

Listen4 listening guides

A brief guide to listening to Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries

This outline serves as a listening guide, or "road map," through a work being performed today. The intention is to help you follow along and enjoy it in more depth. We welcome you to email us with your reactions at announcements@aspennmusic.org. Now ... let the music begin!

Even if you have never seen one of the operas by Richard Wagner (1813-1883), you will know this brilliant composition. It has been used for countless TV commercials, cartoons and movies, and brilliantly in Francis Ford Coppola's war epic *Apocalypse Now*. "Ride of the Valkyries" is from the second opera in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, *Die Walküre* or *The Valkyries*, and is the orchestral introduction to the third act. Wagner's four-opera cycle was inspired by ancient Norse myths, and, as is common in myth, the love, villainy, and heroism of its story is extreme.

This short work begins with intense upward swoops in the violins, and builds to a climax where the stage curtain opens onto a tableau including a rocky mountain peak, heavy clouds, and the appearance of the Valkyries—nine warrior maidens, the daughters of Wotan, the king of the gods. Below are four things to listen for.

1

String writing:

A feeling of intensity begins immediately in the first notes of the violins as they play quick upward sweeps. Shortly afterward the cellos introduce a rhythm that will be played almost constantly throughout the movement, creating a sense of agitation and unease. The strings are exceptionally busy in this piece, playing continuously—a hallmark of Wagner's string writing. The individual parts are very difficult and the end effect is a wall of string sound, without individual notes being heard, as opposed to a specific melody being emphasized.

Melodic themes:

One of the common uses of an operatic overture or introduction is to introduce themes. Many of the melodies used in this Act III introduction are used during the opera. Listen for the Valkyrie call—"Hoyotoho!" first heard in the violin section. This theme is heard later in the act, sung by the Valkyries themselves.

3

2

Use of brass and winds:

The brass sections introduce the main musical theme—the dotted rhythms, which have a swinging sound, cut through the strings like a knife. The horns and trombones trade this heroic phrase. The brass sections are used collectively to give the music its ferocious feeling of battle. In general the instruments are used in full sections rather than with the individuals solos found in many orchestral works.

4

Orchestrations:

Wagner uses very large orchestras for his operas and is particularly heavy on the use of brass sections. In "Ride of the Valkyries" he uses six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, and tuba in addition to two flutes plus piccolo, two oboes plus English horn, three bassoons, three clarinets plus bass clarinet, multiple percussion instruments, and a full complement of strings. When everyone is playing, as in this work, the immensity of sound is all encompassing and thrilling.