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Hello and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast that helps you discover the music of composers, cultures, and traditions from all around the world. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're joining me today for a special Halloween edition of What Was That Sound?

If you've listened to a What Was That Sound? episode before, you know how this works — I'll play short clips of sounds from different instruments, and your job is to guess which one you're hearing before I tell you the answer. There's a free printable tracker at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/186 if you want to write down your guesses and jot down a few facts about each instrument along the way.

And since this is the Halloween edition, every sound you'll hear today comes from music that composers wrote to feel just a little mysterious, a little eerie, and (okay, I couldn't resist) a little spook-tacular. I'm done. Let's get started!

For our first sound, we're going to listen to a piece called Danse Macabre by the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns. In this section, he's musically painting a picture of skeletons dancing at midnight. Listen closely for the instrument that sounds almost like rattling bones.

Any guesses as to what that clattery, bony-sounding instrument was?

If you said xylophone, you're exactly right! The xylophone is made up of wooden bars that a player strikes with mallets, and that hard, hollow sound is what makes it perfect for imitating bones knocking together. Saint-Saëns was actually one of the first composers to use the xylophone this way in an orchestra, and it worked so well that composers have been borrowing the trick ever since. If you want to hear the rest of this piece — including a really fun cameo from a certain famous skeleton — go back and listen to Episode 158, where we covered the whole thing.

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Our next sound is big, echoey, and might remind you of walking into an old, empty building. This clip comes from a piece traditionally attributed to Johann Sebastian Bach called Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. You've probably heard it before in movies or haunted houses without ever knowing its name. Listen for the instrument that fills up the whole room with sound.

What did you guess?

That dramatic, room-filling sound is the pipe organ. Organs work by pushing air through hundreds (sometimes thousands) of pipes of different sizes, which is part of why they can sound so massive. Bach was actually a professional organist for most of his life, playing for churches all over Germany, and this piece has become one of the most famous organ pieces ever written — even if most people who recognize it have no idea it's a few hundred years old.

For our third sound, we're heading to Russia for a piece by composer Modest Mussorgsky called Night on Bald Mountain. According to old Russian folklore, something magical and mysterious was said to stir on this mountain once a year on a single eerie night — and Mussorgsky tried to capture that feeling in his music. Listen for the low, rumbling instrument that sounds like distant thunder.

Did you guess timpani?

Timpani are large drums with a rounded copper bottom, and a player can actually adjust their pitch using a foot pedal, which is part of why they can create that rolling, rumbling effect. Composers love using timpani to build tension or make a moment feel bigger and more dramatic, and this piece is a fantastic example of that.

For our last mystery sound, we're leaving the orchestra completely. This next instrument isn't played by touching it at all — a musician moves their hands through the air near two antennas to control the pitch and volume. Listen for a wailing, otherworldly sound.

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Any idea what that was?

That's a theremin! It's one of the earliest electronic instruments ever invented, created by a Russian scientist named Leon Theremin back in the 1920s. Because it makes such an eerie, floating sound, old science fiction and horror movies use it often, and that's actually why our ears associate it with "spooky" to this day, even if we've never heard the word theremin before. It's also considered to be a difficult instrument to master, since you don't touch the instrument to change notes, and it requires an incredible amount of precision as even the slightest movement in your posture or breathing can cause the pitch to drift.

And there you have it — four sounds that help make Halloween music feel mysterious and fun: the xylophone, the pipe organ, the timpani, and the theremin. If you'd like to hear the full pieces we pulled these clips from, I've put together a curated playlist in the show notes, along with the printable What Was That Sound? worksheet, all at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/186.

Thanks so much for joining me today. I'll see you next time on Busy Kids Love Music!