

# Walküre, Die

## (‘The Valkyrie’).

First day of der [Ring des nibelungen](#) in three acts by Richard Wagner (see [Wagner family](#), (1)) to his own libretto; Munich, Königliches Hof- und Nationaltheater, 26 June 1870 (first performance as part of cycle: Bayreuth, Festspielhaus, 14 August 1876).

Siegmund	tenor
Hunding	bass
Wotan	bass-baritone
Sieglinde	soprano
Brünnhilde	soprano
Fricka	mezzo-soprano
VALKYRIES	
Gerhilde	soprano
Ortlinde	soprano
Waltraute	mezzo-soprano
Schwertleite	contralto
Helmwige	soprano
Siegrune	mezzo-soprano
Grimgerde	mezzo-soprano
Rossweisse	mezzo-soprano

The first prose sketch for *Die Walküre* dates from autumn (probably November) 1851. In a letter to Uhlig of 11 November 1851 Wagner referred to the new work as *Siegmund und Sieglind: der Walküre Bestrafung*, but by 20 November (letter to Liszt) he had renamed it with the familiar title *Die Walküre*. The sketch was developed into a prose draft (17–26 May 1852) and then into a verse draft (1 June–1 July 1852). The final poem was incorporated into the private printing of the entire *Ring* text in February 1853.

The first musical sketches for *Die Walküre* date from the summer of 1852 and include an early version of the Spring Song. The first complete draft was made between 28 June and 27 December 1854. Unlike the comparable draft for *Das Rheingold*, which for the most part consisted of one vocal staff and one instrumental, that for *Walküre* shows some degree of orchestral elaboration, often with one vocal staff and two instrumental. In spite of the difficulties he experienced – on account of many delays and interruptions – in expanding that first draft into score, Wagner did not find it necessary to make a second draft as for *Rheingold* since he was now familiar with the expanded orchestral forces. Instead he went straight into a draft of the full score (January 1855–20 March 1856); the fair copy was made in parallel between 14 July 1855 and 23 March 1856.

Act 1 *Inside Hunding’s dwelling* The turbulent prelude that opens the work depicts at once a raging storm and the mental convulsions that are soon to shake the participants in the drama. A tremolo on a single repeated note is maintained by the second violins and violas for 60 bars,

while underneath cellos and double basses rampage up and down a series of notes clearly intended to recall the motif of the spear (*see Rheingold, das ex. 5*): that symbol of Wotan's power and authority is evoked because this entire act is contrived, in a sense, at the instigation of his will. The motif sung by Donner, the god of thunder, at the end of *Rheingold* to the words 'Heda! Hedo!' rings out on the brass, first on the Wagner tubas. Despite the different harmonic context it begins in B $\flat$ , exactly as in *Rheingold*; however, it is winched up sequentially through a series of modulations until the tension breaks in a thunderclap, after which the storm begins to subside.

As the curtain rises and Siegmund, collapsing with exhaustion, bursts into the forest dwelling, a cello takes up the Spear motif but turns its end accommodatingly back on itself (*ex.1*): a hint that an alternative to sheer naked power is being proposed. Sieglinde enters, and as she bends over Siegmund's sleeping figure that idea is taken up again in conjunction with a phrase expressive of her tenderness (*ex.2*). The two melodic ideas are worked to a small climax as Sieglinde fetches him water. Then *ex.1* opens out into a fully-fledged Love theme, *ex.3* (derived from Freia's theme in *Rheingold*), the music as yet anticipating events on the stage.

Sieglinde now fetches a horn of mead for Siegmund, to the accompaniment of an effusively lyrical passage in A major, bassoons, horns and clarinets lending a bloom to the strings. The pair gaze at each other in unspoken affirmation of love, the two halves of the Love motif sounding in reverse order. The minor triad of the Volsung motif (*ex.4*) evokes the ill luck that dogs Siegmund; the motif is combined with *ex.2* as he decides to stay and await his fate.

The arrival of Hunding (scene ii) is heralded by a sharp, abrupt motif on the Wagner tubas. He roughly extends his hospitality and asks where Siegmund has come from and what is his name. Siegmund says he should be called Woeful, describing how one day he returned from hunting with his father, Wolfe, to find their home burnt down, his mother murdered and his twin sister brutally abducted. At Sieglinde's prompting he then narrates how he went to the aid of a young woman forced into a loveless marriage, killing her savage kinsmen in the fight. Hunding now realizes that he is harbouring his kinsmen's foe. The laws of hospitality compel him to give Siegmund shelter for the night, but in the morning he will have to fight for his life.

As she prepares Hunding's night drink, Sieglinde drugs it. She leaves the room with a lingering gaze, first at Siegmund and then at a spot in the trunk of the ash tree that stands in the middle of the hut: the Sword motif sounds presciently on the bass trumpet.

In the third scene Siegmund, left alone, meditates on the fever of excitement stirred up by Sieglinde and on his weaponless plight, recalling that his father had promised that there would be a sword for him in his time of need ('Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater'). He calls on his father: 'Wälse! Wälse!' (the octave leaps of the Sword motif without the tail-piece are traditionally regarded, by singers and listeners alike, as a test of virility). They launch Siegmund on a heart-warming soliloquy, richly orchestrated, the rippling harp arpeggios mirroring the gleaming of the sword in the ash tree.

Sieglinde enters. She tells how an old man dressed in grey had thrust the sword into the tree at the wedding ceremony of herself and Hunding. This narration, 'Der Männer Sippe sass hier im Saal', is a choice example of the musico-poetic synthesis – the practical application of Wagner's principles of word-setting – that finds its most consistent expression in *Die Walküre*. Particularly noteworthy are the low-lying vocal line depicting the old man's low-

brimmed hat, the shape of the melodic line portraying the flash of his eye and then its ‘threatening glance’, the falling chromatic intervals for his lingering look of yearning, the expressive appoggiatura on ‘Tränen’ (‘tears’) and the final rise to a top G for the physical act of implanting the sword in the tree. The sounding of the Valhalla motif by horns and bassoons, announcing the real identity of the stranger, is one of the classic uses of leitmotif to comment on the action.

True to Wagner’s theoretical principles, the ensuing duet does not allow the couple to sing together. Even Siegmund’s Spring Song, ‘Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond’, celebrated as a tenor song extracted from its context, is not as conventional as it first appears. It begins like a ternary aria, but after only nine bars of the middle section the continuation of the Love motif bursts in and disrupts the form. Incomplete and hybrid structures of this kind are typical in Wagner’s music dramas (see Newcomb 1981–2). Siegmund speaks of Spring and Love as brother and sister, to which Sieglinde replies that he is the spring for whom she has so longed. The remainder of the act is an ecstatic declaration of their love, with an unashamed acknowledgment that they are also brother and sister. He admits that Woeful is no longer an appropriate name and Sieglinde renames him Siegmund (‘guardian of victory’). To her delight he pulls the sword out of the tree, naming it ‘Nothung’ (‘Needful’). They embrace rapturously and the curtain falls with decorous swiftness.

*Act 2 A wild, rocky, mountain ridge* The music of the prelude anticipates the Ride of the Valkyries in the third act; its vitality is generated by dotted rhythms in 9/8 time, and augmented 5ths heighten the tension. Wotan instructs his daughter Brünnhilde, the Valkyrie of the title, to ensure that Siegmund wins the ensuing battle with Hunding. She revels in the Valkyrie battle cry, but warns Wotan that he has another battle on hand: his wife Fricka is furiously approaching, in a ram-drawn chariot. Brünnhilde disappears as Fricka, angrily but with dignity, tells how, as guardian of wedlock, she has been appealed to by Hunding to punish the adulterous Volsung pair. To her complaint that they have flouted the vows of marriage Wotan replies that he has no respect for vows that compel union without love. Fricka turns her attack to the twins’ incest, but Wotan’s reply, to the tender accompaniment of the Spring Song and Love themes, indicates that not even this breach of conventional morality shocks him. Fricka continues her indignant protest in an arioso passage in G<sup>#</sup> minor, in which the stock of leitmotifs momentarily gives way to new and distinctive melodic material. At first glance a reversion to an old-style form, ‘O, was klag’ ich um Ehe und Eid’ in fact displays considerable subtlety in its variety of pace and irregular phrase-lengths.

Fricka complains that Wotan has brought disgrace on the gods by fathering these incestuous twins on a mortal woman. He replies that the gods need a hero free from their protection, who will be able to do the deed they are prevented from doing. But Fricka devastatingly exposes the flaw in the guilty god’s argument: Siegmund is not able to act as a free hero so long as he is protected by Wotan. As Wotan thrashes about in despair, much use is made of a motif ([ex.5](#)) labelled ‘Dejection’ by Newman but whose contorted melodic shape and kinship to the Spear motif suggest something more specific: the frustration of Wotan’s will. Fricka extracts from him an oath that he will no longer protect his son.

In scene ii Wotan continues to writhe in mental agony ([ex.5](#)) and Brünnhilde reappears to receive the full brunt of his outburst of grief and frustration, ‘O heilige Schmach!’ A powerful climax is generated by the dissonant piling up of motifs, initiated by a new one that is primarily an inversion of [ex.5](#), though also related to that of Wotan’s authority (the Spear motif). The notes to which Wotan sings of his endless rage and grief (‘Endloser Grimm!

Ewiger Gram!') are in fact those of the Love motif ([ex.3](#)), a poignant reminder that it is lack of love that is the cause of his troubles.

The ensuing long narration of Wotan, 'Als junger Liebe Lust mir verblich', is a key passage in the work, and one intended not only for the information of Brünnhilde, or even of the audience, but as an act of self-revelation, in which we see Wotan in a new light. He begins by confessing how he attempted to fill the vacuum of lovelessness in his life by acquiring power. His hushed reliving of the story is the closest thing in the whole work to pure recitative, but it is by no means oblivious to the *Oper und Drama* principles of word-setting and in any case it acquires a special aura of suspense from the accompaniment – double basses alone, *pianissimo*. The characteristic motifs appear as Wotan recalls Alberich's forging of the ring, the building of Valhalla and Erda's prophecy. The prominence of [ex.5](#) attests to Wotan's sense of frustration, and the motifs of the Curse and the Sword drive the narration to a tremendous climax: he now longs for only one thing – 'das Ende'. He instructs Brünnhilde to protect not Siegmund in the coming battle but Hunding. She tries to change his mind, but he is implacable.

The third scene opens with an orchestral interlude making a symphonic development out of agitated repetitions of the Love motif. Siegmund and Sieglinde enter breathlessly. She, tormented by guilt, begs him to abandon her, but he merely vows to avenge the wrong done her by killing Hunding. Horns are heard echoing round the forest, and Sieglinde, feverishly imagining Hunding's dogs tearing at Siegmund's flesh, falls into a faint.

There follows another scene of key significance in the cycle: the Todesverkündigung (Annunciation of Death). Brünnhilde appears, announcing to Siegmund that he must follow her to Valhalla. The Wagner tubas intone a solemn motif whose interrogatory melodic shape and unresolved dominant 7th have generally earned it a label such as 'Destiny' or 'Fate' ([ex.6](#)). It is heard throughout the scene, as is a four-bar theme whose latter half corresponds with it ([ex.7](#)). Three distinct brass groupings are used to conjure a mood of quiet, noble heroism: Wagner tubas, trumpets and trombones, horns with bassoons. When Siegmund hears that he cannot take his sister-bride with him to Valhalla, he determines not to go. Brünnhilde tells him that his fate is unalterable but, distressed by his evident devotion to Sieglinde and his threat to kill her rather than be separated, she finally relents and promises to protect him, in defiance of Wotan's command.

Siegmund bends affectionately over the sleeping Sieglinde (scene v). Hunding's horn is heard, and in the ensuing fight Brünnhilde attempts to protect Siegmund with her shield, only for Wotan to appear and shatter Siegmund's sword with his spear. Hunding kills Siegmund, but is himself despatched by Wotan with a contemptuous wave of his hand. Wotan, enraged, then sets off in pursuit of the disobedient Brünnhilde.

Act 3 *On the summit of a rocky mountain* In the Ride of the Valkyries that opens Act 3, the war-maidens gather, collecting heroes for Valhalla. Although hackneyed, the piece has much to recommend it, especially when sung and staged. The scoring illustrates a characteristic device of Wagner's: a brass theme in unison cutting across a dense texture, in this case of trilling, antiphonal woodwind and swirling string arpeggios. The Valkyries notice that Brünnhilde is missing; eventually she is sighted carrying on her saddle not a hero but a woman. They fearfully refuse to protect her from the fury of Wotan. Sieglinde longs to die, but on being told that a Volsung stirs in her womb, she implores Brünnhilde to protect her. She is urged to make her escape to the forest in the east and is given the fragments of

Sigmund's sword from which one day his son will forge a new weapon. This announcement is made with an expansive theme (later to be associated with Siegfried's heroism) whose intrepid ring prompts Sieglinde to react with the work's most enraptured melodic inspiration, 'O hehrstes Wunder!' (ex.8). The motif returns at the end of the cycle, where Wagner referred to it as 'the glorification of Brünnhilde'.

Wotan storms in (scene ii) and the Valkyries in vain try to shield Brünnhilde. She is told that she can no longer be a Valkyrie, and that she is to be confined in sleep on the mountain-top, a prey to the first man to find her. The Valkyries, horror-struck, protest in eight-part counterpoint, but under threat of the same punishment if they interfere, they separate and scatter.

Left alone with Wotan (scene iii), Brünnhilde begs for mercy ('War es so schmachlich'); she asks whether it was so shameful if, though contravening Wotan's orders, she was in fact carrying out his inward wishes. The theme she uses is derived from that of the spear, the symbol of Wotan's authority, but its severity is turned, by octave displacement, into an eloquent melody (ex.9). She recounts how the Volsung touched her heart, and a new melody, similarly derived from the Spear motif, blossoms forth in a transported E major: Brünnhilde's compassionate love thus stands opposed to Wotan's tyrannical wielding of power, but also, in motivic terms, grows organically out of it.

Brünnhilde pleads that at least she be spared the disgrace of an ignoble union: let her be surrounded by a circle of fire that will deter all but the bravest of heroes. Deeply moved, Wotan embraces Brünnhilde and, laying her down on a rock, he kisses her shining eyes closed. Throughout the unfolding of this scene more and more motifs are recalled from the past as emotionally charged memories are brought to the surface. Two new motifs remain to be mentioned: that of the Magic Sleep, evoked by a sinking semitonal melodic line and trance-like mediant progressions, and ex.10, which is heard in an ominous minor key as Brünnhilde dreads being woken by a coward, but which in its major form acquires a luminous, hypnotic quality in the closing pages of the score.

The last part of this scene is a succession of carefully controlled climaxes, none of which is more affecting than that following Wotan's grief-stricken farewells to Brünnhilde: 'Leb' wohl'. Finally the god summons Loge and points with his spear to where he should blaze round the rock. The sea of fire that spreads to enclose the whole mountain in flames is depicted by a richly orchestrated texture created from the themes of Loge and others. Wotan sorrowfully departs.

*Die Walküre* is the music drama that most satisfactorily embodies the theoretical principles of *Oper und Drama*. A thoroughgoing synthesis of poetry and music is achieved without any notable sacrifice in musical expression. Indeed, many of the most powerful passages of the work achieve their effect precisely through the organic relationship of music and text. *Die Walküre* is generally regarded as the most approachable of the *Ring* operas and it has certainly proved the most susceptible to performance in extracts.

Barry Millington

Ex.1



Ex.2



Ex.3



Ex.4



Ex.5



Ex.6



Ex.7



Ex.8



Herr - - - li - che Maid!  
[‘Sublimest of wonders! Glorious woman!’]

Ex.9



Ex.10



Rheingold:

Ex.5

