FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE RIDICULOUS: THE LONG, STRANGE RIDE OF WAGNER'S VALKYRIES by James Wierzbicki

Dr Wierzbicki is Higher Degree Research Coordinator and senior lecturer in musicology, among other positions at Sydney University. Previously on the musicology staffs of the University of Michigan and the University of California-Irvine and for more than twenty years the chief classical music critic for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and other large American newspapers, James Wierzbicki currently focuses on twentieth-century music in general and film music in particular. His books include Film Music: A History *(Routledge, 2009), monographs on the American composer Elliott Carter (University of Illinois Press, 2011) and the electronic score for the 1956 film* Forbidden Planet *(Scarecrow Press, 2005)*. A very small selection of the images Dr Wierzbicki used is reproduced on the inside front cover page.

Thank you for inviting me to deliver a presentation titled 'From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: The Long, Strange Ride of Wagner's Valkyries'. As I hope to demonstrate this afternoon, it has indeed been 'a long, strange ride,' not just for Wagner's valkyries but for valkyries in general.

This is one of the earliest known depictions of a valkyrie. It's the 'Tjängvide image stone,' [see inside covers for some of the images] found near the town of Tjängvide in Sweden, and dating from the so-called 'Viking Era,' which is to say sometime between around 700 and 1000 A.D. Note that she indeed rides a horse and wears a helmet. Note, too, that she carries no weapons; in her left hand she bears a cup, which contains the 'mead' with which she 'revives' the 'fallen hero' whom she escorts to his deserved place in the Viking equivalent of heaven. This valkyrie is not, to put it simply, a warrior woman; rather, she is a caring, nurturing servant.

The old Norse word 'valkyrie' means 'chooser from amongst the slain.' Traditionally it was the valkyrie's primary job to visit a battlefield and then select, from amongst the many corpses, the body of a fallen 'hero' which she would then transport to Valhalla. An important part of that job was the 'resurrection' of the hero by means of the nourishing cup of mead. Thus we see the cup in many other images from the Viking Era. We even see the cup—but no weapons—in as late an image as this bronze statue from 1835, by the Danish sculptor Herman Wilhelm Bizzen.

Wagner's valkyries made their first appearance thirty-five years after the completion of this statue. They dispense with the cup, and they bear arms. Propelled as they are by Wagner's music, they also take on a somewhat bellicose attitude. And thus begins, in terms of public image, the transformation of the ancient Viking-era valkyrie into the modern 'romantic' valkyrie.

Surprisingly, photographic documentation of the first production of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, in Munich in 1870, seems not to exist. But we do have drawings by that production's designer, Theodor Pixis. For example, we have a drawing for the fourth scene of Act II, during which Brünnhilde—the platoon leader of the valkyries—shows up in advance of the others. There she is, with her horse, of course.In close-up you can see that in her left hand she carries a sword.

In contrast to the paucity of graphic documentation from that 1870 first production of *Die Walküre* in Munich, from the 1876 production at Bayreuth—the premiere, actually, of the entire 'Ring Cycle'—there is a bounty of visual evidence. For example, we have—very impressively—the full-color drawings by Carl Emil Doepler of the costumes for various members of the valkyrie troop. We also have this full-color painting on glass, painted on glass because it was one of the 'slides' for the 'magic lantern show' that depicted the 'flying in'—the actual 'ride'—of the valkyries at the start of the opera's third act. Imagine the familiar music.

And we also have, from the 1876 Bayreuth production, plenty of photographs. For example, here is a photo of that production's Brünnhilde, with her horse, of course. And after this, the archives yield a veritable gush of photographs that depict various sopranos who sang this important role**.** Not all of these women were 'overweight.' But enough of them were to give rise to that most worn of clichés, you know, the one about the 'opera not being over until … .'

In any case, these vintage photographs give us a pretty good idea of what the traditional operatic Valkyrie looked like. We get a rather different idea of how 'the Valkyrie' looks not from photographs but from drawings and paintings. I've already shown you the drawings that Carl Emil Doepler made for the 1876 Bayreuth performance. Here's some more artwork, starting with a painting by the Norwegian artist Peter Nikolai Arbo. Note that this painting pre-dates the first *Walküre* performance by one year, but nevertheless it depicts an armed Valkyrie who does not carry a cup. In other words, it reminds us that the armed Valkyrie was not an invention of Wagner.

I'm pausing here at the year 1910, for the sake of introducing the English book illustrator Arthur Rackham. Rackham illustrated a great many books, including editions of *Alice in Wonderland*, the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, *Peter Pan*, and various plays by Shakespeare. But perhaps his best-known work involves Wagner's 'Ring Cycle': these would be the 1910 edition of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, with 34 colored plates, and the 1911 edition of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, with 32 plates. [**An autographed set of the 1910 edition (No. 96) of these books is for sale from the Wagner Society in NSW – see advert at the end of this Quarterly**-Editor.]

You've probably seen some of Rackham's wonderful *Walküre* drawings, which were made first with pencil and then filled in with colored ink. Probably the most familiar illustration is this one, which was not reproduced but simply imitated for the cover of the relatively inexpensive *Walküre* score that doubtless many of us own.

The original version of this presentation was delivered last November, at the University of Melbourne, during conference titled "Wagner and Us." Designed especially for that conference, the paper focused on the role of Wagner's valkyries in contemporary culture. That is still my focus, and so I will now jump ahead, to 1979. This film clip is from

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. It contains what is probably the most famous—or infamous—cinematic use of the 'Ride of the Valkyries'.

And now what is probably the second-most famous use of the 'Ride of the Valkyries' in film, in D.W. Griffith's 1915 'silent' film *Birth of a Nation*. When this film had its New York premiere in June of that year, in the pit was Modest Altschuler's 'Russian Symphony Orchestra,' an ensemble that just a few weeks later would give the American premiere of Alexander Scriabin's famously colossal *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*. So it probably sounded quite sensational when, at the film's dramatic climax, the hooded horsemen of the Ku Klux Klan ride in to a town in the American south to squelch an uprising by recently freed slaves. First you'll hear a bit of the overture to Wagner's Rienzi, and then—after a clever modulatory passage—the 'Ride of the Valkyries'—the arrangement by Joseph Briel skips the trill-filled introduction and gets right to the good part.

Some obvious questions: How familiar was this music to an American audience in 1915? Was it familiar enough to be recognized as a sort of music 'symbol'? If so, what did this 'symbol' represent?

The first two questions are quite easy to answer. The 'Ride of the Valkyries', to members of the 'general' American public in 1915, was very familiar. In his 1994 book *Wagner Nights: An American History*, Joseph Horowitz notes that "the first 'Wagner night' [concert] at [New York's] Central Park Garden took place September 19, 1871. The first all-Wagner program, on September 17, 1872, featured the American premiere of the 'Ride of the Valkyries'. The public responded by leaping onto chairs and shouting."

Despite the fact that Wagner explicitly did not want music from this opera to be in any way excerpted, the 'Ride of the Valkyries'—four years before the Bayreuth premiere—was well on its way to being a Pops Concert favorite. Persons who could afford to go to the opera heard the music presumably as 'Wagner intended it to be heard.' But many others heard it as a self-standing piece, at concerts both indoors and outdoors. As early as 1871, they might have heard it in arrangements for one or more pianos. They might have heard it in 'recordings' on piano rolls. They might have heard it in 'audio' recordings. Here's an example from 1906, by the Edison Concert Band.

Along with audio recordings of instrumental piece familiarly known as the 'Ride of the Valkyries', there were also audio recordings of—what shall we call it? … a 'song'? —titled "Ho-Jo-To-Ho!" Here's an example from 1903, a studio recording on a Victor disc, featuring soprano Johanna Gadski and an unidentified pianist who probably is Frank La Forge. There were other recordings of 'Ho-Jo-To-Ho', which was also known as 'The Battle Cry of Brünnhilde'.

So by 1915, when it was used in the silent film *Birth of a Nation*, the 'Ride of the Valkyries' was definitely popular. But was it also 'meaningful'? That's hard to say, but it is clear that the music's role in *Birth of a Nation* made it meaningful, and in ways that are still relevant today.

In a 1920 handbook by Edith Lang and George West, for example, silent-film accompanists are reminded that the 'Ride of the Valkyries'—along with von Suppé's *Light Cavalry Overture* and Liszt's *Mazeppa*—is good for illustrating 'galloping horses'. In a similar handbook from 1924, Erno Rapee notes the cinematic usefulness of such Wagnerian items as the overture to *The Flying Dutchman*, the 'Bridal Chorus' from *Lohengrin*, and the Prelude to *Parsifal*. The 'Ride of the Valkyries', Rapee says, is good for 'battle scenes'.

The idea that the 'Ride of the Valkyries' is suitable for both 'battle scenes' and 'galloping horses' easily carried over into the era of the so-called 'sound film'. An early example of its use for a 'battle scene' can be found in a 1935 cartoon by Walt Disney, part of Disney's series of 'Silly Symphonies', something titled *Music Land*. The 'plot' is simple: the 'Land of Symphony' and the 'Isle of Jazz' are separated by the 'Sea of Discord.' The two nations go to war, and at one moment the queen of the 'Land of Symphony' pulls out all the stops.

Disney wanted to explore the other standard trope—that of 'galloping horses,' or perhaps 'flying' horses—in his 1940 feature-length animated film *Fantasia*. Indeed, as early as 1938 his artists were working on a 'Ride of the Valkyries' sequence that would have been, actually, quite faithful to stage directions for the opera. But events in Europe prompted Disney to abandon this idea.

It was no secret that Adolf Hitler was a fan of Wagner's music, or that members of the Wagner family were fans of Hitler. (This is the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, specially decorated in honor of Hitler's birthday in 1939.) That Hitler was a great lover of the music of Beethoven, and of Bruckner, seems to have made no impression at all on popular culture. What made quite an impression was Hitler's affiliation with Wagner. Perhaps this was because of Wagner's infamous anti-Semitism, a feeling that Hitler certainly shared but one of which he apparently was quite unaware. Perhaps—and more likely—it was because of the clever ways in which Hitler's propaganda officers used the music of Wagner in, for example, the weekly newsreels that played in German cinemas throughout most of World War Two. Here's a very effective clip from 1942 that indeed features a 'battle scene'; there are no 'galloping horses,' or 'flying' horses, but there *are* flying airplanes. This footage documents the aerial attack on Stalingrad.

As I mentioned, the connection between Nazism and the 'Ride of the Valkyries' made an impression on popular culture. Thus in 1943 we get this, another animated film from Walt Disney, one that explains how children in the Third Reich are 'educated'. In this clip, it's explained that German children are taught 'warped' versions of fairy tales.

This third element in the semiotic equation—the Nazi element—seems to have come in and out of fashion. It's the only semiotic element in Ken Russell's 1974 film biography of Gustav Mahler. Almost all of the music in this biopic is, as you might suspect, by Mahler; in the highly stylized scene that depicts Mahler's conversion to Christianity—aided by Cosima Wagner—we hear something else.

There is explicit Nazi imagery, as well, in the 1980 film *The Blues Brothers*. This is a music-filled comedy, mind you, But it does feature a car chase accompanied by 'The Ride of the Valkyries'. Here we get a triple dose of symbolism. It's a wild

smash-'em-up car chase, so it counts as a 'battle scene'; instead of 'galloping horses' we have the modern equivalent, that is, speeding automobiles; and for comic effect, one of the pursuing police officers gleefully wears a brown shirt and a swastika armband.

Minus the Nazi imagery that clearly is played for a laugh, the 'Ride of the Valkyries' scene in *The Blues Brothers* is—in terms of semiotics—quite similar to the well-known scene from the previous year's *Apocalypse Now*. It is quite in keeping with the suggestions in the film-accompaniment handbooks from the 1920s. In other words, in the hilariously comic *The Blues Brothers* as much as in the ultra-serious *Apocalypse Now*, Wagner's familiar music underscores a scene that features both some sort of 'battle' and some sort of fast movement comparable to 'galloping.'

According to the fanatics who collect such information, before *Apocalypse Now* there were only a handful of 'sound films' that made use of 'The Ride of the Valkyries,' and in none of them do we find this doubly meaningful trope.

On the other hand, after *Apocalypse Now* there are a great many films that contain scenes featuring 'The Ride of the Valkyries', and in almost all of them we indeed find the 'double' trope of 'battle' and 'fast movement'. Some of these are 'action' films, and some of them have specifically to do with realistic military combat. But some of them are unashamedly low-brow comedies, and some of them are children's films. That the 'Ride of the Valkyries' has become an easily recognized cliché in films aimed at children perhaps proves the point that, for Wagner's valkyries, it has indeed been a long, strange ride.

You're probably familiar with this animated film from 1957, an offering from Warner Bros., part of that studio's 'Merrie Melodies' series, starring Elmer Fudd and, of course, Bugs Bunny. It's called *What's Opera, Doc?* and it features Elmer Fudd quite famously applying somewhat 'violent' lyrics to the main tune of the 'Ride of the Valkyries.' Of course, as a cartoon presented in movie theaters in the 1950s, *What's Opera, Doc?* played not just to children but, rather, to 'general' audiences.

According to Norse legend, if you see a valkyrie you'll know that you're already dead. Yet in our modern-day culture we do see valkyries all around us. We can see them, obviously, if we go to the opera house. In 1899, the whole flock of valkyries looked like this. Nowadays, it's hard to know what operatic valkyries will look like. They could look something this.

But we don't have to go to the opera house to see valkyries. We can go to the toy store, where we can find, if we like, valkyrie action figures. We can read valkyrie comic books. If we prefer that our reading material not have pictures, we can read novels that are actually about valkyries or at the very least have titles that allude to valkyries. The females amongst us, for special dress-up occasions, can easily find valkyrie costumes. If any of us are really 'into' this sort of thing, we can get valkyrie tattoos.

This last lovely image is a reminder that in recent decades the Honda motorcycle company has marketed an especially 'fast' machine called the Valkyrie. For that matter, a bicycle manufacturer called Airborne has a titanium-framed 'road bike' called Valkyrie. But even early in the twentieth century the image of the valkyrie was used in advertisements for bicycles. And in advertisements for perfume. And for beer. And for cubes of beef extract. …

Getting back to modern-day culture, if you like computer games, you can indeed find some that deal at least in a vague way with the 'character' of the valkyrie. You can also find quite a few computer games that feature not the 'character' of the valkyrie but simply the music that Wagner composed for the entry of his valkyries and which was subsequently exploited for the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. All of these 'shoot-'em-up' games use the 'Ride of The Valkyries' in their episodes of violent aerial bombardment.

But not all computer games that make use of the 'Ride of the Valkyries' are ultra-violent. As participants in the burgeoning field of ludomusicology [a musicological approach to videogame music] will surely know, for quite a few years the world at large has had free access to a game called *Flight of the Hamsters*.

As I said earlier, nowadays valkyries are simply all around us. And often they are depicted as being quite cute.

For the valkyries in general, and for Wagner's valkyries in particular, it has indeed been a long, strange ride, and I place the emphasis here on 'strange.' So let me conclude by sharing with you what, amongst all the appropriations of the 'Ride of the Valkyries' that I've been able to find, is perhaps the strangest. You'll recall that, after the quite sensational sounding of the 'Ride of the Valkyries' in D.W. Griffith's 1915 'silent' film *Birth of a Nation*, for a long time the standard cinematic use of this music had to do with 'battle scenes' or with 'galloping horses,' and sometimes with both. You'll also recall that since Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* the semiotic cliché of the 'Ride of the Valkyries'—especially evident in modern 'war' films and computer games—has involved both violent combat and the very fast movement—often through the air—of deliverers of violence.

Yes, there are cinematic examples in which Wagner's iconic 'Ride of the Valkyries' is associated not just with combat and rapid movement but also with Nazi ideals. But these examples are few and far between. Most recent cinematic appropriations of this music sidestep politics and have simply to do with aerial combat.

Yes, from this … to this, for the valkyries it has been a long, strange ride.

[Fortuitously, but interestingly, in his article, Roger Cruickshank draws our attention to the use of Valkyries in the parade that preceded the opening of the Melbourne Ring Cycle—Editor.]

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