

Motivic Grouping

Soprano
Lebhaft

Brünhilde: Hojo - to-ho ____ ! Hojo - to-ho ____ !

Wagner: *Die Walküre*, Act III - *Ride of the Valkyries*

A motif (or motive) is a short rhythmic or melodic musical idea that occurs throughout a composition. It can be manipulated in many ways—inverted, divided, expanded, contracted, and so forth.

Although a motif is clearly identifiable most of the time, tradition can dictate distorted ways of playing that can obscure a motif's true shape.

“Ride of the Valkyries”—Which Way Did They Go?

The Ring of the Nibelung, Richard Wagner's massive, fifteen-hour, integrated four-opera cycle, is filled with motifs. He used them to identify musically each character and mood. The sword, the ring, and love itself each have their own motivic themes.

“Ride of the Valkyries” from *Die Walküre* (second of the four operas) introduces one of the most famous melodies in all of classical music. In performance it is normally phrased as shown in example 40.

Brass players usually take a breath on the bar lines and make a crescendo to the highest note of each bar (beat two). Countless performances, recordings, and even television commercials evidence the universality of this way of phrasing. In a famous Warner Bros. cartoon titled “What's Opera, Doc?” (1957), Elmer Fudd sings, “Kill da wabbit” (Kill the rabbit) under the three beats of each bar, underscoring the traditional bar-by-bar grouping. But is this the right way—the musical way—it should be played?

The larger phrase heard in "Ride" is simply this rising motif stated four times:

Example 44



The only change Wagner makes between the first statement of the motif and its subsequent repetitions here is his lengthening of the pick-up in order to connect the four statements into one long phrase. If Wagner had not lengthened the pick-up notes, the theme would appear as in example 45.

Example 45



If written this way, it would not be remotely possible for orchestral players to breathe on the bar lines.

If the motif consisted of the first full bar, with its final descending interval, as traditionally played—

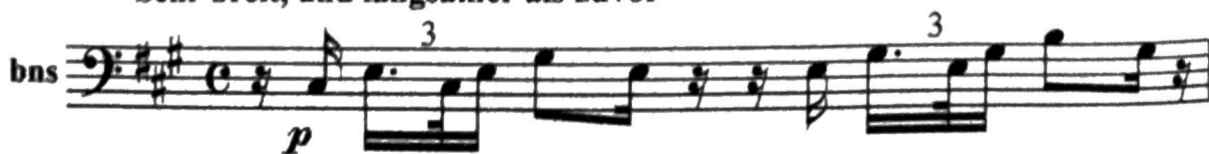
Example 46



—then it would be supported by appearances of that sort in the score. This does occur roughly twenty-four times in the last three operas of the *Ring*.

Example 47

Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, scene iii
Sehr breit, und langsamer als zuvor



However, the version of the motif ending on the uppermost note appears at least 132 times. This is more than a 5-to-1 ratio. Which is the rule and which is its exception? In keeping with standard motivic manipulation, there are also a handful of variations of this motif that do not clearly fit either mold.

If Wagner's motif is grouped in the traditional way, then Wagner would more logically have written the longer phrase in the "Ride" with a short pick-up added to each bar (as well as a final downward note in the last bar) in order to provide a sense of motivic symmetry:

Example 48



Regarding the meter itself, in 9/8 time (as in all meters) the *first* beat of the bar is traditionally the strongest. Not surprisingly, Wagner has highlighted its greater weight by placing an accent on the first note of each bar, contradicting the common practice of accenting the second beat.

Example 49



Famed English music critic and Wagner scholar Ernest Newman (1868–1959) bemoaned that, in concert, two common performance errors usually mar this phrase: performers tend to swallow the last note of each bar and overlook Wagner's accent on the first beat in favor of an unwritten emphasis on the second.¹

By lengthening the first pick-up note and removing the sixteenth notes, we can analyze the unornamented structure of the phrase more clearly (example 50).

Example 50



This skeletal structure consists of an upbeat, an arrival, and a resolution.

Replacing all the notes as written and setting words to the motif also illustrates its proper phrasing (example 51).

Example 51

"They're getting a - way. They're getting a - way. They're getting a - way. They're getting a - way."

Of course, these are not the composer's lyrics. If only Wagner *had* set words to this motif . . .

It so happens that he did. But Wagner set this melody to words only once in the entire *Ring*. In Act 3, scene 1 of *Die Walküre*, immediately following the end of what would be the concert version of the "Ride," Siegrune sings:

Example 52

(zu den Andern)

sop

Siegrune: In brün - stigem Ritt jagt Brünn - hilde hier!
In fe - verish ride flies Brünn - hilde here!

Then she stops; no word or descending interval occurs on the third beat of the last bar. Siegrune states two grammatically coherent German clauses that cannot be parsed in any other way without destroying their meaning. Incontrovertibly, the motif was intended by the composer to be grouped in this way.

Examined methodically, it is clear that Wagner's motivic treatment here is firmly based in the natural construction of German syntax, and is also strongly supported by repetition of the freestanding motif throughout the *Ring*. Yet tradition, bar line breathing, and even an animated cartoon have twisted Wagner's straightforward use of motivic repetition.

I have never heard the longer phrase from the "Ride" played in a way that shows its true motivic construction. Perhaps this analysis will stimulate some reexamination of this, as well as other similarly timeworn traditions.