KAPITTEL 17

From Black Metal to Norse Revival? Mournfulness, Memories, and Meanings of Wardruna's Rune Music

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Abstract: Continuing a practice of using Norse and heathen themes in their black metal music, former Gorgoroth members Gaahl and Kvitrafn transitioned into a musical expression that appears to be spiritually, aesthetically, and geographically connected to Norwegian nature, mythology, and ancient identity. With their group Wardruna, the music, they claim, comes from runes – "The runes are the composer and I am the instrument," explains Einar Selvik, the leader of the group (Dorrell, 2022; Mykleset, 2015). This has consequences for how the music is interpreted and understood, in terms of its compositional process, spirituality, meanings, and composer intentions. It also affects the music and artists' perceived status and legitimacy as authorities on Norse or Norwegian spirituality and identity. This article identifies ways in which Wardruna's rune music is represented as an authentic and spiritual expression of ancient Norse or Norwegian identity, while playing into a sense of lost heritage, nostalgia, and a contemporary strain of romanticism. Further, the article considers the implications of such representations for understandings of Norwegian cultural heritage, history, ancient spirituality, and national identity.

Keywords: Norse mythology, memory and heritage, composer intentions, media representations, popular music, neofolk, black metal music

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Introduction

In 2009, when Gaahl, black metal icon and front man of the band Gorgoroth, announced he would retire from metal (Svendsen, 2009), he had already transitioned into a new kind of music. Gaahl, whose birth name is Kristian Espedal, had established a notorious extreme metal persona through satanic music, controversial statements, and crime convictions (Hawkins & Nielsen, 2020, pp. 185–187). But black metal was no longer the cultural antigen that had caused disruption and despair in Norway during the early 1990s – its transgressive potency had faded – and Gaahl knew when to change the tune, so to speak. Months before his announcement, his more recent project, Wardruna, had released the first album of its rune music trilogy, *Runaljod* (Wardruna, 2009b).[1] The trilogy revolves around the twenty-four runes of the Elder Futhark, comprising musical representations of the runic alphabet.

The transition from satanic metal to rune music is less of a leap than it might at first seem. Granted, in terms of sound, instrumentation and aesthetics, moving from Gorgoroth to Wardruna represents a complete changeover – the music no longer sounds or looks like black metal and might instead be characterized as neofolk or world music. Thematically, ideologically, and conceptually, however, the transition into a folkish or neopagan category with emphasis on heathen heritage and Norse mythology seems, in several ways, like a logical development. Since the beginning of the so-called "second wave" of black metal – which established the fame and infamy of Norwegian black metal performers around the world – fascination with and commemoration of pre-Christian heritage, Nordic myths, nature, and paganism have gone hand in hand with anti-Christianity, individualism, and countercultural expressions (Mørk, 2011, pp. 127–130; Granholm, 2011, pp. 514–515; von Helden, 2017, pp. 38–40; Hagen, 2011, p. 190).

Wardruna and its rune music in some ways also seem to reflect a broader shift in Norway, from a period in the 1990s when black metal's opposition to a cultural and religious paradigm caused moral panic and

1 Wardruna was initially a collaboration between Gorgoroth members Gaahl and Einar Selvik, also known by his stage name Kvitrafn, as well as singer Lindy-Fay Hella (Wardruna, 2020).

gleaned extensive media attention (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 28) to a time when this transgressive expression began to represent an assimilated and interwoven part of the cultural fabric of a nation that had gone through significant changes in terms of religion, wealth, and global connectedness (Furseth, 2015; Botvar, 2010, pp. 13–15; Hagen, 2011, pp. 180–181; Hawkins & Nielsen, 2020, pp. 190–191). Whether the antipathy to contemporary mainstream culture that black metal expressed has diminished, or merely evolved into other forms and expressions of resistance, remains up for discussion. Further, some of these more recent expressions, especially representations of Norse mythology and heritage, seem to be gaining broader audiences through popular cultural productions.[2]

This chapter examines religious or spiritual elements of Warduna's rune music and some of their implications for notions of Norwegian identity. Seeking to illuminate how this music might play into conceptions of memory, heritage, and national identity, I identify themes, rhetoric, and aesthetics which emphasize these cultural categories. I also look at how the music is represented and performed, and discuss concepts of interpretation, intention, and meaning in relation to this. Finally, I refer to some associations and implications of this music's black metal roots and consider how these might affect interpretation. A central question in this study is: In which ways does Wardruna's rune music reflect, impact, and develop notions of national identity and heritage?

In addition to Wardruna's *Runaljod* albums (2009b, 2013, 2016) and music videos, materials examined include news articles and other media content,[3] including documentary films, interviews, and presentations. From musicology and popular music studies, I draw on a tradition that interprets music and performance as culturally meaningful artistic expressions and that, in Lawrence Kramer's words, "sees a rough but vital harmony among music, words, and ideas as they address, orbit, and collide with each other" (2016, p. 2). A consequence of this is a broad

2 Such as the popular television series *Vikings* (Hirst et al., 2013) and the video game *Assassins Creed Valhalla*, to which Wardruna and Einar Selvik have provided incidental music (Nilsson, 2020; Trendell, 2018). In 2016, Wardruna's rune music also topped Billboard's World Albums chart (Elnan, 2016).

3 Archival news content was mainly gathered through Retriever Research.

understanding of performance practices, which includes popular artists' publicly performed identities. In this, my approach is in part inspired by the work of Kai Arne Hansen, addressing "how pop personae are articulated across a variety of disparate but intersecting spaces" (2019, p. 502), and Stan Hawkins, who emphasizes the significance of artists' personal narratives for reception (2020, pp. 241–243), and observes that "[Personas'] effect is to get us to reflect on the significance of gender, race, class, sexuality, and many other qualities of identity" (2020, p. 250). My conceptual premise both supposes and imposes interdisciplinarity, and I also look to relevant scholarship within the fields of media, literature, history, and religion.

Popular music scholarship focused on heritage, memory, and national identity constitutes a relatively small and recent body of work, but scholars are increasingly recognizing and investigating popular music *as* cultural heritage (Bennett & Janssen, 2016, p. 1). Works by scholars such as Philip V. Bohlman (2011, 2017), Celia Applegate (1998), and Irene Morra (2014) provide instructive examples of how to approach issues of music and national identity. In my research, I have come across relatively few studies devoted to black metal or neofolk music and religion, but groundbreaking works by Robert Walser (2014) and Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) have raised several important questions and demonstrated the relevance of examining such issues. Kennet Granholm's study of satanic, heathen and neopagan elements and developments in Norwegian black metal and neofolk, touches on many of the issues explored here, and makes a case for the study of religious aspects in this music, and in popular culture more broadly (2011). This provides a springboard to my inquiry, which allows me to connect religion or spirituality in Wardruna's music to aspects of national identity.

Nature, rituals, and the significance of place

The title of Wardruna's song Løyndomsriss (2009a) translates approximately to "secret carving". The title itself is a translation of *rune*, meaning "mystery" and "secret knowledge" in the form of an inscription or carving. In the song's music video (Wardruna, 2011), a hand gently unearths a

stone, peeling away the overgrown moss. The point of a knife carves into wood or stone, reminiscent of petroglyphs or runestones. The image then cuts to an establishing shot: Through an uninhabited boreal landscape, a lone journeyer sculls inward on the fjord, causing ripples to expand in the water around him. He is humbly dressed in dark woven fabric. Only his fair features and his ornaments – a bone bracelet inscribed with runes and a wheel cross pendant strung around his neck – draw attention. An ancient sounding drone is punctuated by ambient distant bells and drums, suggesting a church and community. Rustling sounds nearby alert us to the landscape. The man seems to be moving away from the bells, hence likely away from the Christian community, and into the ancient wilderness.

There is an omniscient whisper which evolves and merges with the drone into a monophonic slow, breathy, half sung chant of vowels and soft consonants. Occasional melodic semitone variations destabilize the chant, only to lend an air of mystery. The words are not of a modern tongue. Another man, clothed in dark robes with long hair and a beard flowing down his torso, is already standing on the bank. Unmoving and statue-like, the second man looks almost rooted like a tree, and ghostly, as if his presence were more symbolic than real. The first man disembarks from his wooden vessel and steps out into the wild growth. The men are in separate realms, but there is a sense of connection between them, as if the robed man is somehow guiding the journeyer – a sage and a seeker. The fair journeyer carries a torch into the dark wilderness and discovers a stone in the undergrowth. When he upends the stone, the chanting expands into polyphony, a fourth above the drone note, as if one voice becomes many, and a new conjunct melody takes the lead, higher than the rest. The journeyer performs a kind of ritual, a mysterious spinning dance with the burning torch, and his body multiplies into translucent likenesses engaged in the same movement. Finally, he sits down on the moss, assuming a cross-legged pose, and his likenesses coalesce.

No trace of modern civilization appears in the video. The scenes seem timeless and organic, emphasizing the sense that this music is beyond the current context. The journeyer seems to be unearthing ancient secrets in the Nordic wilderness, recognizable by the landscape of the fjord and

boreal forest and flora. He is guided or driven through a kind of ritual performance, and there is a sense that he thereby achieves insight or reveals something sacred. Notions of solemnity, mystery, spirituality, ancient knowledge, sacred ritual, discovery, and rootedness are emphasized by the video's visual rhetoric, as is the image of landscape and the significance of place. The music streams like a numinous mantra that floods the scene but also seems to emanate from it. The ripples in the water take on a metaphoric quality. The two men are Einar Selvik and Gaahl, acting out the roles of journeyer and sage, respectively.

The musical rhetoric and aesthetics of this video emphasize the central themes and sentiments of Wardruna's rune music trilogy. From conception, through composition and interpretation, to performance and promotion, Wardruna creates and develops a narrative about the music that links it to Norse myth and spirituality. The trilogy's title *Runaljod* (Wardruna, 2009b) translates roughly to "sound of runes." Wardruna's website further describes the concept and the process of creation:

> The runes are interpreted on their own premises, although here their various qualities are placed in the wider context of various ancient Nordic traditions relating to nature and human and spiritual relations. For this reason, some of the recordings have also been made in various locations or under circumstances that have particular significance for the rune in question. (Wardruna, 2020)

What is meant by "under circumstances that have particular significance for the rune in question" becomes clearer in interviews with Einar Selvik, who has become the primary composer and leader of Wardruna, in which he describes setting up scenes and using instruments meant to enhance or represent the meanings of the runes (Mykleset, 2015; Lunde, 2017). For example, in order to interpret the rune ᚾ, *nauð* (an Old Norse form of the word *nød*), meaning "distress" or "suffering" (Heyerdahl, 2019), Selvik fasted for two days before wandering, nearly naked, into the mountainous wilderness, where the wind and snow beat on his body until he truly felt the meaning of the rune *nauð* (Lunde, 2017). He then began to sing (Lunde, 2017), creating a musical interpretation of the rune that both harnessed its meaning and connected the song to the Norwegian wilderness and its sometimes harsh natural environment. Selvik has also described

using materials, instruments, and elements that reflect the runes' associated meanings, for example, by drumming on birch trees when interpreting the rune ᛒ, *bjarkan*, meaning "birch", and using sounds of water to represent ᛚ, *logr*, meaning "water" (FaceCulture, 2009; Mykleset, 2015; Heyerdahl, 2019).

The creative process of Wardruna thus becomes a kind of compositional ritual that takes place in constructed and natural contexts and places described as spiritually significant (FaceCulture, 2009). Through these rune-centered rituals, connections are established between music, nature, region, mythology, and cultural identity. In this way, Selvik explains, Wardruna's rune music speaks to a basic human longing for connection (Lunde, 2017). He sees the runes as representing "very good images of the old culture. If you boil it down to its essence, it is about man's relationship with nature, to each other and to something that is bigger than yourself. That is something, I would say, that is highly relevant today" (Dorrell, 2022). The aim of Wardruna's rune music project, according to the band's website, is "sowing new seeds and strengthening old roots" (Wardruna, 2020). The image of nature evoked in their descriptions echoes a romantic idealization of a pre-Christian era where people lived in a sacred pact with nature and the landscape that surrounded them.

Many of Wardruna's rune songs are aural tapestries of natural elements and objects, such as water, thunder, rain, bones, wood, and the sound of outdoor "presence" or atmosphere (Wardruna, 2009b, 2013, 2016). Combined, such organic sounds form a backdrop – sometimes accompanied by a monotone drone or the beating of a single drum – for the human voice. Humming, whispering, muttering, lamenting, or distant shouting, usually of vowels or indiscernible words in conjunct, slow phrases, emerges from the organic tapestry as if bearing ancient messages. The voice or voices oscillate between blending with and erupting from this homophone musical organism, often staying on a single note, or ornamentally fluctuating by a semitone, resembling a simple plainchant. With an effect similar to that of a plainchant, listeners have the impression of divine communication through song (Parncutt, 2019, p. 434). Sometimes two voices sing parallel fifths or fourths, invoking associations with Icelandic *tvisang* or austere medieval polyphony. Traditional

instruments also appear, including Hardanger fiddle and mouth harp. These tend to stand out as melodic shimmering, though careful not to linger on figures of major or minor, and instead weaving in and out of harmonic limbo. Listening to this is to be transported into a nature setting, from which music emerges organically and with solemnity.

A sense of loss, invented memories, and romantic ideals

Wardruna's music has an elegiac quality. The artists profess to be bringing the old back to the new (Trendell, 2018), but the old is cast in a light of nostalgia, loss, and mourning. Pierre Nora's concept, *lieux de mémoire*, offers a possibility of understanding elements of ancient Nordic culture in this music as uncanny "realms of memory" rather than history (1998, p. xi). The realms represent ideals of a lost identity, and Warduna's rune music becomes a kind of, in Nora's terms, "symbolic site of identity" (1998, p. ix). Wardruna's rune music evokes an idealized past identity and, at the same time, offers a place of consolation for the loss of this past. Because listeners have no lived experience of ancient Nordic identity (or music), this identity is simultaneously constructed and evoked through Wardruna's music. The lack of experience (and contestation) also contributes to lending authority and authenticity to the music. Effectively, Wardruna is practicing what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have termed "the invention of tradition" (2003). Something similar might be said of memories: because the lost past is not preserved in popular memory, Wardruna's musical "realms of memory" represent inventions rather than preservations of memory.

Music is special in how it deals with history and time, because, in Simon Frith's words, "music in itself provides our most vivid experience of time passing" (2007, p. 266). The suggestion of transient time and nostalgic sentimentality are, as Frith observes, basic ingredients in popular music's function in "the creation of identity" (2007, pp. 266, 267). Such sentiments seem to prime listeners for existential reminiscence. Selvik has stressed that his work is not founded on a romantic idea of the past, but rather the conviction that "our" background is a culture largely shaped by the

nature and landscape that still surrounds us (Ullebø, 2021). However, as we shall see, romanticization and commemoration to some degree seem unavoidable and beyond a composer's control.

In a 2008 interview, Gaahl explains that, "My goal with Wardruna is to bring Balder home where he belongs" and, when discussing what he hopes to achieve with audiences, "To breathe life back into them. To awake them from the sleep … To bring them back to life, to the old way of thinking, being themselves" (FaceCulture, 2011). According to Nordic mythos, for example the *Vǫluspá* poem of the *Poetic Edda*, the slain god Balder will return after *Ragnarok*, with the rise of a new and better world, once the old world has been destroyed (Næss & Magerøy, 2020; Nordbø, 2021). While Gaahl is reluctant to specify or describe how he envisions the return of Balder and whether he interprets the mythos literally, his initial response implies the imminence of *Ragnarok* – the twilight of the gods and the end of the world as we know it. He also implies that there is an alternative, older and more authentic way of being-in-the-world. The old way, he suggests, is truer and in accordance with ancient Norse beliefs. The vagueness of his statements works as a communication tactic or rhetorical device, succeeding in capturing listeners' imaginations, while leaving a great deal open to interpretation and enveloping the music in a veil of mystery. When Gaahl is asked the question, "What is holy?" he answers, simply, "Nature" (FaceCulture, 2011).

In a 2005 documentary interview, when asked about "the primary ideology or the primary ideas that fuel the black metal band Gorgoroth," he gave an equally brief response: "Satan" (Dunn et al., 2005). The parallel between these two interviews is striking, mainly because Gaahl seems to sum up the essence of his artistic work and its ideological foundation in a single word – having merely replaced one term with the other – which conjures a host of associations and assumptions about beliefs and worldview. These two single word responses are not so different, in terms of ideas, associations, and sentiments. Kennet Granholm argues that black metal and neofolk music are more than musical genres or subcultures, demonstrating how they function as "complex cultural systems, providing sets of ideology, meaning, practice, and traditions," which between the two scenes have been converging (2011, p. 535). Further, "Both [black

metal and neofolk] have heathen underpinnings, and it is this similarity that has made a partial convergence of the two genres possible" (Granholm, 2011, p. 538).

The fascination with heathen and pagan themes in some ways continues a quest for pre-Christian culture that blossomed during the Renaissance (D'Elia, 2016). But today, contemporary heathenism and paganism are most often seen in connection with romantic ideals and ideas that, in response to enlightenment thinking, place scientific knowledge, technological advancement, and industrial society in opposition to spirituality and the natural world (Luhrmann, 1989, pp. 38–39). The Romantic Movement – especially German Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – fostered sentiments and notions of a natural and organic order in distant past cultures, where oral tradition and mythology connected people with the life-giving nature that surrounded them (Granholm, 2011, pp. 520–521). This romantic idealization represented opposition to the Enlightenment's elevation of reason and rationality, as well as a reinterpretation of "the 'primitive' as a good rather than a regrettable stage of culture" (Ong, 2012, p. 18). To examine how these ideas persist today, Granholm argues that

> one needs to look to the modes of use of these symbols and the worldviews, meanings, and sentiments they evoke. This means that fictional characters such as those occurring in e.g. the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis … can be used in a pagan or heathen framework. (2011, p. 524)

Romantic ideas of nature as divine or, conversely, of a divine force within nature (and humans), are evoked throughout Wardruna's representations, both aesthetically, as in the *Løyndomsriss* video (2011), and in statements and interviews by Gaahl and Selvik (see, for example, FaceCulture, 2009, 2011; Lunde, 2017; Mykleset, 2015; Wardruna, 2020). Selvik calls himself an animist, in the sense that he believes everything in nature has a spirit, its own force (Ullebø, 2021). He presents his music-making as a kind of act of communing with nature, Norse heritage, and history (Lunde, 2017). The runes, Selvik explains in one interview, are part of an ancient and complex form of magic where they connect with the human voice and the world (Robb, 2013).

What makes it religious?

Describing his creative process, Einar Selvik has said, "The runes are the composer and I am the instrument" (Dorrell, 2022; Mykleset, 2015). This suggests that the runes are communicating to or through Selvik and that this communication manifests as music. Whether Selvik believes that the runes themselves have a consciousness and desire to express or, rather, some divine entity or entities, such as Norse deities, are communicating through the runes, is unclear. His remarks about animism suggest that the runes possess their own spiritual essence (Ullebø, 2021).

Melford E. Spiro defines religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated super-human beings" (1966, p. 96). Wardruna's creative process is not institutional and cannot be considered a *religion*, but the experience Selvik describes, of communication with someone or something superhuman, and of channeling music from runes, might be deemed *religious*. However, the nebulous concept of "religious experience" is not uncomplicated (Taves, 2009; Yamane, 2000). As Ann Taves explains, the dominant academic study of religion in the twentieth century, which emphasized "religious experience" as the essence of religion has, during the last few decades, been criticized on the grounds that the approach was insular or essentialist, "masked a tacitly theological agenda of a liberal ecumenical sort, and embodied covert Western presuppositions about religion and religions" (2009, p. 3).

Considering the religiosity of Wardruna's rune music prompts the question: Whose (religious) experience matters, the experience of the composer or the creator, or the experience of the listener? Taves writes, "In general, psychologists and sociologists of religion have distinguished between the private religious experience of individuals and the public religiosity of organized groups, with psychologists of religion focusing on the former and sociologists of religion on the latter" (Taves, 2009, p. 7), which begs further questions about how "religious experience" is understood. The distinctiveness of these (unequally treated) experiences and how that relates to music will not be thoroughly examined here, though it brings up several problems with regard to how we understand and investigate "religious music". To examine and engage with such questions

meaningfully would benefit from deeper theoretical involvement with scholarship of religion.

One problem that emerges with studying religious experiences of music is ontological. The fact that something is *described* as magical or religious does not mean it *is* magical or religious. By this I mean, simply, that a description is a representation, or a "linguistic representation", to use David Yamane's more precise term (2000, p. 171). Religious "experience" cannot be studied as such, argues Yamane, as the "religious experience in real time and its physical, mental, and emotional constituents" are inaccessible to researchers (2000, p. 171). Thus, following Yamane, in the place of "experience" we must examine "linguistic representations", such as Selvik's utterances about his experiences of rune music composition. Then comes the question of reliability. An artist is, after all, in the business of fiction as much as (if not more than) of facts. This is not to suggest that Selvik's descriptions of spiritually inspired compositional processes should be dismissed or overlooked. Rather, it is the ways in which they become meaningful that warrant examination. Concerning ideology and myth in folk and rock music communities, Simon Frith observed, "The significance of magic is that people believe in it" (Frith, 1981, p. 168). Linguistic representations are, in any case, not the only expressions which lead listeners to interpret music as religious or spiritual. Musical performances, aesthetics, gestures, expressions – not to mention interpreter subjectivity – have a bearing on interpretation and experience.

While I have not thoroughly examined the spiritual impact of Wardruna's music on its fans, it seems clear that the notion of spirituality, whether arisen from musical and visual representations or Selvik's descriptions, is significant. The many media headlines propagating these ideas and processes indicate that this is of interest to a broad audience. During the nineteen-nineties, news stories of satanic metal frequently featured in Norwegian mainstream media (Grude, 1998; Jahr, 2017), and seemed to intrigue audiences who likely had very little knowledge of the music but who were interested in the controversy. Media coverage of Wardruna seems to indicate that the music's runic spirituality and connection with Norse identity captivates people beyond music fan communities. This makes sense, both because the ideas are fascinating in

how they configure music and composition – prompting us to reconsider musical meaning and spirituality in certain contexts – and because the mixing of Norse mythology and Nordic heritage play into and inspire modern myths of the Norse people and their archaic culture. It concerns shared Nordic heritage, history, and memory. This music, as Granholm (2011) asserts, is more than just music – its rhetoric and mythology contain visions of a past where spirituality, ritual, and nature were the ingredients of a meaningful and holistic existence. The music becomes a lens through which one can look back on seductive views of the distant past, hinting at the possibility of a natural order different from our current reality and perhaps also an alternative way of life in the future. Containing "realms of memory", to invoke Nora (1998), the music seems to already belong to the landscape and spirituality it conjures up, and it is perceived as distinctly and authentically Nordic or Norse.

Meanings, interpretations, and authority

With most of Wardruna's rune songs, it is difficult to discern and understand words, which, when there are any, tend to be Norwegian (*nynorsk*), *Høgnorsk*, Old Norse or Proto-Norse, whereof the latter three are archaic. That, however, does not prevent the listener from interpreting their meaning. As Simon Frith observes, "It is […] difficult to avoid hearing intelligible words in vocal sounds: we find a meaning for words sung in a strange language, and spontaneously interpret …" (1998, p. 173). While the lyrics then might seem to matter less, the vocals matter a great deal in producing this kind of spontaneous interpretation in listeners. Listeners get the distinct sense that the vocalist is expressing or telling them something meaningful and important. Voices and vocal music bear messages and convey *human intent*, and listening for meaning in vocal sounds is fundamentally human. I would argue that it is not even necessarily words that are interpreted and ascribed meaning. We tend to interpret vocal sounds as phrases, texts, and emotions, and we base our interpretations, in part, on whatever we may already know or believe about the music, including its artist(s), genre, time, and place. This is also very much something that happens when listening to black metal music, where words vocalized

through growls and screams are utterly unintelligible to the listener, and so Wardruna's members would know how to draw on this effect.[4]

Something more is also achieved; although listeners intuitively and spontaneously interpret and glean meaning from vocal sounds and foreign words, unintelligibility (and hence uncertainty) does lend mystery, and perhaps also a sense of secrecy, to the music. Foreign words' meanings can seem somehow more significant, and the phrases more eloquent, than those of words and sentences sung with the glaring clarity of a listener's mother tongue. In certain ancient magical papyri, vowels and nonsensical names were considered to be a sort of divine language, and they were chanted during ritual performances to communicate with divine forces (Bull, 2017, pp. 87–92). The medieval European performance ritual of Gregorian chanting in Latin or Greek was (and still is) similarly incomprehensible to most people, but the chanting, incomprehensible yet recognizable, signifies worship and communication with the divine (Parncutt, 2019, p. 2). The uttering of unintelligible sounds and words, as we can see, has a special place in certain forms of ritual performance practices.

Warduna's apparent knowledge of ancient, obscure, and dead languages, as well as their claimed ability to interpret runes – thus giving them access to arcane knowledge – gives a sense of learnedness and the mastering of special skills.[5] Indeed, Wardruna encourages this notion by referring to its members not only as artists, but also as "sages", "scholars", and "skalds" (Wardruna, 2020). Selvik has characterized himself as an adherent of heathen ideas, claiming, "The Gods help those who help themselves. This reflects that you are your own god, that it is your own responsibility how you act, what you contribute with in this world" (Lunde, 2017, my translation). This kind of strongman, individualistic rhetoric is typical of black metal, where masculine ideals are propagated pretentiously and without irony. Gaahl has said that he thinks of himself

4 Gorgoroth have famously chosen not to publish their lyrics (Patterson, 2013, p. 256), leaving the listener with the interpretative task of deciphering growls or screams into words and meanings.

5 Ecclesiastical music with Latin text comes to mind. This music has the effect of separating those who have knowledge and are in a position to preach, i.e. the clergy and the learned, from those who do not comprehend or master the Latin language.

as a shaman (Klausen, 2021; Johnsen, 2016). In connection with rune interpretation, such characterizations imply spiritual authority and privileged access to sacred knowledge. In some ways, this echos pre-modern divisions where literacy was exclusive to a privileged few (almost all of them men), and knowledge of a dead language, namely Latin, held the key to positions of social influence and ecclesiastic leadership.[6]

Giving a presentation on ancient Nordic instruments and music, Selvik explains that Wardruna has attempted to avoid listening to traditional music, so as not to be influenced by the tradition's evolution (2016); instead, it has wanted to rediscover the instruments and the runes "on their own premises" (Wardruna, 2020).[7] Nested within this idea is a sense that today's traditional music has been tainted by its development, and that a purer, more organic, or transcendental sound is available by engaging with ancient instruments and runes in an unlearned manner. This seems to overlook the composer or musician's background, training, and context. It harbours scepticism to modernity and its innovations. It also reinforces the notion of Warduna's music as "uncomposed" and transcendental. The implied claim is that this music has risen from the runes themselves, as a primordial, pure, and sacred music rooted in Nordic nature and ancient, magical wisdom. Liberated from modern influences, Wardruna's music represents, ostensibly, ancient sounds and values. To interpret the work in a contemporary context, then, would seem to neglect the basic premises of the work. Being rooted in the ancient past renders it resistant to current context-oriented critiques.

Selvik's claim, "The runes are the composer and I am the instrument" (Dorrell, 2022), achieves several things. First, as I have already discussed, it is a statement which asserts that the musical process is spiritual or religious. Thereby the music is elevated to the realm of the spiritual or divine, affording the music an aura of divinity. Second, it bypasses composer intentions, divesting the composer(s) and performer(s) of their

6 For example, John Hartley – considering Walter J. Ong's studies of orality and literacy – writes, "In the Renaissance, it was Latin, rather than literacy as such, that separated the men from the boys – and from women, domestic life, and vernacular literacy too" (Hartley, 2012, p. 214).

7 Selvik has engaged in a kind of instrument archeology, working with instrument makers to (re)construct traditional instruments, and has established himself as an authority on Norse instruments and music (Selvik, 2016).

responsibility for the music's meaning. Precisely because the statement masks any ideological or conceptual intention on the part of the creator, here defined merely as an "instrument", it places the music and its meanings beyond critique. Thus, and this is the third point, the statement invests the composition (and the statement) with "transcendent status" and significance (Lincoln, 2006, p. 5). "Discourse becomes religious," writes Bruce Lincoln, "not simply by virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority and truth" (p. 5). By referring to a non-human, transcendent composer (the runes), Selvik positions the music in the realm of the sacred: because its reference is to a transcendent authority, the only authority that can confirm or deny it, the statement is protected from contestation. The circular logic of this religious discourse effectively disarms opposition to the truth it claims and to the spirituality of the music. As Lincoln observes, "Contestation then takes place in the realm of hermeneutics" (2006, p. 6). The notion of a transcendent composer, elevated to super-human status, in some ways resembles the authoritative composer figure of the Romantics – genius, unknowable, righteous, and above critique. Paradoxically, the status of the transcendent composer is achieved by the human composer's self-effacement.

First, with references to ancient culture, through archaic language and myth, Wardruna distances its music from the contemporary context. Further, archaic languages serve to root the music in the distant past. The use of these languages contests the dominance of English-language popular music and renders Wardruna's rune music more authentically Norse or Norwegian.[8] Finally, by establishing the reference to transcendental authority and effacing human autonomy in the music's creation, Wardruna dissociates its music from any intentions of a human creator. The music is thus elevated beyond practical real-world critique. It is neither a symbol belonging to this world, nor an act of communication from human artists. The implication is that the music does not *mean* or *do*, it simply *is*, and *always has been*. The role Wardruna has claimed is that of a revelator of Norse music and spiritual wisdom. As such, the rune

8 At a time when popular music in Norway was overwhelming dominated by English lyrics and Anglo-American and British musical standards, many Norwegian black metal songs also had Norwegian lyrics. This likely contributed to the understanding of this music as distinctly Norwegian.

music may be interpreted as an ancient, and hence authentic, expression of Nordic identity.

Intentions and sticky associations

Composer intentions and motivations, while fundamentally unknowable, require some consideration. John Farrell, following Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), reconsiders literary theory's concept and treatment of the "intentional fallacy" and argues that "[authorial intention] is essential to the definition of human action" (Farrell, 2017, p. 11).[9] Intentions are as difficult to examine as experiences – their realm is the human consciousness or unconscious mind – and understanding them relies on *representations of intentions*, which are never wholly reliable. Nonetheless, intentions weigh in on interpretations of human actions and creations, along with interpreters' presumptions about those intentions. While critics may strive to liberate the text (or music) from its human creator, and their own interpretation from "intentional fallacy" (Farrell, 2017, pp. 8–10), fans and listeners tend not to do so. Composer intention is sought out or imagined, and it impacts understanding and value judgment (Farrell, 2017, pp. 10–11). Consider musicians' and musicological scholarship's obsession with composers, often long dead, and the multifarious speculations about the originators' intentions for their works, whether in terms of text (nourishing concepts such as *Urtext* and *Fassung letzter Hand*), performance and sound, ideology and politics, or status in the world. Studies of "religious music" are often based on composer intentions, as when a composer *intended* the work to be performed in a liturgical or ritual setting, or a composer used sacred text in the work. Consider, also, the obsessions of fans with artists' remarks about their artistic productions, personal lives, and worldviews. Regardless of whether they ought to, intentions matter a great deal to how music is perceived and experienced.

9 Winsatt and Beardsley in 1946 famously asserted that attempting to understand an author's intention was an "intentional fallacy," and argued that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (p. 468).

In regard to literary theory, Farrell distinguishes between varieties of authorial intention: "artistic intentions" concern the author's attempt to provide a certain experience, evoking certain emotions or reactions in the audience (2017, pp. 6, 39); "practical intentions" refer to "the ambitions, either egotistical or idealistic, that motivate the work of art" (2017, p. 6); and finally, "communicative intentions," reflect "how authors expect the audience to understand the sentences, symbols, stories, and other features that make up a literary work" (2017, p. 7). It is usually possible to know more about an author's "communicative intentions" than those of a composer, simply because writers have sentences and language as their primary medium, whereas composers do not.[10] But these varieties are useful when thinking about composers and music as well, because, as Farrell demonstrates, our presumptions and understandings of the various intentions affect how we judge a work's value and success (2017, pp. 10–11). Further, the distinctions can bring some clarity to an understanding of *authorial authority*: that is, to which degree a creator can (expect to) affect and control a work's meaning and impact. Once in the world, after all, the work enters an interconnected realm of meanings and intentions, sometimes contesting, and sometimes assimilating. By relinquishing the role of composer, Selvik distances himself from the authorial position of artistic intentions. But what about the other kinds of intentions? Selvik's utterances about the music are highly communicative, and while Wardruna continues to perform this music, it is fair to assume that it also has some practical intentions connected to it.

Selvik has attempted to protect Wardruna's music from imposed meanings and associations. In a 2017 interview he said that Wardruna wanted to get away from "the ghost of Nazism" that he feels haunts Norse cultural heritage (Lunde, 2017, my translation). The unwanted association

10 That is probably one of the reasons why the musicological tradition has tended to focus on artistic and aesthetic intentions. Another reason is the tendency to ascribe genius and super-human status to composers, who themselves sometimes claimed to not understand the intent behind their divine inspirations (Jacques, 1891, pp. 35–38). When more recent critical scholarship attempts to probe the (ultimately unknowable) intentions of composers, it can easily be accused of being speculative, ideologically motivated, overly critical, or oppressively negative.

between Wardruna and far-right ideology has been a vexation for Selvik, and he has sought to emphasize the far right's misrepresentation of Norse heritage (Ullebø, 2021; Lunde, 2017). In the wake of the German *Völkisch* movement, with Nazi appropriation and adaptation of Nordic symbols and mythology, including runes, Norse heritage seems to never fully have recovered from these (ab)uses. Today, the symbolic use of runes tends to bring up conflicting emotions and ignites debates about origin, ownership, and meaning (Lokna & Torvik, 2017). While some ideologues and groups of the far right continue to use runes as symbols of white supremacist views, many wish to reclaim Viking heritage and Norse culture from the sticky embrace of ethnonationalism. Neopagan, heathen, and other pre-Christian oriented cultural groups, for whom the runes are spiritually and symbolically significant, have attempted to distance themselves from far-right politics (Lokna & Torvik, 2017). Wardruna may be included among them. But, as Granholm observes, the relationship between the ideologically opposed groups and paganism is, historically, complicated:

> [T]he romantic birth of paganism stems from both a fascination for nature and the ideas of nation and race—features which make it more understandable how the 'pagan frame of mind' has managed to manifest in both radical right-wing racist white power movements and antiracist, environmentalist and leftist groups. (2011, p. 521)

The idea of nature and rootedness are emphasized by groups on either side of this political divide. Both leftist and radical right-wing groups envision a more organic balance between nature and humans, which they see as undermined by contemporary culture, albeit in different ways. Studying the origins of the religious force of National Socialism, Karla Poewe has observed, "The fundamental human divide, the fault line of human antagonism, is that between culture and civilization" (2006, p. 14). She writes, "[T]he word civilization had negative connotations for Germans of the 1920s and 1930s and was commonly equated with a general Europeanization and Americanization… By contrast, culture was conceived as an organism" (Poewe, 2006, p. 10). This seems to echo sentiments in Selvik's utterances, such as

> In Western society we're moved so far away from our roots and the core and pillars of what shaped our culture, so it's only natural that you'll see this counter reaction. Whether that's in historical reenactment, spiritual research or whatever, it comes in different forms. (Trendell, 2018)

That both far-right and environmental leftist groups – with their divergent views and ambitions – grasp for and lay claim to the same Norse symbols and mythology is indicative of the cultural and political forces of mythology. It also emphasizes the looseness of meanings and how these can easily stray from intentions.

Warduna's stance against cultural appropriation by far-right groups is complicated by their own history. Over the course of his musical career, Gaahl has fortified his menacing black metal image with controversial utterances, including anti-Semitic remarks (Dunn et al., 2005). Further, the former Gorgoroth band members and their music are associated with the satanic countercultural movement that caused a great deal of disruption in Norway during the 1990s. Many musicians and artists belonging to this milieu, including Gaahl, have publicly expressed antireligious sentiments and supported aggressive, sometimes destructive, activities, such as church arson (Mørk, 2011; Kahn-Harris, 2007). Black metal personas were built on public interviews, media coverage, and performances onstage and offstage. The documentaries *Satan rir media* (Satan rides the media) (Grude, 1998) and *Det svarte alvor*, (The black graveness) (Grøndahl, 1994) show how controversial views and commentary gleaned media attention and contributed to an image of Norwegian black metal as transgressive and violent. Though many musicians have attempted to dissociate from this image, it tends to stick. In today's online media environment, former statements are not easily erased. Such expressions and content are part of listening contexts and affect how music is perceived and interpreted by listeners, who negotiate meanings within their own social and cultural realities, whatever they be. These realities are continuously and rapidly changing, making it ever more difficult for artists to control the meanings of their music.

Reinventing Norwegianness with popular culture

Norwegian black metal music has had a particular place in the popular cultural imaginary when it comes to the idea of nation and national music. Media coverage and critique, with terms such as "True Norwegian Black Metal" (Beste et al., 2007) and "one of Norway's greatest cultural exports" (Fredriksen-Sylte & Brattland, 2007, my translation), have advanced the idea of this music as a distinctly Norwegian commodity. Scholarship is not immune to the idea of a music's nationality, either. As Hans Weisethaunet remarks, "Music historiography often seems to take the validity of the 'national' category for granted" (Weisethaunet, 2007, p. 170). With Norwegian black metal, the notion of nationality is enhanced by the music's special circumstances. The satanic scare that accompanied the public's awakening to black metal in Norway led to discussions of moral decline and social problems which were in turn framed as national problems (Haugsbø, 1993; Hauge, 1993). Once the idea of *Norwegian black metal* was established, it seemed only to gain traction, and artists seemed to accept or sometimes even embrace it, though they might not have intended to create it.

Wardruna's music is also thought of as Norwegian, or perhaps more precisely, Norse. Its black metal legacy might contribute somewhat to this idea. Certainly, it is in part due to its Norse references, Nordic themes, and rune composition, as discussed. As noted by Hobsbawm and Ranger, "invented traditions" and references to "a 'people's past'" are "highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the 'nation', with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest" (2003, p. 13).

Wardruna not only creates music; its music and ideas are part of other media content and popular cultural productions that emphasize heritage and identity. Wardruna and Selvik have contributed incidental music to, among other productions, the television drama *Vikings* by the Canadian History Channel and the video game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* by Ubisoft Montreal (Gjestad, 2015; Trendell, 2018; Nilsson, 2020). In *Vikings*, Wardruna's music can be heard as background music as well as diegetic music, with Selvik performing a role as shaman in the series, playing traditional instruments (Hirst & Girotti, 2016; TV Guide, 2017). Wardruna's

music lends authenticity to the series, explains Selvik (Gjestad, 2015). According to Selvik, authenticity arises from the sounds of the ancient instruments, and from an engagement with Norse history, heritage, and mythology (Gjestad, 2015). *Vikings* emphasizes historical contestation over land and borders, kingdoms and earldoms, while portraying the lives and battles of "Norwegian" Vikings (Hirst et al., 2013). The show's appeal must be attributed largely to the aesthetics and excitement it offers, but its popularity also indicates a broad curiosity and interest in these historical themes.

Popular culture both satiates such curiosity and contributes to contemporary conceptions of history, heritage, and identity. When young Norwegian black metal musicians in the early nineteen-nineties became fascinated with their Nordic heritage and Norse mythology, they may or may not have been reading the *Eddas*, but they were certainly reading J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Band names such as Gorgoroth and Burzum – both taken from Tolkien's universe – are evidence of their fascination with this epic work of popular fantasy fiction. Tolkien drew liberally from Norse sagas and mythology in the construction of his heroic legends. Similarly, today, popular culture, including music, is a significant source for religion (Granholm, 2011, p. 539), heritage and history (de Groot, 2016), thus influencing people's understanding of cultural identities. As such, popular cultural products continuously contribute to the processes of (re)inventing, revising, destabilizing, and effacing notions of identity, community, nationhood, and religion.

Conclusion

Perhaps black metal's aggression or its transgressive attitude somewhat obscured its inherent mournfulness, but it was always right there, from the primal screams and posturing to the black attire, in groups of youths dressed like a company in mourning. Norwegian black metal youth founded a musical milieu or connection that could offset the ache of loss and provide an outlet for emotional backlash against their contemporary reality. Wardruna inherited the mournfulness, along with the Norse mythologies that inspired black metal, and looked deeper into the distant past to inform their music. Discussing the popularity of Wardruna's music,

Selvik explains that "Today, a lot of people have a longing for some sort of connection to something bigger than themselves – whether that's spiritual or philosophical. […] They want some kind of communion and they find that within our performances" (Trendell, 2018). Wardruna seems to acknowledge and validate this feeling of longing by drawing attention to elements of "lost" culture or traditions, such as Norse language and spirituality. Longing thus appears elementally linked with a sense of loss of, using Hobsbawm and Ranger's term, "a 'people's past'" (2003). A loss of history, Robert Walser observes, "enables other constructions and connections to be formed" (2014, p. 160).

While transgressive Norwegian black metal drew much inspiration from pre-Christian heritage, Wardruna's engagement with runes, as well as its romanticizing rhetoric and interpretations of meaning in ancient Norse culture and mythology, go further in implying and constructing a radical worldview. A view connected with modern myths and notions of heritage and national identity. The runes function both as spiritual elements and as symbolic "sites of memory", which appear, in Nora's words "by virtue of the deritualization of our world" (Nora, 1998, p. 12). Wardruna becomes a purveyor of a kind of ritual coherence lacking in contemporary society, emphasizing a pre-modern existence where nature and humans were part of the same organism. Though Selvik claims not to be inspired by romantic ideas (Ullebø, 2021), a current of romanticism and commemoration flows not only through the music of Wardruna, but also, and perhaps more so, through the image of Norse heritage and Norwegian identity that this music stimulates through popular culture.

By elevating its rune music to the realm of the spiritual and emphasizing its authenticity, and its own authority, Wardruna has positioned itself as a conveyer of Norse identity and a reviver of a spirituality that is distinctly Nordic. Its ritualistic creation of music, and its representations of a kind of primordial and sacred communion between nature, runes and composer, imply a transcendent or super-human knowledge. Through its rune music, Wardruna claims to establish a connection to cultural roots and the distant, previously lost, past. In this lies a vision and perceived potential not only of an alternative and, according to Wardruna, more authentic music, but also of a people's spirituality and an alternative

(Nordic or Norwegian) identity. The allure of a vision of a spiritually, geographically and culturally rooted identity, and thus (more) authentic existence, is not new. What this study of Wardruna's rune music and representations hopes to help to bring to light, is how such a vision may be revived, developed, expressed, circulated, interpreted, desired, believed in, embraced, or contested through music and popular culture.

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