Wagner - The Ride of the Valkyries

Richard WAGNER (1813 – 1883)
Was there anything this man couldn't do? He wrote enormous operas, conducted them and designed the sets. He even invented instruments and developed many of the theatrical conventions that we still use today. **The Ride of the Valkyries** is from his massive 4 opera epic *The Ring.* Wagner strongly objected to the piece being performed outside of the opera (unless he himself was conducting!). Despite this it has been used regularly in films since 1915 and was most famously used in the 1979 war film **Apocalypse Now**

Composing Project for Key Stage 3: Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries

Wagner certainly was a genius. He wrote literally days' worth of operas but if you look at some of his most famous pieces carefully you can see that they are structured from very few ideas and often these ideas taken one by one are extremely simple.

Wagner 'invented' the leitmotif* and much of his work is based on manipulation of very short leitmotifs. His **Ride of the Valkyries** is made up from just three motifs and this project demonstrates how just three ideas is all you need.

LEITMOTIF – a small musical idea that represents a character/ emotion/ place/ theme etc. from the story of the opera and adapts to the plot as the story develops

Wagner's Three Ideas

Idea 1 The trill (or wobble): 'Suspense'

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: 'Flying'

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

Idea 3 The triad tune: Heroism

Wagner's iconic tune is actually just made up of broken chords. Wagner takes a triad –
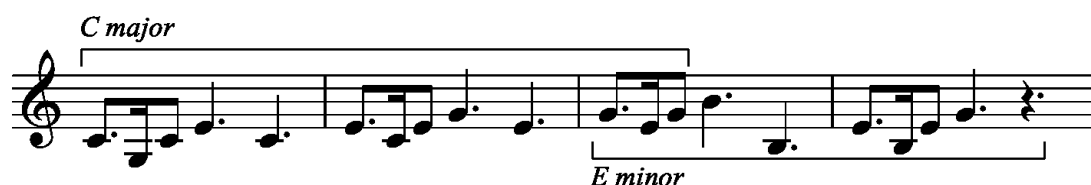

…opens it up with a spiky rhythm –

… and keeps inverting (shifting upwards) –

Wagner's genius is that he transforms into other triads as he works his way up, like this –

Students trying out this task don't have to have a huge knowledge of triads and chords but can instead experiment by using the general shape and listening to what works. Wagner's motif is so clever that it will work on any notes, but you could equally use this task to teach about chords, inversions & extended triads.

Task 1: Exploring Wagner's Three Ideas

1. Tell your class a little about Wagner and his **Ride of the Valkyries**. (I would recommend you don't listen to the piece just yet; doing so may make any further exploration disappointing). Explain that Wagner uses just three ideas (of motifs) to make his piece and demonstrate these ideas to your class

2. Split your class into smaller working groups and ask them to make an exciting piece of music using Wagner's three ideas.

3. When this is achieved, hear each group in turn and give feedback. As each group has used the same 'ingredients' it should be simple to join the groups together into one piece.

Task Two: Structure

1. To give his piece structure (and to give the musicians a rest!) Wagner includes short passages of 'thinner' music whereby he fragments his ideas. When putting your groups together, encourage the class to employ some of his structural devices such as:

   a. 'free-fall' – Wagner creates short passages where his motifs fragment and the orchestra sounds like it is hurtling downwards

   b. 'heroic chords' – the brass section occasionally come together for a series of massive block chords

   c. 'explosions' – loud bangs coming out of rapid trills and usually ending with swoops. There is of course, one big bang at the end

   d. 'sneaky motifs' – his motifs sneak back in quietly and build up

Taking it further:

When you and your class have explored Wagner's 'classic three ideas piece', it's time for you to make your own piece from scratch. This can be achieved either as a full class, in small groups or even individually. Encourage your class to use this 'recipe' to help create your music -

1. Begin with a **programmatic idea** – what are you going to describe? This can be anything but the simpler ideas are always the best.
2. Decide on the **three prominent ideas** you want to use to express your theme
3. Create **one short, simple motif** for each of these ideas
4. **Orchestrate -** decide which instrument/s will play each idea.
5. **Structure** these ideas into a final piece.
6. Fix the piece until it is roughly the same every time adding details such as **dynamics** and **tempo** changes.
7. Finally, think carefully about **beginning** and **ending** – the two most important sections of any piece.