Tritone Substitutions, Tritone Sub Chains, and “Extended” Tritone Subs

A tritone substitution is the substitution of one resolving dominant chord for another whose root is a tritone (augmented 4\(^{\text{th}}\)/diminished 5\(^{\text{th}}\) away. In C major, an example would be taking a regular ii-V-I progression (Dmi7→G7→CMa7) and replacing the G7 chord with a Db7 chord (Db is a tritone away from G). This works because the 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) and 7\(^{\text{th}}\) of the G7 chord – B and F, respectively) – are the same notes as the 7\(^{\text{th}}\) and 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) of the Db7 chord (allowing for the enharmonic spelling of the Cb as a B). The root of the chord changes, but the guide tones remain the same. So:

\[ \text{Dmi7} \rightarrow \text{G7} \rightarrow \text{CMa7} \text{ becomes } \text{Dmi7} \rightarrow \text{Db7} \rightarrow \text{CMa7} \]

When analyzing a progression with roman numerals, the most common label used to show a tritone substitution is to replace the original “V7” with the designation “subV7”, as in the example below.

A tritone sub chain is what happens when a chord sequence that began as a series of dominant chords resolving by 5\(^{\text{th}}\):

\[ (\text{i.e. } \text{E7} \rightarrow \text{A7} \rightarrow \text{D7} \rightarrow \text{G7} \rightarrow \text{CMa7}) \]

employs tritone subs on every other chord to make the root motion chromatic without changing the guide tones or function of the chords:

\[ (\text{i.e. } \text{E7} \rightarrow \text{Eb7} \rightarrow \text{D7} \rightarrow \text{Db7} \rightarrow \text{CMa7}) \]
An **extended tritone sub** is an extrapolation of the tritone sub concept where a related ii chord is attached to the subV chord to insert a side slipping ii-V progression into a place where the original progression only had a regular V7-I progression. In the case of the original ii-V7-I in C:

\[
\text{Dmi7} \rightarrow \text{G7} \rightarrow \text{CMa7}
\]

becomes

\[
\text{Dmi7} \rightarrow \text{Abmi7} \rightarrow \text{Db7} \rightarrow \text{CMa7}
\]

![Musical notation image]

It is not uncommon for jazz improvisers to apply the same logic above to the concept of tritone sub chains, producing an effect that we will call an **extended tritone sub chain**. The principle is easily illustrated by the first four bars of the standard “I Can’t Get Started”:

![Musical notation image]

One common reharmonization of bars 3 and 4 of this tune replaced the harmonic motion in these bars to a series of descending extended tritone substitutions leading to the CMa7 resolution chord:

![Musical notation image]
While this practice is common in jazz both as an improvisational and arranging device, it should be noted that indiscriminate usage of this device can easily create harmony that clashes with the melody of the song, as in bars 3 and 4 the previous example:

![Musical example showing chords and melody notes]

Note how the three melodic pickup notes leading into the C major resolution are in direct conflict with the superimposed harmony created by the extended tritone sub chain. Whether this is an acceptable outcome or not is a subjective matter, but it is good for each player to decide for themselves whether they want to accept the resulting melodic dissonance this sort of reharm creates in this instance.