

>> This is Steve Mencher for the Library of Congress and this is another in our series of music and the brain podcasts, based on the series of talks here at the library. I'm talking with Norman Middleton a concert producer at the library and Jessica Crash, a musician and a composer who teaches at George Washington University. One of the courses she teaches is called dangerous music, and that's the subject of our conversation today, and we'll maybe start by talking about a musical interval that some people have called dangerous or devilish, which is the tritones. So, if you were starting on C for instance if you jumped up to F sharp, like the beginning of Leonard Bernstein's great song from West Side Story, Maria, that could be a tritone. What could possibly be devilish or dangerous about two musical notes?

>> One of the issues of the tritone comes from physics. I assume our brain is somehow tied within the physics and the world outside of the brain and that's the tritone, if you have a string for each note the ratio of those strings is a ratio of the square root of two to one, and the square root of two is a very strange number in physics and it makes mathematicians-- At different times in history, it made them uncomfortable and it was kind of a forbidden number, and I was fascinated that that also was an interval that was uncomfortable for people and sound.

>> So throughout history from a long time ago up until the Rock music of recent times, this tritone has been used in various ways to give you a feeling, to make you feel something.

>> That's right, and the feeling was almost always negative. Even now in things like Gospel music, diminished chords are frowned upon and diminished chords are based on tritones and so just that far a field from the original idea is still in play today.

>> As we're talking about dangerous music. The idea of the devil has shown up often in music, whether it's something that the devil is doing in the music, music written up about evil or the devil. Whether it's stories of musicians having sold their souls to the devil in order to play almost super humanly, and, so in your talk, you talked a lot about that and I wonder if you could share some of that with us.

>> Yes. The devil entity has several facet. There's going back to the tritones. It was called dibolous in music, musica. Diabolus in musica, the devil's music. And then there's the devil as Beelzebub, Mephistopheles and Fallston and all that kind of stuff. Where it takes, the devil himself, is a humanoid and then you have the third facet. People selling their soul to the devil to enhance their talent. All three of those things have big histories in music. For instance, going back to the devil being a source of making your talent better. One of the earliest ones is the thing about Tartini the baroque composer who supposedly met the devil in a dream and in that dream the devil played a piece to him in the dream and Tartini supposedly got up and wrote it down. Well that story is like an urban myth, there's really no evidence that Tartini ever had that dream but the story took on a life of its own. Then there's the one about Paganini who supposedly had the devil standing right next to him while he played these fantastic pieces. And then

there's Robert Johnson who was a Blues singer who supposedly sold his soul to the devil so that he could play better and have a better career. So the devil is a very powerful influence. Then you have the devil in heavy metal music. Started back with the tritone. A lot of heavy metal music uses the tritone, and those guys do that on purpose because they know that the tritone is considered evil. And a lot of heavy metal people use that evil for publicity. There are actually very few heavy metal musicians that are Satanists, but they know that people don't like the devil and they don't like Satanism. So they just use it as a marketing ploy and its very successful.

>> Jessica, I know that sometimes the evilness or the dangerousness in music is something that's sort of ginned up politically. I'm thinking particularly of what happened in the late 30s in Nazi Germany where the music of Jewish composers was thought to be somehow disgraceful or degenerate and therefore the Nazis forbid it or had it not be performed in that era. Now, can you tell us a little bit about how they were trying to use this idea of dangerous music for their own political ends.

>> I think that the Nazis had a very muddled aesthetic policy and they latched onto some things that were really in the music and much of it was a fabrication. There were only maybe two percent of the musicians in Germany were Jews. But the Jews were at the forefront some of the modernists music. And the modernists music did to tend to be more dissident and so the Nazis came out with a stance against that kind of dissident modernism. But they tolerated it in the Italian modernists, and they tolerated from Stravinsky during the non- aggression pact with Russia. So, you know there are psychological and political factors and it's fascinating when they overlap like this and they could latch onto something that people are already were uncomfortable about, in the new modernism and gain some support from the public when they criticized Schoenberg or banned some of this modernist music. On the other hand they also tried to ban Jazz. But there was so much popular interest in Jazz. That they had to kind of accommodate and say Jazz was ok if it was German musicians playing it.

>> Now, let's take Schoenberg for example. What did they point to in his music as something was particularly offensive to them or particularly "dangerous".

>> Well Schoenberg was Jewish, so I think that was the issue.

>> So just by definition.

>> Yea, although they had these different public statements they would make about aesthetics that were muddled and we see similar things in the Soviet Union with Stalin. That they kind of made these decrees and the Soviet Union have a decree against formalism. But nobody really knew what formalism was. So they'd have these political stands that macerated as an aesthetic stands. But they were pretty incoherent. With Schoenberg's music it was dessinate, it was complicated, it was the at forefront of things that were going on in Europe. And Schoenberg thought that he was, with his new system, going to make German music dominant for the next hundred years. You know he saw himself as a good German and he was very

much in the German tradition of Bach and Brahms and Beethoven. The Nazi's said he had destroyed the triad, and as if, you know. The Nazis were claiming the triad was German, when everybody had been using the triad. So they said that Schoenberg was ruining German music and Schoenberg thought he was rescuing German music.

>> That's fascinating. Norman, I know in your talk, you talk specifically about sometimes when Rock music or Heavy Metal music, Rap music as well, has specifically caused either murder or suicide among young people, and this seems, you know, on the one hand an extension of, starting in the 1950s when parents would say, well that Rock and Roll music is no good. You know, and about some also very specific incidents that actually did happen and went to court.

>> Yes, there were some cases, there was this case out in Las Vegas where these guys were sitting around listening to Rock music and they were drinking, and one of them decided that he would commit suicide, or that, there were two guys and they made sort of this suicide pact and. So they went into, I think a playground or something, and they had a shot gun, and one of them took the shotgun and blew his own head off and then the other guy took the same shotgun and-- But the shotgun by this point was so bloody that he didn't shoot himself correctly and he survived, but barely, and so he had years and years and years of corrective surgery until he finally died of his wounds. And the song that they were listening to was a song by Judas Priest's, called Beyond the Realms of Death, and, so the question becomes, you know, did the music cause the suicide or was there something else going on with these kids that they may have committed suicide any way. No matter what they were listening to, or if they were listening to anything at all.

>> Ok, when you two gave your presentation [inaudible]. I know you ended up talking about dangerous dance and that's a good place for us to end as well. And it seems like to me, social dancing would almost by definition be dangerous. It's the kind of aspect to things where two people can get together and touch and move rhythmically, and become somewhat intimate under the cover of music. But that may not necessarily be what you have looked into.

>> I'm always fascinated about by story of Rite Of Spring, I'm fascinated about it because we studied it in theory class and orchestration class and I knew this piece for years until I finally went and saw a live performance and realized it was a story about ritual, murder of a young woman, which my theory teachers never told us. So that's my initial fascination but -- Then I started looking at the history of the riot at the premiere, and when you look at the dance, the dance was also challenging as well as the music. Traditional ballet is about hierarch. You have the [inaudible] ballet, you have the special few couples, and then the prima ballerina. Rite Of Spring was ant-hierarchy with all the dancers as one group, and in that sense was very much a political and ethical statement. The Rite Of Spring was mainly provocative in its "primitivism" and trying to challenge the Parisian upper class to look at the sides of themselves that they weren't owning up to, I think, or to say the Russian primitivism, or that the Russians were better, or more

real than the Parisian. But I think there was a statement in the way the choreography dealt with hierarchy, that was provocative.

>> What other kinds of dancing is dangerous, Norman?

>> Dance seems to be inherently conflictive. Because dance it's alone and in itself, is a sensual activity, it's the only art form that involves the entire human body. Throughout the three major religions. There were rules established in all three. There's, in Muslims and Jewish cultures, dancing is ok as long as the two sexes are separated. As long as the dance is in glorification of God, it's the same in Christianity too. Christians have taken it one step further. Well, some Christians, conservative Christians have taken it one step further and in some Pentecostal churches. Dancing is forbidden altogether, but oddly enough, there are lots of instances in the bible where dancing is ok. Because it's all in glorification of God, But, and it seems that in recent years, slowly but surely. Dance has become part of church services. Oddly enough it took a long time for that to happen. Especially in some Christian churches. But it's ok now.

>> I've been talking with Norman Middleton a concert producer here at the Library of Congress and Jessica Crash a pianist and composer who teaches at George Washington University. We've been talking about dangerous music as part of the series of podcasts we're doing based on the lectures on music and the brain being given at the Library of Congress. I'm Steve Mencher.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov.