

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 three hundred 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 2, Beethoven 9, 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, 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 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 left 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 (gasp) 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 3 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 duple 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 bar helps to de-emphasize beats 2 and 3, which are often and mistakenly louder than the downbeat.

I again refer back to the concept of *knowing how it goes*. A phonetic phrase that seems to help put the rhythm in 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 down beat 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 versus 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 4 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 3 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 ones enjoyment of this monumental repertoire.