



Orchestral Excerpt CLASS

By Dennis Bubert

The Ride of the Valkyries

by Richard Wagner

For most concert goers, Richard Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries* is perhaps the best known and most widely recognized of any of the orchestral music from the epic *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner began work on his epic four-opera *Ring* cycle with a dramatic poem which was to become the libretto for *Siegfried* — the third opera in the

cycle. The composer produced more than 750 pages of notes, drafts, and scenarios, as well as all four completed librettos, before beginning work on any of the scores. The fourth and final opera, *Die Götterdämmerung*, was finished in 1876.

The Valkyrie was completed in 1856, with its premiere performance in June 1870. Interestingly, the premiere of *The Ride of the Valkyries* was in Vienna several years earlier, in a series of concerts conducted by Wagner in December 1862 and January 1863. The first performances of the entire *Ring* cycle were at Bayreuth in 1876, under the baton of Hans Richter.

For trombonists, *The Ride of the Valkyries* has become standard audition fare and appears unfaillingly on audition lists for all trombone positions, as well as tuba. In this column, Per Brevig, Peter Ellefson, and Charles Vernon address the numerous challenges presented by this demanding excerpt. My thanks to them for their thoughtful comments. Thanks also to Nathan Fink for his help in preparing score excerpts, David Krosschell for his assistance with Vernon's contribution, and to Michael Moore, publisher of Atlanta Brass Society Press, for his permission to reprint exercises from *A Singing Approach to the Trombone*.

Per Brevig, retired principal trombonist, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

Valkyries, in Norse mythology, are the beautiful maidens who ride through the air and choose heroes from among those slain in battle, and carry them to Valhalla.

Valhalla was the great hall into which the souls of fallen heroes in battle were borne by the Valkyries to be received by Odin. Here warriors feasted on the flesh of a boar slaughtered daily and made whole again each evening. They drank liquor which flowed from the udders of a goat, and their sport was to fight one another every day.

This should whet your appetite to see Wagner's tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung). The four operas were composed in the following order: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods). Wagner completed all four works over a period of 25 years!

In *Die Walküre*, the *Ride of the Valkyries* takes place in the first scene of the third act. In the reduced version which symphony orchestras usually use, there is no bass trumpet part as in the original version. Therefore, the tenor trombones play much of the bass trumpet part. The entrance of the trombones in the original version takes place where the "Ride" motif is played in the minor key for the first time in bar 37. Whatever music the trombones play before this entrance was originally written for the bass trumpet. This section then, in the reduced version, must be played lighter (like a bass trumpet), and should match the lightness, rhythm and articulation of the horns and trumpets. In bar 13 where the bass trumpet enters, a notation in the opera score states: "Den Rhythmus durchweg sehr scharf und deutlich betonen" (the rhythm strongly and clearly accentuated throughout). Also in the score there are staccato markings on the second and third notes of the first beat of every bar where the "Ride" configuration occurs. This marking is missing for the most part both in the original version as well as the reduced concert version.

It is often difficult for students to feel the correct rhythm and style of this excerpt. Even in the finest orchestras one does not always hear a unified rhythm, style and interpretation. The rhythmic success of this passage also reflects on the conductor's ability to show his intention. I remember distinctly the first time this passage really came together in performance. It was at a performance of the Metropolitan Opera with Herbert von Karajan conducting. Von Karajan was a conductor who had full control over the orchestra, and who, with clear and simple gestures could indicate exactly how a phrase should be interpreted. At the Met, in addition to conducting the performance, he also staged the production!

Here are some ideas for the student to consider when practicing *The Ride of the Valkyries*:

In performance you have to play this excerpt with full volume and your strongest, fullest and richest sound. In an audition setting you might want to hold back slightly to avoid any harsh or brassy sounds. You also have to judge the hall in which you are playing. If it is a bright hall with a

Ride of the Valkyries
from Die Walküre

1st Trombone

Richard Wagner

Lebhaft 11

f

dim. *f* 4

ff *f* *ff* *f* *ff*

piu f

13 *ff*

f *ff*

ff

ff

ff

lot of reverberation, you might need to play a volume that feels more like a *mf* to you. Any forced, brassy or unfocused sounds immediately create an adverse reaction from the jury.

It is to your advantage to study the interpretive style of the conductor and the brass section of the orchestra for which you are auditioning. But ultimately, you must play the excerpts the way in which you decide they should be performed. In other words, don't try to outguess the jury. Do your own thing!

Also remember to make a clear distinction between *forte* and *fortissimo*. The passage in the minor key starts *forte*. Four bars later, it is *piu forte* (which means more *forte*, or stronger). The section in the major key starts *fortissimo*. Even though in the fifth bar there is only one *f*, which is missing in some editions, you must play with the same strong intensity. This marking allows you to make a real impact with the *subito fortissimo* five bars later. The repeated *ff*s are merely phrase markings for the four-bar phrases. Give them an extra accent to put weight on the beginning of the phrase.

In listening to performances, you will find that the first section — minor — is usually a little faster and lighter than the second — major — section. You will find tempos varying from *mm* = 80 to *mm* = 96. In an audition setting, I find *mm* = 92 to be a good tempo with the major section slightly slower and heavier. (When you make your first entrance in the minor key, make certain to play *D* natural. You can only imagine the impact if you play the *D* sharp the first time around.)

Here are some examples, somewhat exaggerated, as to how you should not play this rhythm: (see **Fig. 1**) and conversely, (see **Fig. 2**). The following example, although mathematically correct when performed as duplets, loses its 9/8 feeling and also the desired bounce on the downbeat. (see **Fig. 3**) The argument for playing the passage this way is to bring out the 16th note.

When practicing this excerpt, it is imperative that you keep the eighth note subdivision flowing through your mind

throughout the excerpt. First of all, the upbeat must be in time as part of a triplet feeling and not a duplet. The downbeat (the dotted-eighth note) must be well accented and have a slight bounce to it. The second and third beats should be sustained with equal emphasis on both notes and with a slight *marcato*. If you do not put enough emphasis on the downbeat, it can easily take on the feeling of an upbeat. (see **Fig. 4**)

The *Ride* itself is a 16-bar phrase which can be divided into two eight-bar phrases with the eight-bar phrases divided into four bars. Ultimately, these are one-bar phrases. You most likely need to breathe every two bars and certainly every four bars. Remember to take your breath between measures.

You might want to make up some exercises to practice the correct rhythm. In the following example play all *B* naturals in the first four bars. Then add *F*-sharp on the lower note. (see **Fig. 5**) The old idea of imitating the rhythm of the word "Amsterdam" has done the trick for many players.

Positions: In the second bar of the minor key section use the fourth position on the third note, the *D* natural. Play the last note of the passage, *A* sharp, in the first position. In the seventh bar of the major key section play the third note, *A* sharp, in the fifth position. Other alternate positions make for a more flowing slide movement, but when the heat is on you want to be as secure as possible, especially in regard to intonation and sound.

Individual notes within both these passages are often played too sharp. Be sure that the upbeat, *F* sharp, is in tune. The same goes for the second note, *B* natural. Also pay attention to the high *A* natural and *F* sharps; they also tend to be played too sharp. The same applies to the major key passage. All the notes in the first four bars, except one or two, tend to be played too sharp. Get off to a good start by placing the *F* sharp securely in the fifth position. You hardly need to adjust the *B* natural upward, but do adjust the *D* sharp downward. In the ninth and 10th bars, the *E* natural and the *B* natural are invariably sharp!

As always, start out by practicing the excerpt slowly, and remember: Fast practice, slow progress! Slow practice, fast progress!

**Peter Ellefson, second trombonist,
Seattle Symphony Orchestra**

Being an orchestral musician is a privilege. As such I am given a front row (well, I guess literally back row) seat to explore and experience the genius of some of the greatest artistic minds of the last 300 years. Most musicians I know have developed preferences for different composers and works in the repertoire. For me, there are many works which, if given the choice, I would never play again. Most of the other repertoire I am quite happy to perform. There are few works in the repertoire that after the performance, leave me with a pure feeling of what a distinct honor it is to be a musician. Among such works for me are Mahler *Second Symphony*, Beethoven *Ninth Symphony*, Mozart *Requiem*, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and *Die Walküre*. If I had to choose one work as my favorite, it would be *Walküre*. During my 10 years in the Seattle Symphony I have played first trombone on 14 performances of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* for Seattle Opera — quite a few times for a "symphony orchestra" trombonist. Musicians in opera orchestras such as the Metropolitan Opera or many other fine opera companies throughout the world have almost certainly performed this magnificent work hundreds of times. Perhaps they are tired of it — I would love to have the chance to tire of it. In my opinion, the third act of *Walküre* contains some of the most wonderfully challenging passages ever written for low brass. From the wonderfully depictive *Ride of the Valkyries* to the poignant *Wotan's Farewell* the act is full of rewarding low brass parts covering quite a dynamic spectrum. Perhaps the most recognizable excerpt from all of Wagner's epic *Ring* cycle is indeed the *Ride of the Valkyries*. I am happy and honored to be able to share my thoughts on this passage, which frequently appears on audition lists.

Why is *The Ride* asked on auditions?

There are a couple of aspects to this excerpt that test the player's preparation and musical skills. The dotted-eighth, sixteenth, eighth note rhythm must be precise and clear, the accents must be in their proper places and intonation must be accurate. They must be accomplished while producing a good sound at a loud volume along with attention to the musical line. In theory none of these components seem extraordinarily difficult. But in practice they often prove to be quite a challenge.

How I learned the passage

At first, these components might be considered separately, but in my mind it is all one big package of KNOWING HOW THE EXCERPT GOES. Oversimplification? I am not purposely trying to be flippant, but so much of what we get bogged down with can be fixed by developing a more complete mental concept of how the passage sounds. One productive way to accomplish this is to take the time to listen

The figure contains five musical diagrams labeled Figure 1 through Figure 5. Figure 1 shows a 3/4 time signature with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, then a quarter note, and another quarter note. Figure 2 shows a similar 3/4 time signature but with a different rhythmic grouping. Figure 3 shows a 9/8 time signature with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, then a quarter note, and another quarter note. Figure 4 shows a 9/8 time signature with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, then a quarter note, and another quarter note. Figure 5 shows a 12/8 time signature with a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and dotted eighth notes, with accents marked above the notes.

to a dozen recordings of the excerpt. By listening to many versions one develops the practice of critical listening and weeding out those versions that are clearly much different than the rest. The remaining 7–8 renditions will, most likely, point you to the correct interpretation of the passage. Internalize the rhythm — speak it out loud while you listen to the recordings. Absorb what it sounds like. To musicians, recordings are aural pictures. I have found the adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words” to be so true in developing strong musical concepts.

How I teach/play the passage

Not surprisingly, the most common troubles I hear when players execute this passage are also the same difficulties listed earlier. The most common mistake relates to the rhythm — not only playing it accurately but playing it clearly so the 16th note is distinct and projected.

The rhythm is deceptively difficult. I am not sure exactly why it is so. Maybe our brains have a tough time processing the ratio of 3–1–2–6–6 quickly and consistently. I often wonder (and this rhythm is one that stimulates that wonderment) if composers really intended for their music to be interpreted absolutely literally. Could it be that this notation was merely the closest Wagner could come to in order to have this motive replicated or was it exactly what he wanted? Just what was the rhythm Wagner had in mind? I usually come to the same conclusion that since we really have no way of knowing, we must trust what the composer set us — the printed page. What else have we to go by? How can we get to the source? In Wagner's case I usually turn to recordings made at Bayreuth — preferably with conductors dating as far back as I can find. Yes, by today's sonic standards, they can be difficult to listen to. Yes, by today's somewhat sterile “perfect” performance expectations, they can seem somewhat sloppy — there are even gasps MISSED NOTES!!! In this writer's opinion we have become overly concerned with technical precision at the expense of musicality and the “big picture.” We have lost character and gesture in search of perfection. It is a luxurious treat to abandon that constrained mindset and listen to these older recordings.

By looking at the printed music one will notice that it is in 9/8 time. The pulse is in three groups of three eighth notes. The pick-up note is an eighth note so it is one-third of the big beat. Very often a player will make the error of playing a double pick-up note, using one-half of the big beat instead of one-third. The next thing to notice is that the dotted eighth has an accent on it. This is imperative to a proper performance of the passage. Since longer notes sound louder than shorter notes I prefer to play a long dotted eighth to emphasize the accent. It is more of a weight accent and not so much a heavily tongued accent. Remember, this is Wagner, not Strauss or Stravinsky. A nice long first note of the first helps to de-emphasize beats two and three, which are often and mistakenly louder than the downbeat.

I again refer back to the concept of knowing how it feels. A phonetic phrase that seems to help put the rhythm context is “Eat co-co-nut cream pie.”

Using the aforementioned culinary treat as lyrics to our passage — all too often I hear “Eat co-co-nut CREAM PIE, co-co-nut CREAM PIE, co-co-nut CREAM PIE, co-co-nut PIE” instead of “Eat CO-co-nut cream pie, CO-co-nut cream pie, CO-co-nut cream pie, CO-co-nut pie.” A word that seems to put the proper accent and length on the dotted eighth note-sixteenth-eighth is TIM-pan-ee.” Another word which helps define the rhythm in AM-ster-dam.

How to practice

To further aid understanding, break down the pitches into various rhythmic divisions:

- Play the entire passage in 8th notes, changing pitches where appropriate
- Divide the downbeat into 16th notes. Play 3 16th note Bs, 1 16th note F-sharp and 2 16th note Bs.
- Alternate between leaving the 16th note out and playing the printed rhythm.
- Alternate between playing the first beat as all eighths and the printed rhythm

The reason for these exercises is to help the player become more familiar with the rhythmic relationships and by becoming more aware, more accurately execute the rhythm. Repetition is very important to get the “feel” of the passage. It has to convey a sense of motion. I think of the drive shaft on a steam locomotive going at a slow, yet powerfully relentless pace. Play along with the recordings to feel the momentum of the excerpt.

Intonation must be carefully tended to as the passages outline major and minor tonalities. Be sure to record yourself and listen critically to your intonation. Another helpful practice tip is to use a partner who can hold the tonic while you play the passage. Pay close attention to the relationships and work out the tendencies to absorb what it sounds like to play it perfectly in tune.

Performing it with the orchestra in the pit

It has been my experience that, in order to get the passage clear and projected to the back row of the house, the dynamics need to be marked up a notch. It is important to try to get maximum volume on the 16th notes. Quite often they get lost, mainly due to the short duration but also due to rhythmic insecurity. Don't be afraid to BLOW!

Performing it at an audition vs. in the pit — is there a difference?

Yes.

Should there be?

In my opinion, no. But I believe I hold a minority view. A trend has developed regarding auditions that disturbs me. It seems that auditionees are encouraged (by their teachers/colleagues) to play sometimes quite differently in auditions than they would be required to play on the actual job. This is particularly true when it comes to fortissimo, aggressive playing. I have served on audition committees where a candidate has been dismissed solely due to their volume

level. I also know of very prominent orchestral musicians who have been dismissed in our auditions as well as auditions for other orchestras, for playing exactly as they would on the job. I wonder why? I feel auditionees should be judged on how they will actually sound on the job they are auditioning for, not by how soloistically or recital-like (read artistically) they can play — an approach that produces a volume level that quite frequently gets lost when the orchestra is playing loudly. This is a subject for a much lengthier discussion, so for now I will make this prescription:

Play this passage clean and clear during the audition with special attention to intonation. Keep the sound in control and play musically.

Warning: when you actually play it in the pit, you will be expected to produce quite a different volume level than the one which many audition committees will tolerate. Most likely it will not be a pretty sound. It doesn't have to be.

Tempo adjustments

There is sometimes a slightly slower tempo taken for the first major section. Usually, there is also a somewhat slower, heavier tempo for the second major section. Observing these subtleties will show the audition committee that the player is familiar with the entire piece and not solely the notes.

Be aware of different editions

There are different instrumentations of “The Ride.” The low brass for the version used in the opera pit is scored for bass trumpet, four trombones and tuba. The concert version is scored for four trombones and tuba and much of the bass trumpet part in the opera version is given to the trombones. There are other arrangements that use the standard three trombones and tuba. It is very important to be familiar with the different versions and know which version contains what. Don't get thrown by an octave displacement here and there.

Final Thoughts

In closing I will recommend two books and a video that have provided me with hours of enjoyment. The books are by legendary record producer John Culshaw, who produced the first complete recording of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* with Georg Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic. *Ring Resounding* is a fascinating account of some of the behind the scenes maneuvering that took place in order to facilitate such a grand scale recording with such high profile artists. *Reflections on Wagner's Ring* is a compilation of Culshaw's intermission talks, which aired during the Metropolitan Opera's broadcasts in 1975.

Both books are out of print but can be obtained through the used sections of the major online booksellers.

A documentary of the Vienna Ring was filmed during the recording of *Götterdämmerung*. My copy is called *Solti's Golden Ring*, although previous versions go by other titles. It is amazing to peek into the Sofiensaal to actually see the wonderful musicians at work. I highly recommend each of these sources to enhance one's enjoyment of this monumental repertoire.