

Ride of the Valkyries from *Die Walküre*
by Richard Wagner (1813 -1883)
Arranged by Wouter Hutschenruyter

Duration: Approximately 5 minutes

First Performance: June 26, 1870 in Munich

Last ESO Performance: November, 2015; Andrew Grams, conductor

Excerpts from the operas of Richard Wagner have long been part of the standard orchestral repertoire. Although purists such as the great English musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey might object to the excision of these “bleeding chunks,” as he called them, from the living body of a complete opera, the practice has enabled many a listener who has never entered an opera house to become acquainted with the magical power of Wagner’s orchestral writing. Many of these excerpts have been taken from Wagner’s monumental collection of four operas known as *The Ring of the Nibelung*, that amazingly rich saga filled with gods, goddesses, heroes, and villains, all drawn from Norse and German mythology and meant to be seen and heard on four successive days. Today’s program presents five of the most familiar excerpts from *The Ring*.

While all five of these excerpts fall neatly into the category of symphonic “warhorses”, surely none has been ridden more than *Ride of the Valkyries*. (Pun very much intended.) Over-familiar though it may be, to those listeners who can banish the thought of Elmer Fudd or the many other parodies and abuses to which it has been subjected, it can still produce a thrill. As the opening of Act III of *Die Walküre*, the second of the four operas of the *Ring* cycle, it creates one of those scenes beloved of Romantic artists, a dark and stormy night on the summit of a craggy mountain top. The nine Valkyries, daughters of Wotan, King of the gods, perform their appointed duties by riding through the sky and swooping down to pick up the corpses of the bravest soldiers slain in battle in order to bring them back to papa Wotan to protect his home of Valhalla. Adding to the drama at this point is the fact that Brünnhilde, Wotan’s favorite daughter, has disobeyed her father and is fleeing from him to find some security with her sisters in their mountain retreat. Even without the famous *Hojotoho* and *Heiaha* battle cries sung by the ladies in the opera house, the galloping rhythms and simulated lightning flashes provide all the necessary drama.

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Forest Murmurs from Siegfried
by Richard Wagner
Arranged by Herman Zumpe

Duration: Approximately 9 minutes
First Performance: August 16, 1876 in Bayreuth
These are the first ESO performances of the work

The familiar *Forest Murmurs* is taken from *Siegfried*, the third opera of the *Ring* cycle. The eponymous Siegfried can actually be called the central figure in the entire *Ring* saga, being the hero designated by his grandfather Wotan to win back the magic golden ring which would insure the gods control of the universe. In the opera which bears his name, Siegfried performs various acts of derring-do, including such things as forging a magic sword, killing a dragon, and then claiming the Valkyrie Brünnhilde as his true love. (Technically, Brünnhilde was his aunt, but then Siegfried was himself the offspring of the incestuous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde who were brother and sister. This is not exactly *Ozzie and Harriet*.) The *Forest Murmurs* excerpt, which has actually been pieced together from various parts of the opera to make a self-contained orchestral piece, offers our hero a bit of respite as he sits under a linden tree in an enchanted forest basking in the sounds of nature, most especially birdcalls. The music offers a refreshing contrast to Wagner's customary heroic style and shows his skill at orchestrating a kind of impressionistic mood piece. Finally, the music turns more heroic as Siegfried ventures forth for more adventure.

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Siegfried's Rhine Journey from Götterdämmerung
by Richard Wagner
Arranged by Engelbert Humperdinck

Duration: Approximately 10 minutes
First Performance: August 17, 1876 in Bayreuth
These are the first ESO performances of the work

Siegfried's Rhine Journey is an orchestral interlude connecting the Prologue to Act I of *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), the fourth and final opera of the *Ring* cycle. As one of the most impressive pieces of orchestral writing that Wagner ever produced, the music is so vividly descriptive that the audience easily grasps its significance even though the curtain is down for most of the time.

The music begins quietly with a sunrise over the rock where, surrounded by fire, Brünnhilde had been imprisoned. Siegfried had fearlessly walked through the fire to claim his bride, and, having consummated their marriage, placed the magic ring on her finger as a sign of fidelity. He is not about to be domesticated, however, but takes off on

Brünnhilde's horse and carrying her shield in pursuit of more adventure up the Rhine river, where he will eventually meet his demise.

Much of the ingenious orchestral writing combines Siegfried's own *Leitmotiv*, which is a *macho* horn call first heard quietly in the horn section, with a sweepingly romantic theme representing Brünnhilde heard first in a solo clarinet and then moving to a lush string sound. The two themes weave in and out, with Siegfried's theme appearing sometimes in Wagner's famously large full brass section (heavy metal at its best), and even by itself played by a single unaccompanied horn. Along the way we hear occasional intricate counterpoint and several other *Leitmotifs*, including the theme representing the Magic Fire as well as the wave-like motion of the Rhine river theme. The richness of the writing and the brilliance of the orchestration clearly demonstrate why Wagner was the despair of so many composers of his time.

The arrangement heard today is by Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921), a fine composer in his own right and a close associate of Wagner.

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Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music from Götterdämmerung
by Richard Wagner

Duration: Approximately 12 minutes

First Performance: August 17, 1876 in Bayreuth

Last ESO Performance: April, 1970; Douglas Steensland, conductor

On a hunting expedition along the banks of the Rhine River, Siegfried is murdered by the villain Hagen who stabs him in the back literally as well as figuratively by tricking Brünnhilde into abetting the murder. He dies whispering his wife's name and his body is carried on his shield in the most somber of funeral processions. Various themes associated with his past are heard, including the *Leitmotifs* of his family. Suddenly, cutting through the gloom, is the triumphant C major theme representing the magic sword *Nothung*, which once was to be his salvation. After another triumphant statement of Siegfried's famous horn call the death theme returns and the music trails off into darkness.

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Entry of the Gods into Valhalla from *Das Rheingold*
by Richard Wagner
Arranged by Herman Zumpe

Duration: Approximately 9 minutes

First Performance: September 22, 1869 in Munich

Last ESO Performance: September, 2007; Robert Hanson, conductor

The *Entry of the Gods into Valhalla* forms a spectacular visual as well as aural conclusion to *Das Rheingold*, which, as the first opera of the *Ring* tetralogy, serves as a prologue to the entire saga. In this final scene of the opera, the gods cross a majestic rainbow bridge over the Rhine River to enter their new home. Valhalla, of course, is not just any piece of real estate - not exactly your typical starter home. It is to be the ideal refuge and fortress for the gods and has been purchased at great price. The builders, that strange construction company of the giant brothers Fafner and Fasolt, had been promised nothing less than Freia, the goddess of beauty and everlasting youth, as payment for their labor. Wotan, King of the gods, reneges on his bargain, however, and buys off the giants with the magic golden ring which had been fashioned out of gold stolen from the Rhinemaidens by Alberich, a member of the dwarf tribe known as Nibelungs. Although the ring gives the power to rule the world, it also carries a curse, causing anguish to anyone who possesses it. Anguish comes soon enough as the giants fight over the ring and Fafner kills his brother.

By the end of the opera the gods are ready to escape all this turmoil and retreat to their new home. All in all, these gods are an unprepossessing lot, all too human in their greed, jealousy, and fear of the future. Loge, the wily god of fire, comments cynically on the complacency of the group, saying that they are entering a fools' paradise, and that they will ultimately be destroyed. That prophecy is exactly fulfilled in the Immolation scene at the end of the final opera *Götterdämmerung*, as Brünnhilde gives the ring back to the Rhinemaidens and offers herself as a sacrifice to be burned, setting off a conflagration that causes the Rhine River to overflow and Valhalla to be burned along with all its royal residents.

Ignoble though these gods may be, Wagner gives them majestic music, beginning with the *Leitmotif* of Thor, god of thunder. After that roll of thunder, we hear the rainbow motif, a broadly majestic arpeggio figure which soon melds into the noble Valhalla motif. The mood changes briefly as we hear the song of the Rhinemaidens, played by clarinets, who from the river below lament the loss of their magic gold. Finally, the rainbow and Valhalla motifs return as the curtain falls and the gods complete their majestic procession.

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