

## Web Feature 2.3

### The tritone—The Devil in music

In the Middle Ages the tritone was referred to as *diabolus in musica* (“the Devil in music”). The first chromatically altered pitches—B $\flat$  and F $\sharp$ —were efforts to temper or correct this perceived evil. If the note B or F created a tritone with another part or voice, it was often “corrected” in performance even if no accidental was specified on the score, a practice referred to as *musica ficta*. In the nineteenth century, the tritone was a musical symbol for evil; for example, it is found prominently in Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830; the fifth movement, “Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath”), “The Hut of Baba Yaga” (a portrayal of a Russian witch) from Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874), and the “Mephistopheles” movement of Franz Liszt’s *Ein Faust Symphonie* (1856–63). Even today it is an ingredient in some hard rock and heavy metal (e.g., the tritone of G and D $\flat$  marks the boundary tones of the iconic guitar riff in Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water” [1972], and E and B $\flat$  are prominent tones in “Enter Sandman” [1991] by Metallica and “Sleepwalker” by Megadeth [2007]). Some of these uses of the tritone are shown in Web Example 2.5.

Liszt, "Mephistopheles" from *Eine Faust Symphonie* (opening, cellos and basses only)

Three measures of music in bass clef, 2/4 time. Each measure features a sixteenth-note triplet (marked with a '6') and a tritone (TT) boundary tone. The tritone is indicated by a bracket above the notes and labeled 'TT (boundary tones)'.

Mussorgsky, "The Hut of Baba Yaga" (theme only)

Two lines of music in bass clef, 2/4 time. The first line shows a tritone (TT) boundary tone at the end of the phrase, indicated by a bracket and labeled 'TT'. The second line shows another tritone (TT) boundary tone, also indicated by a bracket and labeled 'TT'.

Deep Purple, "Smoke on the Water" (fragment of riff, rhythms removed)

A single line of music in bass clef showing a fragment of the riff. A tritone (TT) boundary tone is indicated by a bracket below the notes and labeled 'TT (boundary tones)'.

**Web Example 2.5.** The tritone in various “evil” contexts.