

Ride of the Valkyries by Richard Wagner

PRIMARY CLASSROOM LESSON PLAN

For:

- Key Stage 2 in England and Wales
- Second Level, P5-P7 in Scotland
- Key Stage 1/Key Stage 2 in Northern Ireland

Written by Rachel Leach

Background

The composer: **Richard Wagner (1813 - 1883)**

- German composer, conductor, writer, impresario, inventor
- Famous for his massive operas with epic stories
- Invented many theatrical conventions such as the orchestra pit and the dimming of lights before a performance

The music: **Ride of the Valkyries**

- First performed in 1870, about 14 years after it was written
- In the original opera this is played as the scenery changes behind stage curtains; audiences must imagine the dangerous 'ride' of the Valkyrie sisters.
- Wagner strongly opposed to it being used outside of the opera (unless he was conducting it!)

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- listen and reflect on a piece of orchestral music
- invent their own musical motifs and structure them into a piece
- perform as an ensemble
- learn musical language appropriate to the task

Curriculum checklist

- play and perform in ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments
- improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
- listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory

Glossary of music terms used

Leitmotif	a short musical idea that represents a character, place, emotion or thing
Pitched percussion	percussion instruments that can play different pitches – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars etc.
Rondo	a musical shape with one section that keeps returning (A-B-A-C- etc.)
Tempo	another word for speed
Triad	a chord made up of three notes (most are found by playing alternate notes on a xylophone)
Trill	two notes alternating back and forth very fast (like a ‘wobble’)
Unpitched percussion	percussion instruments that can only make a limited number of sounds – drums, shakers woodblocks, tambourine etc.

Resources required

- Art materials
- Classroom percussion instruments and any other instruments that your children might be learning

This scheme of work is plotted out over six lessons. Feel free to adapt it to suit your children and the resources you have available.

The six lessons at a glance

Lesson 1:

- Activities: Listen and describe a piece of music
Watch the orchestral performance and discuss
Create an artwork piece inspired by the music
- Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Appreciate and understand a wide range of high-quality live and recorded music drawn from different traditions and from great composers and musicians

Lesson 2:

- Activities: Use Wagner's musical motifs to create a piece
- Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 3:

- Activities: Use Wagner's musical motifs to create a piece
- Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 4:

- Activities: Structure sections of music to create a 'rondo'
- Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 5:

Activities: Write a narrative and create leitmotifs

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 6:

Activities: Structure ideas and leitmotifs to create a narrative
Perform in front of an audience

Curriculum link: Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music

LESSON 1

Watching and listening

1. Prepare your class

Explain to your class that you are going to begin a 6-week music project focusing on a fantastic piece of music by a composer called Richard Wagner and watch the full orchestral performance online. Try to keep the name of the piece a secret.

2. Have a class discussion about what you have just heard and seen. Tell your class that the music is describing something. Can they work out what it is?

Discuss their ideas before telling them that the music is all about an epic journey: mythical creatures are transporting eight sisters through the night and into battle.

3. Watch the orchestral performance again. Afterwards, ask the following questions –

- a) What mythical creature might the music be describing? (If they don't know about mythical creatures, ask them to combine two animals to make a new one!)
- b) Is it travelling quickly or slowly?
- c) What kind of landscape are they passing through?
- d) Can you use two adjectives to describe the ride? Is it a calm and safe, or something else?

4. Listening task

Give out paper and art materials. Ask your children to draw this dangerous ride through the night that is being described by the music. They must draw up to eight sisters travelling on the back of mythical beasts and also fill in their surroundings. As your class work on this keep the music playing in the background for inspiration.

5. When this is achieved, encourage some of your children to introduce their artwork and ideas to the class and discuss them.

6. Now play the recording one last time. This time ask your class to listen out for short musical ideas that describe the movement of the beasts, (i.e. the swirling violins at the beginning). Encourage them to add a gesture or mark on their drawing for every one of these sounds to make their artwork 'move'.

7. Finish your lesson by watching the introductory film with Christopher Eccleston and discuss what Wagner is actually describing – the eight sisters (warrior women) are being transported by winged horses, through woodland and towards a battlefield.

LESSON 2

Ready for flight

1. **Warm-up.** Begin with your class sitting in a large circle. Pass a clap around the circle and have a race to see how fast you can pass it. Try clapping two times each, going clockwise and anti-clockwise, passing a stamp or a vocal sound etc. Ask your children to suggest 'flying' sounds and gestures to pass around the circle too.
2. **Remind** your children about Wagner's piece and the story behind it. Explain that you are now going to begin making your own version of it on instruments.
3. **Demonstrate the following two ideas;** these are taken from the beginning of 'Ride of the Valkyries' -

Idea 1: The trill (or wobble)

Throughout the piece there is always a set of instruments providing a feeling of excitement and suspense by playing rapid trills like this –



Idea 2: The upward swoop

To give the idea of flying there are many fast, upward swoops. These occur prominently at the beginning of the piece –



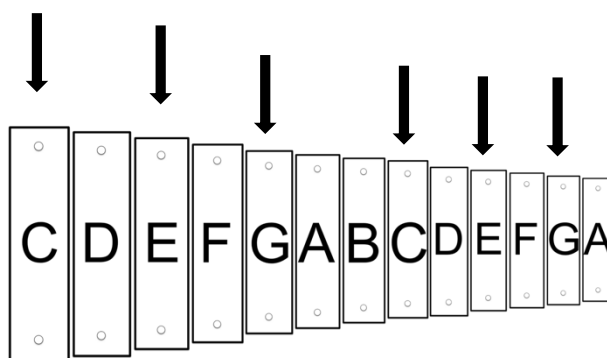
4. **Choose one child** to come forward and have a go at playing one of these ideas using whatever instruments you have in class. If you are lacking in pitched percussion, ask them to try and make the same effect using something unpitched – the 'wobble' could become a 'rumble' on a drum and the 'swoop' could become a flourish on maracas for example.
5. **Now, demonstrate the third idea. This is the most complex of the three.**

Idea 3: The 3-note tune

Wagner takes a three note chord (known as a triad) –



(on a xylophone, take off all the notes leaving behind all the C, E and Gs)



...opens it up with a spiky rhythm –



(any rhythm will work, the children can invent their own)

... and keeps going upwards (inverting) –



(keep playing the same pattern until you've used up all the notes available)

6. **Choose a child** to come forward and try this out. They can use whatever rhythm and pattern they like.
7. **Split into three working groups** and challenge each group to make a short, exciting piece using these three ideas. Tell them that the 'wobble' must be constant, the 'swoop' happens only occasionally and there should be one big, loud version of the 'tune'.
8. **Bring the class back together**, hear each group separately making any tweaks needed to make the pieces as exciting as possible. Challenge your class to join their group pieces together to make one big, exciting piece. Call this the 'A section'
9. **Finish the lesson** by encouraging your class to write down carefully what they have done and who played what. They can do this as a simple list, make a clever diagram or a graphic score.

LESSON 3

Three more ideas!

1. **Warm up.** Start the lesson with a quick clap around the circle and a reminder of the three ideas you worked with during the last lesson.
2. **Explain** that Wagner called these short musical ideas leitmotifs and he used leitmotifs all over his music to describe characters, emotions, places, things etc. In Ride of the Valkyries he includes short sections of music using new leitmotifs. These are there to give his piece structure.
3. **Demonstrate** these three new ideas –

New idea 1: 'Falling'

A short passage that falls down in pitch from high to low

New idea 2: 'Heroes'

Loud, long notes

New idea 3: 'Explosions'

Big bangs coming out of long trills ('wobbles')

4. **Split back into the same three groups as last time** and ask each group to make a short new section using these ideas. These ideas are deliberately much vaguer so there is more scope for you children to invent something unique.
5. **Bring the class back together** and hear their work. Make any tweaks needed so that everyone knows what they are doing and the pieces have a definite beginning, middle and end. Call these sections 'episodes' and keep them separate for now.
6. **If you have time**, put the 'A section' back together from last week and finish the lesson with a quick performance of it. Again, write down carefully what you have done.

LESSON 4

Structure

1. **Warm up.** Begin again in a circle and remind your class of the elements they have explored so far. You can turn this into a game by encouraging your pupils to clap back their rhythms, mime playing their tunes and create gestures to help remember elements like 'swooping', 'wobbling' etc.
2. **Here's a list of what you should have –**
 - A section: trills/ 'wobbles'
upward swoops
big tune
 - 3 episodes: falling
heroic notes
explosions
3. **Get the instruments out** and put these sections back together, then **explain** that Wagner uses a classic shape for his piece called 'Rondo form' (A-B-A-C-A-D). Your full class piece is the A section. Can your children replicate Wagner's piece by deciding on an order for their group 'episodes' and alternating them with the A section?
4. **Try out several versions** until you have all agreed on the 'best' one and write it up on the board. **Explain** that Wagner varies his 'A sections' – sometimes the A section creeps back in, sometimes it crashes back in. Sometimes it is very loud, sometimes soft. The length of his A section varies too.
5. **Encourage your children** to borrow at least one of these ideas from Wagner and adapt at least one of their A sections accordingly.
6. **Practise** performing your new rondo piece until it is nearly perfect.

LESSON 5

New leitmotifs

- 1. Warm-up.** Begin this lesson by reminding your class of the story of Wagner's piece – eight sisters are riding winged horses into battle. Explain that this lesson is going to be about telling the rest of the story.
- 2. Split back into your three groups** and label the groups 1, 2, 3. **Give out paper and pens** and ask each group to write one section of the story as follows –
 - Group 1: Before the 'ride': what are the sisters doing?
 - Group 2: The reason for the 'ride': why do the sisters set off?
 - Group 3: After the 'ride': what happens next?
- 3. Encourage each group** to write their section of the story as just three short sentences. For example, Group 1 might have something like -
 - The sisters were knitting
 - A pigeon flew in with a message
 - The sisters jumped up and screamed
- 4. Remind your children** about the concept of leitmotifs – short, musical ideas that describe things within a story. Ask each group to underline one word in each of their sentences that could be turned into a leitmotif. For the example above it might be 'knitting', 'pigeon' and 'screamed'.
- 5. When this is achieved,** ask each group to invent a short leitmotif for each underlined word. So, 'knitting' might become a fast, ticking woodblock, 'pigeon' could be a swoop up and down a glockenspiel and 'screamed' could be a screech on a clarinet.
- 6. Ask each group** to practise reading their words aloud and adding the leitmotifs in at an appropriate time. They can do this however they like – i.e. simply play the motifs after the word is mentioned, layer them up to create a piece or something else.
- 7. Finally,** hear each group and make any tweaks required. As always, encourage your children to keep a record of their work.

LESSON 6

Structure and performance time!

- 1. Warm up.** Begin with a quick focusing game and then talk through everything you have made so far. You should have a list like this –
 - Rondo piece: The ride (A: trills, swoops, tune; Episodes: 'falling' 'heroic' 'explosions')
 - Group 1: Before the ride (narration and leitmotifs)
 - Group 2: Why they rode? (narration and leitmotifs)
 - Group 3: What happened next? (narration and leitmotifs)
- 2. Put these sections back together.** Working in small groups first and then slowly bringing the class and bigger pieces back together. Make sure everyone knows what they are doing in each piece.
- 3. Ask your children** to come up with an order for their pieces so that they tell a story that makes sense and practice your pieces in this order adding in any additional narration or leitmotifs as required.
- 4. Finally,** invite another class in to hear your finished work – the story of the Valkyrie Sisters!

TAKING IT FURTHER

Cross-curricular activities

- **LITERACY:** Write a story and turn it into music using leitmotifs, or complete this story with more leitmotifs
- **ARTWORK:** Wagner didn't just write the music for his operas, he designed the sets and costumes and sometimes even the theatre they were performed in! Create the whole theatrical world of the Valkyries (or another story) by designing every aspect of it, just like Wagner did.

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