Rattling Bones in the *Danse macabre* from Saint-Saëns to Tim Burton

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During the late Middle Ages, the dance of death, also known as »danse macabre« in French or »Totentanz« in German referred to a special motif in literature and painting where one or more death figures fetch the dying, often shown sorted by class. From then on, the concept and its representation expanded, for example into a broader allegory of dying in general (Ehrmann-Herfort 2016, 682). Musical instruments or explicit dancing are mostly, but not always, present in the early depictions of the motif. The first piece of music known to us that takes up the theme is *Mattasin oder Toden Tantz* from August Nörmiger's *Tabulaturbuch auff dem Instrumente* (1598) (Boyd 2001).

Figure 1: A doctor is guided by death. Detail from a watercolor copy of the *Basler Totentanz* (1806) by Johann R. Feyerabend (public domain)

Looking at the wealth of works from different periods, as they are available to us today, the phenomenon can be divided into at least three types: in one sense, the Dance of Death describes a more intimate partner dance of a personified death with the dying. Representative of this is the *Basler Totentanz*, the famous painting from the late Middle Ages, that shows a vast array of persons who either dance with a skeleton or are being fetched by a dancing skeleton (see Figure 1). In terms of musical examples, we might think of Franz Schubert's »Der Tod und das Mädchen« (1817). However, a broader concept of the Dance of Death also includes dying people who dance without a personified Death being present. We could interpret the protagonist's famous dance of the seven veils in Richard Strauss' *Salome* (1905) as her own death dance. Then there is the more public Dance of Death, a mass event that does not have to feature someone dying: cheerful undead and skeletons dancing, disregarding the physical laws of being and time. These morbid scenes are intermingled with a *memento mori* and a reminder not to take even death too seriously.

Still present today is the centuries-old idea of the Grim Reaper, who appears as the personification of death. In German-speaking countries, death has a masculine connotation, whereas in Slavic languages it is feminine (see Figure 2). This also occurs in the French tradition where death is called »la morte«.

This might be of interest because being taken away by death was often portrayed as an act of seduction. The motif of death and the maiden is certainly so successful because of the morbid eroticism attached to it. On the other hand, the visual depiction of death mostly appears completely unisex, as a mere skeleton. The temptation to join is less introduced through sexual enticement than through dance and music. The instruments used during the Dance of Death are classically the flute and the violin or fiddle, sometimes bagpipes or the hurdy-gurdy.

This paper, however, concentrates on the musical representations of the danse macabre, in which the bodies of the dancers themselves seem to sound. A brief historical outline will show how the typical instrumentation of dancing skeletons was established in classical music and how film music took this up to form its own topos, which is still varied today.

Figure 2: The painting *Śmierć* [death] (1902) by the Polish painter Jacek Malczewski (public domain)

Dancing skeletons and their sounds from the 19th century

In the nineteenth century, the subject experienced a particular revival. The old dances of death from the visual arts often served as sources of inspiration, as in the case of Franz Liszt's *Totentanz* for piano and orchestra (1849): beside the *Dies irae* and a theme from Mozart's Requiem, which he adapts musically, the triptych *Il trionfo della Morte* (ca. 1336–41) by Buonamico Buffalmacco and Hans Holbein's famous *Totentanz* (ca. 1523–

26) woodcuts served as a model here (Diagon-Jacquin 2009, 384–445). On the other hand, folklore and its literary continuation exerted a great influence, as on the two central dances of deaths in ballet form: the dance of the undead nuns in *Robert le Diable* (1831) by Giacomo Meyerbeer and the dance of the »vile« in Adolphe Adam's ballet *Giselle* (1841), where a dance with the undead kills the man who is responsible for Giselle's death.

Other central works deal not only with the undead, but explicitly with skeletons. Goethe's ballad *Der Totentanz* from 1813, which tells of a nocturnal cemetery scene where resurrected skeletons dance, was one of the works that triggered a new popularity of the motif and that describes the sound of rattling of bones during the dance in a thoroughly humorous manner. Among others, it was set to music by Carl F. Zelter and Carl Loewe (Boyd 2001; Ehrmann-Herfort 2015, 689).

In Camille Saint-Saëns' famous »poème symphonique« *Danse macabre*, op. 40 from 1874, both the personified Death, who plays the violin, and skeletons, who merely dance, appear. The term »poème symphonique« was previously established by Liszt and can literally be translated as »symphonic poem« here, as Saint-Saëns depicts the content of a poem by Henri Cazalis through the medium of instrumental music. This is program music par excellence, as the textual content can be retraced in detail in the mimetic music. This realization might have been an obvious idea, as the events in the poem are already very musical:

Henri Cazalis *Égalité-Fraternité*	
French	English
Zig et zig et zag, la Mort en cadence Frappant une tombe avec son talon, La Mort, à minuit, joue un air de danse, Zig et zig et zag, sur son violon.	Zig and zig and zag, death in cadence Striking a grave with his heel, Death at midnight plays a dance tune, Zig and zig and zag, on his violin.
Le vent d'hiver souffle, et la nuit est sombre ; Des gémissements sortent des tilleuls ; Les squelettes blancs vont à travers l'ombre Courant et sautant sous leurs grands linceuls,	The winter wind blows, and the night is dark, Moans come from the lime trees; White skeletons run through the shadows Running and leaping under their great shrouds,
Zig et zig et zig, chacun se trémousse, On entend claquer les os des danseurs […]	Zig and zig and zig, everyone shakes, The bones of the dancers can be heard rattling […]

Table 1: The beginning of Henri Cazalis' *Égalité-Fraternité* cited after Stegemann 2019, XVI. Translated by the author.

Saint-Saëns had previously set the poem to music as a song for piano and voice. His reworking as a »Poème symphonique« for orchestra now reveals almost all the instrumentation strategies that have characterized the Dance of Death in general to this day. Only the death knells are missing. In their stead, the harp must strike twelve times in the beginning to signal midnight, the witching hour. The solo violin is the only »diegetic« instrument that is itself part of the narrative in terms of sound and does not merely imitate noises, such as the oboe, which mimes the morning cock's crow at the end. The violin plays in scordatura; the E string is to be tuned down, so that the tritoni of the opening cadenza can be played on open strings. I would argue that the deceptive character of the Dance of Death is set to music here: Death itself is an ugly evil, represented by the tritoni, who can nevertheless have an attractive effect on people through his supernatural power, represented by the smooth theme the violin plays afterwards. Gustav Mahler also used a scordatura effect in his Fourth Symphony (1904) to orchestrate death in the scherzo (second movement). Here, the violin is tuned a note higher so that it sounds »screaming and raw ›as if death is playing‹« (Killian 1984, 179).

The depiction of the undead as skeletons has a clear effect in the visual language, as they are immediately and unambiguously recognizable as actually dead. In addition, the supernatural impression is heightened when the figures move without any musculature or facial expressions. In addition, skeletons also lend themselves to acoustic representation, as they can make sounds themselves, even without the aid of instruments.

Some of the very oldest instruments known to us, such as the bone flute or the quijada, are made from bones and it is probably not too bold to assume that the rhythmic striking of bare bones reaches even further back. However, the rattling of skeletons is, of course, only imitated in nineteenth century orchestral music. The percussive *col legno* technique was used to this effect in string instruments. This means that the strings are not bowed with the hairs of the bow but with its wood, which in combination with staccato or spiccato produces a rattling sound effect. Apart from Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre*, quite a few examples of this can be found throughout music history: for example, in Siegfried Wagner's *Sternengebot* (1908), to name a lesser-known one, where it illustrates a nightmare in which an undead wedding party dances in a cemetery (Act III, Scene 4).

More striking and widespread is the imitation of rattling bones through percussion instruments, above all the xylophone. The sound is produced in the same way as when bones actually hit each other: both are directly struck idiophones. The xylophone brings with it the additional benefit of tuned pitches and thus offers far-reaching possibilities for integrating the sound into the composition. In the case of Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre*, the intention was already unmistakable at the première; a few days later, the *Revue et Gazette Musical de Paris* reported on it (quoted after Stegemann 2019, XL): »Soon the orchestra rings to the fantastic timbre of a xylophone, doubtless to depict the clattering bones of a skeleton.«

Saint-Saëns may not have been the one who invented this typical instrumentation,[1] which was to some degree already inherent in the literary models, but his *Danse macabre* set the tone for subsequent Dances of Death in musical theater, popular music, and especially film music.[2]

Rattling bones in early film

During the nineteenth century, the Dance of Death motif became a macabre bourgeois amusement. Terracotta figurines based on images of the *Basler Totentanz* were sold, Johann Rudolf Schellenberg published caricatures such as the *English Dance of Death* (1814) and in Bavaria Franz Graf von Pocci introduced the skeleton figure to children's theatre. The Schichtl family of showmen made skeletons dance with the help of magic lanterns and marionettes from the 1870s to the 1950s. Already in the 1820s, the Belgian magician Étienne-Gaspard Robertson created sensations of this kind, using magic lanterns and invisible curtains to stage particularly impressive uncanny scenes in which skeletons appeared to move (Wunderlich 2001, 104–111). Around 1900, dancing skeletons were popular features in magic shows (Solomon 2022, 110). In a clearly fascinating

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1 Michael Stegemann surmises that Saint-Saëns got the idea from his reading of Georges Kastner's *Les danses des morts* (1852) (Stegemann 2019, L). However, Kastner only describes the xylophone-like *claquebois* once in his extensive monograph because it appears in a Holbein woodcut. In his own composition in the appendix, however, he does not use an instrument of this kind.

2 Aside from *Sternengebot*, other examples are the appearance of Kaschtschej's skeleton in Nicolai A. Rimski-Korsakow's *Mlada* (1889/90), the look inside the torture chamber in Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* (1918) and Olga Neuwirths *Bählamms Fest* (1999), in which the ghost of a rat rattles through a children's room. In popular music, xylophones or marimbas abound in Halloween classics like *Spooky, Scary Skeletons* by Andrew Gold.

manner, they appear to make the impossible possible: experience and history teach us that death is inevitable, a certainty that is expressed in proverbs like *Mors certa, hora incerta*.[3] Two universal fantasies seem to be at play here: immortality and resurrection. Therefore, it is no surprise that even a very early film such as LE SQUELETTE JOYEUX (France 1898) by the Lumière brothers, shows a dancing skeleton (a marionette). During its dance, some bones fall off temporarily – sometimes accidentally, sometimes to dance on their own. Unfortunately, it is unknown what music accompanied this silent film in 1898. Uploads that can be found on YouTube today are mostly underlaid with a simple, uplifting xylophone track, presumably copyright-free. In LE PALAIS DES MILLE ET UNE NUITS (France 1905) by Georges Méliès, Arabian knights encounter and fight dancing skeletons in a cave. Another twist on the theme shows up in George Albert Smith's trick film THE X-RAYS (United Kingdom 1897): a flirting couple sits on a bench, when a large camera, labelled »X Rays« is directed at them. Now they are visible as skeletons that seem to be dancing around with only their legs.

Animated movies made full use of the possibilities for instrumentation that dancing skeletons afforded. From 1929 to 1939, Walt Disney produced the SILLY SYMPHONIES, a series of animated short films that feature original musical scores as well as pre-existing music and tell self-contained stories, in which he experiments with the combination of music and storytelling. The imaginatively crafted cartoon sketches make full use of the scoring technique known as ›Mickey Mousing‹, in which the visual action has its exact counterpart in the music. The special feature is that music itself is the central theme of these cartoons. This new kind of musical novelty short was suggested by the composer Carl Stalling, who also wrote the score for the first one: THE SKELETON DANCE (United States 1929, Walt Disney) (Davis 2007, 80; Merritt and Kaufman 2016, 55). The scenery, instrumentation, and idea are very similar to Saint-Saëns' work. However, there is no personified death: a group of similar, anonymous skeletons dance in the cemetery at midnight until the rooster crows in the morning. In contrast to the previous examples, however, this dance does not merely imitate the sound of bones; instead, the skeletons create music through and on

[3] Latin proverb that translates to »Death is certain, the hour is not.« More famous to this day is the version by Benjamin Franklin: »in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.«

themselves, by deliberately using their bones as percussion instruments. At the center of Stalling's score is an arrangement of Edvard Grieg's *Trolltog* (*March of the Dwarfs*) from his *Lyric Pieces* Book V, op. 54 no. 3. In 1904, Grieg orchestrated these piano pieces for his *Lyric Suite* op. 54, using the arrangement by Anton Seidl as a basis, at least in the case of the dwarfs' march (Fog et al. 2008, 249). Here, the glissandi-rich melody is mainly played by flutes and strings. As dwarfs turn into skeletons in Disney's project, Stalling lets the xylophone take over. The many glissandi perfectly lend themselves to be played on the skeletons' rib cages.

The idea of using body parts as (percussion) instruments was already used in the previously released STEAMBOAT WILLIE (United States 1928, Ub Iwerks, Walt Disney), where Mickey Mouse plays a xylophone solo on a cow's teeth (see also Kaul 2015, 34). It recurs in different Disney films over time, most prominently in the song »Under the Sea« from THE LITTLE MERMAID (United States 1989, John Musker, Ron Clements).

An interview with Stalling suggests that originally, Walt Disney had planned to use Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre*:

> [Mike Barrier:] I've read that Walt wanted to use that music [*Danse macabre*], but couldn't get copyright clearance, so he asked you to compose something similar.
>
> [Carl Stalling:] That's what he usually did when something was copyrighted, but my music wasn't similar at all to the *Danse Macabre*.
>
> (Goldmark and Taylor 2002, 39)

Despite Stalling's claim, the whole film and the instrumentation continues the *Danse macabre* tradition quite clearly, even if the composer did so unconsciously (cf. Kaul 2015, 37).[4]

The idea to use xylophones for a jolly dance of skeletons was also used in the Mickey Mouse Film THE HAUNTED HOUSE (United States 1929, Walt Disney), animated by Max Fleischer. From this time onward, the dancing skeletons and their xylophone sound were a popular theme in the animation industry that also inspired live-action films, such as PENNIES FROM HEAVEN (United States 1936, Norman Z. McLeod), where Louis Arm-

[4] Stalling also denies the obvious use of Grieg's music in the same interview (Goldmark and Taylor 2002, 40).

strong performs the song »Skeleton in the Closet«. After a gloomily spoken intro, accompanied by effects that resemble/evoke death knells, a light-hearted swinging Fox Trot enters the soundtrack with lyrics describing a supernatural midnight party: »The spooks were having their midnight fling, the merry making was in full swing, they shrieked themselves into a cheerful trance, when skeleton in the closet started to dance. […] you never heard such an unearthly laughter, such hilarious groans, when skeleton in the closet rattled his bones.« The sung part is followed by a trumpet solo, which is interrupted by a dancing skeleton entering the stage. It dances to a drum solo, which the drummer finishes by standing up and playing xylophone glissandi on the skeleton's ribs.

The trope also appears in Fritz Lang's monumental silent film classic METROPOLIS (Germany 1927), for which Gottfried Huppertz composed a comprehensive orchestral score that was only rediscovered in 1979 (Finocchiaro 2020, 186). Like in the example from Siegfried Wagner's *Sternengebot*, a fever dream of the protagonist Freder is utilized here to break with the laws of the narrated world and introduce supernatural elements: at a reception organized by the inventor Rotwang, his mechanical human (»Maschinenmensch«), who has the appearance of Freder's lover Maria, dances in front of the assembled men in a lascivious yet robotic manner. She corresponds entirely to the faded-in image of the Babylon the Great, the »mother of all abominations on earth«, about whom a monk had warned earlier in the film. In the second part of the dream, a group of figures from the cathedral can be seen: the personified seven deadly sins and a skeletonized grim reaper. With the musical entry of the xylophone, they begin to rise from their pedestals and the skeleton lifts a bone to its mouth to play a flute solo on it. Freder realizes: »Death is over the city - - -!« and wakes up. The sequence masterfully combines the traditional dance of death motif with all the social corruption that manifests itself in the new invention. Meanwhile Gottfried Huppertz' music appropriately brings together the old and new Dance of Death by quoting the archaic sounding *Dies irae* and utilizing the comparatively new tradition of the percussion instrument, which was associated with Saint-Saëns before in the literature (Hoklas 2015, 130).

A counterexample to the instrumentation trend in early films would be HITTIN' THE TRAIL TO HALLELUJAH LAND (United States 1931, Rudolf Ising), which includes a scene that is

visually heavily inspired by THE SKELETON DANCE (Merritt 2016, 56) but does not take up the musical trope. Instead, the three skeletons form a »regular« singing ensemble.[5]

Tim Burton's CORPSE BRIDE – »Remains of the Day«

Tim Burton's widely known stop-motion animated film CORPSE BRIDE, released in 2005, clearly follows in Disney's tradition in this aspect. It is an artistic adaptation of an Eastern European folktale, which in turn is based on an even older Jewish legend (Leonard 2011, 29, Pfefferman 2005). The legend typically tells the story of a fiancé putting his wedding ring on a twig, which turns out to be the finger of a woman's corpse who had died as a bride. She then wakes up and insists on him marrying her. Interestingly, tales like this, about brides challenging death in some form, have existed since the Middle Ages, evolving into countless variations over time (Lindbeck 2014).

The music for CORPSE BRIDE was composed by Danny Elfman and plays an explicit role in the film in that – reminiscent of musicals and revues – the characters themselves regularly make music, sing, and dance. It therefore is portrayed as particularly diegetic: the characters not only hear the music, but also create it themselves.

At the center of the movie is the track »Remains of the Day«: the protagonist Victor, who accidentally married the deceased bride Emily, is abducted by her into a bar beneath the earth, which turns out to be a kind of underworld, populated by the very cheerful dead.[6] Here, a one-eyed skeleton man and his combo musically recount the story of the corpse bride, who was killed by her fiancé to claim her inheritance. There is nothing sinister about the scene or the music, on the contrary: the whole film is brought to life by the effect that the realm of the dead is more colorful and livelier than that of the living, which is portrayed as a grey and stiff caricature of the Victorian era.

While the music above is mostly period-appropriate, the music below takes us into the world of twentieth-century jazz and cabaret (Leonard 2011, 31–35). Burton envisioned a

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5 HITTIN' THE TRAIL TO HALLELUJAH LAND was banned for its racist content in 1968 as one of the infamous »Censored Eleven« films (Jahn 2017, 88). The cemetery scene thrives on the stereotypical image of the particularly superstitious African American.

6 The track was also released on the album *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Warner Records Inc. 2005).

Sammy Davis Jr.-style for the song, but Elfman described the final result as »in fact like a 1930s Cab Calloway song« (Salisbury 2008, 259). The skeletons sing and dance on a small stage, accompanied by a skeleton with black sunglasses at a coffin-shaped piano, bending passionately over the keys (see Figure 3).[7] The clear reference to Ray Charles, who died the year before, also vaguely characterizes the number musically, including the primacy of the rhythmic blues piano and the presence of the choir that takes over the chorus. Alien to the role models from the blues and jazz world is the xylophone sound, which gives »Remains of the Day« its individual touch.[8]

Figure 3: Human and animal bones making music together: Ray Charles skeleton at the coffin-shaped piano, lead singer Bonejangles in the background.

Besides the piano, only one sound source is audible/visible at first: the skeletons use their own bones as percussive instruments with pitches. The singer begins the show with the exclamation »Hit it, boys!« and then hits the skull plates of his dancers with his own bony

7 Screen capture taken from Ray, *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride main song – Remains of the Day*, YouTube (02.11.2011), https://youtu.be/j4p9WKnDQzQ?si=jQQd2xnbdidMXOs2, 0:30.

8 While the vibraphone was quite popular in jazz, the sharper sound of the xylophone was generally avoided. An exception is the musician Red Norvo, who also used it alongside the vibraphone and marimba, e.g. in the *Blues in E flat* from 1935.

fists to introduce the number musically. At this point in history, it comes as no surprise to the viewer that the skeletons produce xylophone sounds. The glissando over the ribs of the last dancer, which ends the musical intro and leads directly into the first piano glissando, is particularly clever. As the story is set in the nineteenth century, the idea of ivory keys is particularly obvious: the glissando is merely a transition from human to animal bones used to make music.

After this opening, the musical use of bones is initially no longer visible, but the instrumentation remains the same and the memorable opening means that the percussive sound is now associated with the bones for the viewer. Moreover, the scene includes additional sounds that blend in with the music. These include the soft rattling of the dancing skeleton bones and the particularly harsh snapping of fleshless fingers. These elements blend into the overall picture as mere noise, i.e. without a recognizable pitch: half music, half ›realistic‹ soundscape. It is precisely this soundscape that contributes greatly to the ›liveliness‹ of the realm of the dead, making it believable and individual, e.g. when slightly unpolished singing voices emerge as soon as the corresponding figure moves into the center of the picture.

The singer – credited as Bonejangles – is voiced by Elfman himself. He tells the crowd both on and in front of the screen the story of Emily, the corpse bride. This storytelling song style is indeed reminiscent of a lot of 1930s numbers, like Cab Calloway's »Minnie the Moocher«. We could also think of gospel and talking blues genres, where songs often start with an announcement of the own performance and a call to the audience to gather and listen (see Table 2).[9]

The connection to Calloway is not only a musical one: the whole scene seems to be inspired by the three Betty Boop cartoons that featured Calloway's collaboration with the Fleischer Studios in New York, especially MINNIE THE MOOCHER (United States 1932,

[9] This tradition may have its roots in original performance situations where preachers, storytellers, or street musicians had to gather their audiences in public spaces. In Europe, we might think of ›Bänkelsang‹: latest news and sensational sorties were presented at town squares often in the form of songs from the Middle Ages up to the nineteenth century. In a broader sense, these narrative situations can of course occur anywhere. In Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* (1841), Senta makes herself heard in order to recite her ballad; in the prologue to Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), Orsini announces his story about Lucrezia. A more recent example from pop music would be »Blue (Da Ba Dee)« by Eiffel 65 or, even more fitting, »Dance of Death« by Iron Maiden.

Danny Elfman: »Remains of the Day«	Cab Calloway: »Minnie the Moocher«	The Jubalaires: »The Preacher and the Bear«
Hey, give me a listen You corpses of cheer At least those of you Who still got an ear I'll tell you a story Make a skeleton cry Of our own jubiliciously lovely Corpse Bride.	Folks, here's a story 'bout Minnie the Moocher She was a red hot hoochie-coocher She was the roughest toughest frail But Minnie had a heart as big as a whale.	Yes, just come on brothers if you want to hear, the story about that preacher and the bear, gather round boys I don't want you to miss, none of this story, 'caus it goes like this:

Table 2: Comparison of the »Remains of the Day«-intro with (potential) older role models.

Dave Fleischer). While some argued the Fleischers must have overlooked the drug references in the songs, the psychedelic cave scenes with dancing skeletons might suggest otherwise (Wennekes 2016, 292). MINNIE THE MOOCHER includes a scene in which three dancing skeletons drink beer in front of a bar while singing a part of the silly choir response of Calloway's song: »Hi-de hi-de hi-de hi-de«. This is plausibly the origin of the bar scene in CORPSE BRIDE.[10] The cartoon SNOW-WHITE (United States 1933, Dave Fleischer) also shows a surreal bar scene, drawn on the cave wall, as well as the framed picture of a skeletal gentleman with hat and moustache, who also appears in CORPSE BRIDE.[11] In an interview, Elfman said about writing »Remains of the Day«: »And it was just so much fun, because […] I knew there was going to be a big instrumental break and I had this idea for like skeletons and Max Fleischer cartoons from the 30s and I said I never had a chance to write for skeletons playing xylophone solos on each other's ribs, you know, they haven't done this in so long.«[12]

The reason why dancing skeletons are obviously associated with black (jazz) music, at least in American contexts, can be found in New Orleans. Vaguely comparable with the Mexican Day of the Dead traditions, members of the black communities dress up as skeletons, called »skeleton gangs« or »bone men«, for carnival (Mardi Gras) and jazz funerals. The tradition can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and is rooted in

10 The cartoon MINNIE THE MOOCHER does not only include the song by the same name, but seven different ones, thus offering rich references to music history itself (see Wennekes 2016, 293).

11 However, CORPSE BRIDE fans also saw the figure described as Clark Gable (with good reasons), who is widely known for his role in GONE WITH THE WIND (United States 1939, Victor Fleming). Whether the portrait in SNOW-WHITE refers to Gable or if it shows his uncanny doppelgänger remains unclear.

12 Danny_Elf_Fan Edits, *Danny Elfman Corpse Bride Interview*, YouTube (13.08.2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjkmGo34coU (3:39–4:02).

the Haitian Vodou that is centered around ancestor worship (Turner 2009, 120; Abrahams et al. 2006, 76). Until today at Mardi Gras the Northside Skull and Bone Gang haunts the city, that was and is a musical center, especially for jazz.[13]

The instrumental break Elfman referred to in the cited interview differs significantly from the rest of the scene: compared to the previous one, it is far more artificial and is reminiscent of an experimental music video. A zoom into the empty eye socket of the singer turns everything black. The skeletons perform solo in front of the now-black screen and here the idea of making music with one's own bones is fully explored, this time introduced by the suggestive exclamation: «Come on boys, pick it up!«. Now the skeletons take themselves and each other apart to expand their instruments. The xylophone and marimba can be heard as the musical base. The individual instruments play short solos over this, and the filmmakers' visual creativity reaches its climax: the skeletons use each other as a stringed double bass, xylophone, one upper half of the skeleton plays the guitar on its own lower half and so on (see Figure 4).[14]

Acoustically similar intermezzi are familiar from live music performances: the drums play alone and, while the musicians are introduced by name, each one improvises a short phrase on their instrument. In the movie, the impression of such an improvisation is created by short, abruptly interjected phrases. The musical freedom creates an even greater contrast to the formal world of the living (Leonard 2011, 36). The fact that the instrument building itself is also improvised further enhances this effect. In contrast to the introduction of live musicians, the individuality of the skeletons is lost. Apart from the singer and pianist, who are recognizable by their sunglasses, eyes and hats, all of them look the same. They even swap their skulls to show how interchangeable they are. The other dead bar visitors are much more individualized due to their clothing and sometimes even more complete bodies, thus offering plenty of room for cultural-historical associations. The corpu-

13 A look at recent online posts confirms this, for example: www.mardigrasneworleans.com/news/skeletons-aren-t-just-for-halloween (27.09.2024), www.neworleans.com/events/holidays-seasonal/mardi-gras/history-and-traditions/the-north-side-skull-bone-gang/ (27.09.2024).

14 Screen capture taken from Ray, *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride main song – Remains of the Day*, YouTube (02.11.2011), https://youtu.be/j4p9WKnDQzQ?si=jQQd2xnbdidMXOs2, 01:59.

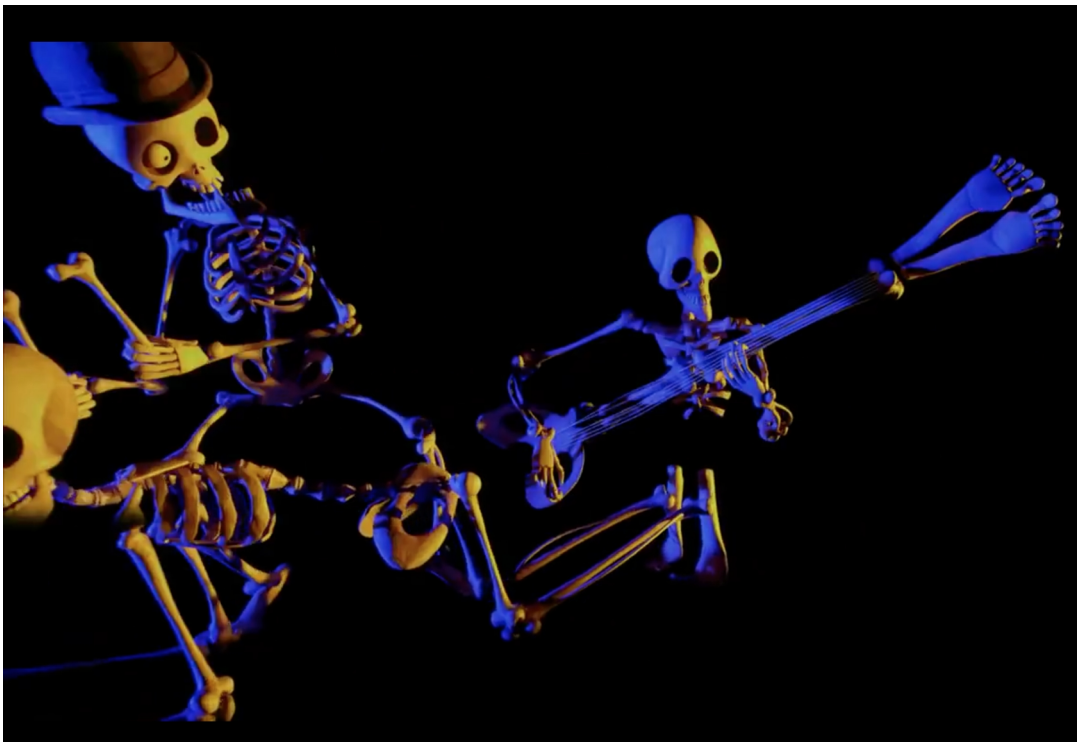

Figure 4: Bonejangles playing the skeleton-xylophone in classic Disneyesque tradition, the guitar being an extended adaption of the same idea.

Figure 5: A reference to Salome and Jochanaan. The head turns out to be the underworlds chef in CORPSE BRIDE.

lent cook carrying a male head on her tray, for example, is bizarrely reminiscent of Salome and the head of Jochanaan (see Figure 5).[15]

The general concept of portraying the dead as more cheerful than the living is reminiscent of Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, an operetta that has regularly staged debauched, song-filled underworld festivals since 1858. All in all, a swinging *Danse macabre* has been created here in sound and vision, which resurrects a vast array of musical and cultural-historical legends far beyond those of the twentieth century.

To quote Hofmannsthal: »As soon as we open our mouths, ten thousand dead people always have their say« (»Wenn wir den Mund aufmachen, reden immer zehntausend Todte mit«) (Hofmannsthal 2015, 159). It refers to language as an inescapable cultural repository but also to the impossibility of avoiding the presence of our cultural past in general. In the case of »Remains of the Day«, Saint-Saëns, Walt Disney, Carl Stalling, Max Fleischer, Cab Calloway, and Ray Charles have their say.

Through the interchangeability and decomposability of the skeletons as the death dance's protagonists, we come as close as possible to a seemingly timeless continuum of the dancing dead, a principle that eludes our reckoning of time in death and eternity. They once were individual humans but the show goes on and now they have become one with music. More recent films, such as COCO (United States 2017, Lee Unkrich) or Louie Zong's short but popular animated music videos on YouTube, show us that the topos lives on and is worth keeping an eye on from a musicological perspective.[16]

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15 Screen capture taken from Ray, *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride main song – Remains of the Day*, YouTube (02.11.2011), https://youtu.be/j4p9WKnDQzQ?si=jQQd2xnbdidMXOs2, 01:26.

16 Louie Zong, *ghost + guest* 👻🎶, YouTube (19.10.2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEpKlsUw9XU.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

Umbreit, Tabea: Rattling Bones in the *Danse macabre* from Saint-Saëns to Tim Burton. In: *Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung* 19 (2025), S. 118–135, DOI: https://doi.org/10.59056/kbzf.2025.19.p118-135.

Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung (ISSN 1866-4768)