Excerpt from “The Devil's Music”
By Finlo Rohrer, BBC News Magazine

The Devil is said to have the best tunes, but what do they sound like? A new film about the history of heavy metal highlights the so-called Devil's Interval, a musical phenomenon suppressed by the Church in the Middle Ages.

On the surface there might appear to be no link between Black Sabbath, Wagner's Gotterdammerung, West Side Story and the theme tune to The Simpsons.

But all of them rely heavily on tritones, a musical interval that spans three whole tones, like the diminished fifth or augmented fourth. This interval, the gap between two notes played in succession or simultaneously, was branded Diabolus in Musica or the Devil's Interval, by medieval musicians.

A rich mythology has grown up around it. Many believe that the Church wanted to eradicate the sounds from its music because it invoked sexual feelings, or that it was genuinely the work of the Devil.

It is a mythology much beloved of long-haired guitar wizards.

In the newly-released documentary Metal: A Headbanger's Journey, bassist Alex Webster of death metal act Cannibal Corpse pays tribute to the effect of the forbidden "Devil's note" on heavy metal.

And rock producer Bob Ezrin pronounces: "It apparently was the sound used to call up the beast. There is something very sexual about the tritone. In the Middle Ages when people were ignorant and scared, when they heard something like that and felt that reaction in their body they thought 'uh oh, here come the Devil'"

Professor John Deathridge, King Edward professor of music at King's College London, says the tritone had been consistently linked to evil.

"In medieval theology you have to have some way of presenting the devil. Or if someone in the Roman Catholic Church wanted to portray the crucifixion, it is sometimes used there"

A more modern advocate of the tritone is Black Sabbath - the rock outfit led by Ozzy Osbourne - particularly in their signature song, Black Sabbath, a milestone in the genesis of heavy metal.

But this link between heavy metal and musical conjuring of the Devil in the Middle Ages comes as a bit of a surprise to the band's guitarist, Tony Iommi.

"When I started writing Sabbath stuff it was just something that sounded right. I didn't think I was going to make it Devil music," Iommi tells the Magazine.
He says he was aiming for "something that sounded really evil and very doomy" but admits he may have been unconsciously influenced by other music and was certainly not aiming to summon the Devil…

There are, however, plenty of bands who consciously use tritones, including the notorious metal act Slayer, who offered their tribute in an album simply entitled Diabolus in Musica.