danced a loud hard bang on the Gong marked the entrance for Death , when the

violin was played it represented the spirits. The tempo progressed and got faster and faster, again Woodwind and Strings were used. In the middle of the piece a massive Chord was formed Percussion, Brass + Strings were all used. The piece sounded like Fairground music and was representing the madness of Death and the Spirits it was very dramatic. At the ending of the piece Woodwind was used to represent mourning the Clarinet was firstly played but the Flute took over because it had a softer timbre. It had a great effect as it sounded peaceful yet sad. The Harp was also played at the end. As Death was not present in the ending, the piece sounded less dramatic than before.

Overall I think the piece which was most effective at describing the Dance of Death to me would almost certainly be Night On The Bare Mountain. The reason being is that it made me feel more danced to death than Dance Macabre this was because it had a great usage of Dynamics, pitch, accompaniment and most importantly tempo. When Death and the Spirits were introduced the piece got really dramatic and full of life. This alone made me choose Night On The Bare Mountain as the most effective piece. Dance Macabre did not really sound like much of a dance tune it sounded more soft not lively although there were some dramatic peaks in Dance Macabre, I preferred Night On The Bare Mountain.

By Sarah Geary