

As if by magic

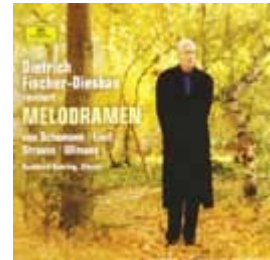
With his astonishing detail and range of colour, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau makes even the most tawdry melodrama feel gripping, says Andrew Clements

★★★★★ (Deutsche Grammophon, two CDs)

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[The Guardian](#)

The important birthdays of revered singers usually generate generous retrospectives from their record companies. There have certainly been plenty of those this year to pay tribute to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, but Deutsche Grammophon has also come up with this set of brand new recordings to mark the 80th birthday of the greatest Lieder interpreter of our time. Other singers before Fischer-Dieskau, including Hans Hotter and Jon Vickers, have turned to recitation when their performing spirit was still willing but the vocal cords had become weak. Typically, Fischer-Dieskau has done it more systematically and thoroughly put together this valuable collection of melodramas, in which the baritone delivers the texts to piano accompaniments played by Burkhard Kehring.



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These days the word "melodrama" is used to describe any kind of exaggerated emotional response, but in the 19th century it had a much narrower meaning, denoting dramatic works in passages of recitation that were either alternated with music or delivered over it. There are numerous operatic examples - in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, for instance, or in the Wolf's Glen scene in Weber's *Freischütz* - but there was also a vogue for concert works.

The substantial works here, each lasting more than 45 minutes, are Richard Strauss's setting of Tennyson's long narrative poem *Enoch Arden*, perhaps the best known of all concert melodramas, and Viktor Ullmann's version of Rilke's *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke*. The Schumann and Liszt pieces are much slighter. The three by Schumann - two to poems by Hebbel, the other based on Shelley's *The Fugitives* - are late pieces with just occasional flashes in the piano writing of the younger, more inspirational composer. The two by Liszt, with texts by Lenau and Burger, are more ambitious and more musically adventurous too.

Just as he did when singing Lieder, Fischer-Dieskau treats every particle of these texts as if they were precious metal. The range of modulation and colour he brings to his recitations is astonishing, weighing every word, giving them indelible inflections. The result, even in the tawdry longueurs of *Enoch Arden*, which is certainly not the best of Strauss, is gripping, and he achieves similar transformations in the Schumann and Liszt pieces.

But the real revelation here is Ullmann's *Cornet Rilke*, one of the 20-odd pieces he composed in the two years he was a prisoner at the Theresienstadt, before he died in Auschwitz in October 1944. As with any of these late pieces it's impossible to separate the music from the desperate circumstances in which Ullmann wrote them, and this one was composed in mid-1944 immediately after his masterpiece, the one-act opera *The Emperor of Atlantis*.

Unlike the opera, though, which was not performed until 1975, Ullmann did hear his melodrama; it was performed in the camp several times, with the composer himself playing the piano.

The music is intriguing, a synthesis of neoclassicism and the Second Viennese School (Ullmann had been a Schoenberg pupil) that is quite unlike that of any other composer and conjures up a mood of concentrated bleakness in an unsettling counterpoint with Rilke's rather ornate and almost self-consciously romantic text. Fischer-Dieskau catches that emotional flux persuasively enough to make *Cornet Rilke* seem the greatest of all these strange, neglected works.