

The Devil in the Belfry by Edgar Allan Poe



The town of Vondervotteimittiss is built in a circle, symbolizing a clock and the eternal cycle of time, which is a constant. The town is comprised of “sixty little houses” which represent the sixty minutes and sixty seconds which are the foundations of time. In addition, the steeple in the center of town, which houses the great clock, has seven sides with seven clock faces, symbolizing the seven days of the week, another important symbol of time and structure.

‘The great clock has seven faces—one on each of the seven sides of the steeple—so that it can be readily seen from all quarters.’

The final number to keep in mind is twelve, which are the numbers on the clock face and the number of months in a year.

So one day, a stranger comes into town playing a big fiddle, and the way he is described conjures the image of the devil. He brutally attacks the belfry man, commandeers the clock tower, and as the clock strikes twelve noon, he causes the clock to chime once more, making it 13 o’clock.

“Twelve!” said the bell.

“Dvelf!” they replied, perfectly satisfied and dropping their voices.

“Und dvelf it iss!” said all the little old gentlemen, putting up their watches. But the big bell had not done with them yet.

“Thirteen!” said he.

Thirteen is considered an unlucky number and portends evil and disruption. What Poe is expressing here is that deviation from the norm, disruption of the perfect order of things which is symbolized by the steadiness of time, results in chaos, which is exactly what happens in the town of Vondervotteimittiss.

‘Meantime the cabbages all turned very red in the face, and it seemed as if old Nick himself had taken possession of every thing in the shape of a timepiece. The clocks carved upon the furniture took to dancing as if bewitched, while those upon the mantel-pieces could scarcely contain themselves for fury, and kept such a continual striking of thirteen, and such a frisking and wriggling of their pendulums as was really horrible to see.’

FIG. 2 Recurring Debussy ideas in 'Le Diable dans le beffroi'

(a) Tableau I: Assez animé et très rythmé (♩=92) (Moby 1902-5)

(b) *(scherzando)*

(c) *Anno 1860* (♩=92)

ni s'occuper des "Images", au profit de
 Monsieur E.-R. Poir... cet homme, quoique
 posthume, exerce sur moi une ~~tyrannie~~
 tyrannie presque angossante. J'en oublie
 des affections essentielles, et m'empêche
 comme un bûche dans la maison Usher,
 à moins que je ne tienne compagnie
 au diable dans le beffroi.

Les affectueux souvenirs de moi-même
 et de l'amitié de vous

Claude Debussy,

