

A Voice of the Century Past

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The Berlin-born baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau celebrated his eightieth birthday last spring, on May 28, 2005. As many readers may know, Fischer-Dieskau is the single most-recorded musician in history. He has made an estimated one thousand recordings (complete LPS and CDS) of music from Bach to Zemlinsky, during a half-century career which stretched from the 1945 through the 1995. By comparison, the second-most recorded musician of all time, with around seven hundred records, is the omnipresent Spanish tenor Placido Domingo.

Fischer-Dieskau has made so many recordings that in some future age, a music researcher may be excused for believing that "Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau" is merely a generic term for baritone or singer. The sonorously triple-barreled name appears on albums of works by Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, Luigi Dallapiccola, Hans Werner Henze, Ernst Kreiik, Witold Lutoslawski, Igor Stravinsky, Michael Tippett, and many others. That who's who of modern composers wrote new works premiered by Fischer-Dieskau. For recording music by dead white men, no one can or is ever likely to rival Fischer-Dieskau. A completist with encyclopedic energy, he has made permanent versions of the works of nearly every major composer and dozens of minor ones.

How did this singer manage a repertory of this amazing breadth and volume? His voice was a pliant, finely textured baritone, surprising in its volume and able to descend well into the bass range. In the earlier years of his career, the lower notes could sound like those reached by a young singer stretching for added gravity. The higher notes are often floated softly, but with enough breath control to reach the back of an auditorium. Critics have written misleadingly about the drying out of Fischer-Dieskau's voice over the years, implying that his earliest recordings are uniformly his best. Although his voice may sound leathery in recordings as early as the 1978, his artistry remained intact until he ceased performing.

A REFUGEE IN MUSIC

According to Hans A. Neunzig's hagiographie but indispensable Dietrich FischerDieskau. Eine Biographie (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995; in English, Amadeus Press, 2003), the singer's father was Albert Fischer-Dieskau (1865-1937), a classical scholar and secondary school principal. The elder Fischer-Dieskau wrote operettas in his spare time, an avocation which reportedly made his son disdain the genre of light music for much of his career. Young Fischer-Dieskau shared a bedroom with a handicapped brother whose epileptic seizures woke him at night. Bombarded with the blandishments of the Hitler Youth program in his early years, the artist sought refuge in the world of books, music, and the visual arts. He began vocal studies at age sixteen. In 1943 he was drafted into the Nazi Wehrmacht, and two years later became a prisoner of war in Italy, where he gave lieder recitals for fellow prisoners.

When he returned home in 1947, Fischer-Dieskau found that his older brother had been killed along with thousands of others in Hitler's eugenics plan for the Aryan race. With Berlin still in disarray, the young singer began almost at once to sing heavy operatic roles in Verdi's Don Carlos and Wagner's Tannhauser. He also gave recitals, beginning with a 1948 Radio Berlin broadcast of Schubert's song cycle Die Winterreise. Soon he met the British pianist Gerald Moore, the longtime in-house accompanist for EMI records. With Moore, Fischer-Dieskau would go on to record nearly every song by Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf, as well as hundreds by Brahms, Strauss, Loewe, and Beethoven. In recording orchestral songs he was just as prolific. What accounts for a mastery achieved so early?

Just watch a DVD of his live performance from 1960 of Mahler's "Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen" (Songs of a Wayfarer, EMI). In the performance recorded for French television, Fischer-Dieskau at thirty-five is tall and long-legged, with a flat-faced chubbiness reminiscent of the actor Tim Robbins. The baritone succeeds in capturing every nuance of language and music in the manic-depressive emotional world of Mahler, expressing the alternating joys and miseries of love. In close-up, the singer's face places itself precisely in position to emit each separate note. Fischer-Dieskau's artistry was always rational, deliberate, and calculated to a fare-thee-well. Even his bow at the end of the performance is perfectly calibrated to the occasion. Although the performance took place in Paris under the Polish conductor Paul Kletzki, the orchestra is all Japanese, Tokyo's NHK Symphony. When

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the singer bows to them, it is with exquisite Asian-style politeness, worthy of Toshiro Mifune in a samurai epic.

Suvi Raj Grubb, an EMI record producer, observed in 1986 in *Music-Makers on Record* that Fischer-Dieskau's voice is:

difficult to balance because of its enormous dynamic range, much greater than that of any other singer I have recorded. No microphone can comfortably accommodate this range of dynamics; at close quarters even the ear cannot do so. We have had to compress it; in the best Fischer-Dieskau recordings this compression has been kept down to a minimum, and has been successfully camouflaged by the engineer's anticipating extremes of dynamics and compensating for them in advance. But once these initial hurdles have been negotiated the recording proceeds fast, as Fischer-Dieskau works very fast. He comes to recordings well rehearsed. He sings a song through once, and repeats any section he feels needs to be improved; it is very rarely that he thinks it necessary to sing a song through a second time in full.

The extremes of dynamics, from loud to soft tones, are part of what made a Fischer-Dieskau concert unique. Sudden drops in volume always challenged the audience to listen more and more closely to the performance. The need to pay intense attention is one of the principal elements of a lieder recital. Unlike opera, classical song ideally demands that the audience be familiar with the text of the poem that has been set to music. Real devotees know by heart the classic works of the repertory, by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and others.

As obsessed with his material as the most ardent fan, this singer is an aristocratic performer, one who might be described as a Berlin Mandarin. That aspect of his presentation emerges in his sometimes world-weary tone in songs like "Allerseelen" (All Souls' Day) by Richard Strauss. When he sings, "Stell' auf den Tisch die duftenden Reseden/ Die letzten roten Aestern trag herbei" (Put the fragrant mignonettes on the table/ Bring the last red asters inside), it sounds like he is giving haughty orders to a housemaid, rather than speaking to his beloved. The natural hauteur and exalted tone are understandable in Fischer-Dieskau, who readily assumes for himself the mantle of all Western culture. Once during a rehearsal of a work by Paul Hindemith conducted by the composer, Hindemith leaned over to Fischer-Dieskau and exclaimed, "You're not a singer, you're a bard!"

In another incident, after a 1965 concert of the songs of Hugo Wolf, the Romanian-born German poet Paul Celan appeared backstage. Celan shook his head disbelievingly in response to the baritone's high-flown performance of "Gesang Weylas" (Weyla's Song), a piece which speaks of an impossibly ideal world as imagined by the German

Romantic poet Eduard Mörike (1804-75):

Du bist Orplid, mein Land!
Das ferne leuchtet. . .
Vor deiner Gottheit beugen
Sich Könige, die deine Wärter sind.

(You are Orplid, my land!
distantly gleaming . . .
To your godliness Kings
bow, as your footmen.)

This vision represents an obviously unattainable ideal to most modern listeners, especially Celan. But in some ways Fischer-Dieskau has spent his adult life in what might be seen as a similarly exalted artistic kingdom of Orplid. He has single-mindedly assimilated the Romantic ethos. As a musically erudite and intellectually complex performer, the singer is generally at his best in multifaceted music. Works by Mahler, Strauss, and Wolf, marked by multiple levels of self-awareness and sophistication, suit him best. Yet Fischer-Dieskau can also triumph in more straightforward songs by Schubert, for example, if the main subject is the Romantic cultural ideal. Schubert's "Das Lied im Grünen" (The Song in Greenery), written in 1827, declares:

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O gerne im Grünen
Bin ich schon als Knabe und Jüngling gewesen
Und habe gelernt und geschrieben, gelesen
Im Horaz und Plato, dann Wieland und Kant.

(O glad was I in greenery
as a boy and youth
to study and write
while reading Horace and Plato, then Wieland and Kant.)

Rare is the baritone-let alone the tenor-who can convince an audience that he has in fact read Horace, Plato, Wieland, and Kant. As for Fischer-Dieskau, he gives the impression that he probably has their volumes in his dressing room backstage. After all, this highly cultivated singer has himself written studious, if derivative and overly portentous, volumes on subjects ranging from Schubert, Schumann, and Wagner to Nietzsche. His lifelong ethos is summed up by that phrase from "Das Lied im Grünen": "gelernt und geschrieben, gelesen"

ANCILLARY ARTS

Fischer-Dieskau's tentacular grip on the arts does not stop with the printed page; he is also an accomplished painter, the creator of intriguingly expressionist portraits of the composers Ravel, Bruckner, and Hindemith, among others. In these works, the musicians are depicted with burning eyes, surrounded by streams of wormlike confetti which may represent the melodies flying out of their minds. The most interesting of these canvases are emotionally authentic, deserving notice as artworks in their own right. Typically professional with his art as with everything else, Fischer-Dieskau has had exhibitions of his paintings in Germany, Austria, France, and Japan. The Galerie Georg Jaud, located in the Bavarian Alpine town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, a mere stone's throw from Oberammergau, dedicates a substantial portion of its website to the singer's paintings [www.galerie-jaud.de]. The images appearing there include a recent monumental portrait of his fourth wife, the gifted dramatic soprano Julia Varady, garbed in a glaring red gown.

Yet all of Fischer-Dieskau's artwork is a mere accessory to his music making (which also includes orchestral conducting and narrating), only part of his adamant urge for ultimate self-expression. He scales artistic Matterhorns because they are there. Benjamin Britten, a composer with whom he worked closely, died before writing an operatic adaptation of King Lear, which Fischer-Dieskau had requested. The baritone had his accompanist Aribert Reimann—a far less talented composer—undertake to write a Lear for him, which was subsequently staged and recorded. For this singer, it is better to have sung Lear by a minor composer than not to have accomplished that at all.

His determination extends to far less important matters. I last met Fischer-Dieskau about a decade ago in Stuttgart, where it fell to me to interview him for an American newsweekly. We spoke for an hour, briskly, like people who had much to get done and no time to waste. When I mentioned musicians he had worked with, he would sum each one up concisely, such as when he dismissed Herta Klust, the pianist on some of his early recordings: "She was deaf in one ear!" When the conversation was concluded, Fischer-Dieskau dismissed me with a friendly but determined tap of his index finger on my chest, much like a commanding officer sending a cadet off to fight in the culture wars. When the interview duly appeared, occupying a full page of a publication not known for its extensive cultural coverage, Fischer-Dieskau made it known through his assistant that he had hoped for more space than that.

On that occasion, Fischer-Dieskau was in Stuttgart to teach master classes in singing at the Hugo-Wolf-Akademie. He arrived heavily laden with two suitcases containing musical scores, looking a bit like Willy Loman in a Prussian production of Death of a Salesman. Although not an overtly sadistic teacher like his elder colleague the soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Fischer-Dieskau had little patience with the limitations of his students. He asked a dumpy, dull tenor to produce more onstage "charm" instantaneously, which proved impossible for that hapless young performer.

During our interview, he explained that recordings are like "snapshots" of a given day's singing, which is why he felt that it was natural to record the same works repeatedly. This may rationalize why there

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are over a dozen versions available of Fischer-Dieskau performing Schubert's Winterreise. An entirely frank answer would also need to recognize the singer's endless appetite for new challenges. His career included operatic roles which were not ideal for him, like Verdi's Rigoletto. In *Reverberations* (Fromm International, 1989), his volume of memoirs written in the pompous tone of a great explorer or statesman, the singer mentions that during one visit to Rome, a hotel bellboy called him "the greatest Rigoletto in the world." That hopes of a gratuity, rather than any particular musical acumen, might have prompted this remark goes unnoticed by the self-serious autobiographer.

Fischer-Dieskau's eye on new challenges has not always taken human limits into account. In late 1992 he performed at a Munich concert in honor of the conductor Wolfgang Sawallisch, who was leaving the Munich Opera for a new post leading the Philadelphia Orchestra. Fischer-Dieskau chose to sing a challenging aria from one of his operatic roles, Verdi's Falstaff. By then sixty-seven, the baritone did not have one of his best nights vocally on that occasion. Also on the program that evening was the thirty-seven-year-old American baritone Thomas Hampson. Listening to what a younger colleague could produce in comparison with his own relatively uninspired performance, Fischer-Dieskau abruptly decided to retire from singing, canceling a series of planned performances.

THE VALUE OF ACCOMPANISTS

A number of colleagues, included Sawallisch, felt that the singer's retirement was premature. For the last thirteen years of his career, Fischer-Dieskau had been giving hundreds of concerts with his best regular accompanist ever, the German pianist Hartmut Höll. A spiky and deeply emotional pianist, Höll is a consummate practitioner of the art of vocal accompaniment, as displayed in dozens of superb CDs of lieder on the Capriccio label with his then-wife, the Japanese-born mezzo-soprano Mitsuko Shirai.

Classical songs are written for piano as well as for voice, and the combination of the two makes a full artistic statement. Höll created an intellectual and emotional balance that Fischer-Dieskau had not enjoyed since his performances with his two other best accompanists on record, Benjamin Britten and the Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter. Britten, Richter, and Höll all shared a profound musical understanding with the singer, an expression of intense emotional intimacy with the music and poetry. Perhaps not coincidentally, like Höll, Richter also performed for years with his life partner, the soprano Nina Dorliak, as Britten famously did with his lifelong companion, the tenor Peter Pears. This kind of emotional intimacy and familiarity of work in common can create great results, although it must be said that there are also a number of wretched husband-and-wife teams who record lieder.

With other accompanists, Fischer-Dieskau had a less uniformly rewarding rapport. Gerald Moore could be chilly and perfunctory, offering the musical equivalent of a clipped British accent; the Viennese pianist Jorg Demus, although inhabiting Fischer-Dieskau's esthetic universe as the son of the great Byzantine art historian Otto Demus, often sounded faded and self-effacing; Alfred Brendel and Wolfgang Sawallisch, both frequent accompanists, could be too lumpy and heavy-fingered; Vladimir Horowitz, cited in almost every survey as one of Fischer-Dieskau's accompanists, actually performed only once with the baritone, at a 1976 Carnegie Hall gala performance of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* that was a disaster, as the singer's memoirs admit.

By the 1985, Deutsche Grammophon, Fischer-Dieskau's longtime record company, was no longer interested in producing new recordings with him. Undeterred, he began cutting albums for smaller labels like Claves, Capriccio, Orfeo, and many others. Some of these late efforts are excellent, especially when Hartmut Höll is involved (e.g., performances of Wolf, Weber, and Mendelssohn, all on Claves). Despite his many years of work with the company, Deutsche Grammophon has persistently and inexplicably shown itself to be largely clueless about what to do with Fischer-Dieskau. A twentyone-CD commemorative set, the Fischer-Dieskau Edition, issued on his seventieth birthday, was a surprising dud. It included some of the singer's uneasiest recordings, like his disc of songs by Charles Ives in impossibly Teutonic English, as well as some operatic arias recorded late in his career. Similarly, an eightieth birthday DVD from Deutsche Grammophon, *The Art of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau*, is a dog's breakfast of odd filmed performances, like a bit of Puccini sung in German, or a snippet of an awkwardly lip-synched film of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Deutsche Grammophon has also issued a new CD set of the singer reciting "melodramas" by Schumann, Strauss, and Liszt for piano and spoken word, in which the accompanying pianist is the relatively weak and inexperienced Burkhard Kehring.

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Far more emblematic and impressive is an eleven-CD set produced by Orfeo, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau: *Die Salzburger liederabende 1956-1965*. With decent sound quality for an historical reissue, this set offers radio broadcasts of complete recitals, which display in a compelling way the art of programming, how one song offsets another in concert. This art, absent from Fischer-Dieskau's recordings of complete works by composers, is in fact one of the most refined aspects of lieder performance, which calls for mixing and matching songs by different composers like the dishes and wines on a chef's menu. With typical high seriousness, Fischer-Dieskau favored building recitals around a single composer, but the arrangement of songs nonetheless reveals a sense of artistic structure absent in the CD box sets, which are ordered chronologically.

In the Salzburg recitals, the accompanist is again Gerald Moore, slightly more motivated than in some of the pair's studio recordings, but still showing less of the artistry evident in Fischer-Dieskau's finest partners. The contrast becomes clear when we listen to the Orfeo DOr recordings of a live Munich recital from 1977 of Hugo Wolf's *Goethe-Lieder*, in which the singer is accompanied by Sviatoslav Richter; a Schubert recital by the pair from that same year; and a 1970 Salzburg Festival Brahms recital by Fischer-Dieskau and Richter. In all of these performances, Richter has an absolute command of the notes, playing with the vigor and command of a composer playing his own orchestral score on the piano, yet he also listens intently to the singer and varies his performance accordingly- a rare skill, which Britten and Höll display as well.

Britten's work with Fischer-Dieskau is available in a series of performances from the composer's Aldeburgh Festival. A set of Schubert songs from 1972, available as a BBC recording, is an exquisitely symbiotic occasion. Fully appreciating the grandeur of Hartmut Höll's contribution to the singer's extraordinary artistry is a somewhat more difficult task. A 1991 Schubert recital from Nuremberg by Fischer-Dieskau and Höll has yet to be issued on DVD. It is available, though, as the second videocassette of an adulatory documentary, *Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau: Autumn Journey*, issued by Warner Music Vision. The film is by Bruno Monsaingeon, the Frenchman who also lavished filmic adoration on Glenn Gould and Sviatoslav Richter.

Monsaingeon makes some extreme assertions in his film, such as the declaration that "disliking Fischer-Dieskau is tantamount to disliking Michelangelo or Proust." But the concert performance, quite late in the singer's career, shows how undiluted stage presence and ability to sing a varied program are not inevitably dependent on vocal freshness per se. More snippets of Fischer-Dieskau and Höll may be glimpsed on a recent DVD release by TDK DVUS, which features a 1991 performance of Schubert's song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* (The Maid of the Mill), in which the accompanist is the gifted Hungarian pianist Andras Schiff. Fortunately, a bonus section of this DVD offers some discreet- and unidentified-appearances by Höll from mid- 1980s recitals with Fischer-Dieskau. The difference is immediately apparent between Schiff, a splendid pianist with strong musical ideas of his own-ideas that the singer is obliged to keep up with-and Höll, an equally astute musician who is pliant and attentive to the aging singer's every inflection without being in the least servile or excessively accommodating.

FAREWELL, FAREWELL

Over the years, Fischer-Dieskau often ended a series of encores after a recital program with the song "Abschied" (Departure)-from Schubert's *Schwanengesang*-with its repeated farewells: "Ade! du muntre, dufröhliche Stadt, ade!" (Farewell, lively, merry town, farewell!). This manner of signaling that a recital is over may seem over-literal, but sometimes it was necessary to dismiss an audience still clamoring for encores. I recall a 1975 Carnegie Hall recital of Schubert songs in which people were shouting out repeated requests for the popular lied "An die Musik"; Fischer-Dieskau politely demurred and ended the recital without performing this familiar song.

His 1991 CD of songs by Weber (issued by Claves) starts with the song "Meine lieder, meine Sänge," which declares:

My lieder, my songs
are consecrated to this instant
their melodies and chords

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fade as time passes.
Great singers have died
and are mentioned no more
What madness it is that I strive
for fame in this world below.

It is most unlikely that there will come a time when Fischer-Dieskau is "mentioned no more." According to ArkivMusic.com, a website listing currently available CDs, almost three hundred of this singer's recordings are still available, with new historical items and other reprints appearing regularly. Over a dozen years after his retirement, he is still the source of more CDS annually than many active musicians. More significantly, he has insured that he can never be forgotten in the history of Western music performance because he has made permanently accessible a precious repertory of works.

To choose a single quintessential recording by this artist is impossible, but one song by Hugo Wolf may be the most endearing: "Nun lass uns Frieden schliessen, liebstes Leben" (Now let's make peace, love of my life) is part of Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch* (Italian Song Book; see recommended recordings below), a setting of poems by his friend Paul Heyse (1830-1914). A Berlin-born philologist who won the 1910 Nobel Prize for Literature, Heyse translated the song from its original Italian version, "Facciam Iapace, caro bene mio," as published in a collection that appeared in Venice in 1841. It is a gentle plea for reconciliation, tender without being wheedling. Wolf's softly rocking melody suggests that the reticent beloved is being cradled in the arms of the importunate lover.

In this plea for domestic peace, Fischer-Dieskau's intimate singing expresses an immensely subtle emotional intelligence as he offers to take the first step toward reconciliation: "Wenn du nicht willst, will ich mich dir ergeben;/ Wie könnten wir uns auf den Tod bekriegen?" (If you are not willing, I will yield to you;/ how could we fight a war to the death?). The song goes on to refer with tender irony to kings, princes, and soldiers who manage to find it within themselves to make peace; its conclusion is an ardently direct appeal to the estranged lover's heart: "Meinst du, daß, was so großen Herrn gelingt,/ Ein Paar zufriedner Herzen nicht vollbringt?" (Do you mean that what such great men manage,/ A couple of satisfied hearts might not accomplish?). The singer extends the song's last floated syllable with inquiring, seductive grace.

Finding simplicity within complexity, using masterful breath control to make an emotional point, Fischer-Dieskau is uniquely plausible in this lied. Steel-hearted listeners who remain stubbornly unaffected by his performance may find any one of the remarkable recordings listed below more to their taste.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING:

For the listener curious to experience some representative examples of Fischer-Dieskau's extraordinary artistry, here are some suggestions, ordered chronologically by recording date. Recordings already mentioned in this essay (with the exception of the Wolf song described in the previous paragraph) are not included among these top twenty-six. Caveat emptor: some of the releases do not include English translations of the song texts in the CD booklets. Philip L. Miller's *The Ring of Words: An Anthology of Song Texts* (Norton) or the singer's own *The Fischer-Dieskau Book of Lieder* (Limelight) are indispensable companion reference works for listeners who do not know German.

1) 1951: WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER-SALZBURG ORCHESTRAL CONCERTS 1949-1954.

Orfeo D'or 409048 (distributed by Qualiton Imports; www.qualiton.com)

This 1951 performance of Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra shows the singer at his early best.

2) 1951-8: SCHUBERT SONGS.

EMI Great Recordings of the Century 67559 (www.emiclassics.com)

Fischer-Dieskau performs Schubert's "Erlkönig" "Ständchen" "Nacht und Träume" and "Du bist die Ruh" with vocal freshness that makes up for Gerald Moore's cool pianism.

3) 1952: WAGNER: TRISTAN UND ISOLDE.

EMI Classics 85873 (www.emiclassics.com)

Conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, this is the performance in which Fischer-Dieskau sings the role of

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Kurwenal with heft, more plausibly than on a CD set led by Carlos Kleiber thirty years later.

4) 1952-3: DIETRICH FISCHER-DIESKAU SINGS BACH & BRAHMS.

Profil Edition Gunter Hänssler PH5013

In two solo Bach cantatas conducted by Karl Ristenpart, "Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen" (no. 56) and "Ich habe genug" (no. 82), the artist sings most mellifluously.

5) 1952: PFITZNER: PALESTRINA.

Myto Records 21060 (distributed by Qualiton Imports; www.qualiton.com)

This live radio recording also features the bass Gottlob Frick, the tenor Julius Patzak, and the baritone Hans Hotter.

6) 1954: BACH: SAINT MATTHEW PASSION.

EMI Classics 65509 (www.emiclassics.com)

The singer is an aptly transcendent Jesus in this rendition conducted by Furtwängler, more moving than in a 1949 recording led by Fritz Lehmann (Music & Arts CD 1091).

7) 1955: BRAHMS: A GERMAN REQUIEM.

EMI Classics 64705 (www.emiclassics.com)

Alongside the splendid soprano Elisabeth Grümmer and conducted by a fine Brahmsian Rudolf Kempe, Fischer-Dieskau is exceptionally eloquent in this choral work.

8) 1955: WAGNER: TANNHÄUSER.

Orfeo D'or 643043 (distributed by Qualiton Imports; www.qualiton.com)

A Bayreuth Festival live performance offers conductor André Cluytens and a solid cast alongside Fischer-Dieskau as Wolfram, one of his most plausible Wagnerian roles.

9) 1957: BRAHMS: A GERMAN REQUIEM.

EMI Classics 66879 (www.emiclassics.com)

Another Brahms Requiem; this one boasts the delectable soprano Lisa della Casa and preternaturally fluid conducting by Herbert von Karajan.

10) 1957: BEETHOVEN: FIDELIO.

Deutsche Grammophon DG 453106 (www.deutschegrammophon.com)

Possibly Fischer-Dieskau's finest operatic recording, as the hysterical villain Don Pizarro, conducted dynamically by the Hungarian maestro Ferenc Fricsay.

11) 1957-8: STRAUSS: CAPRICCIO.

EMI Great Recordings of the Century 67391 (www.emiclassics.com)

The high-flying sophisticated verbal world of Richard Strauss's late opera suits the singer perfectly in this fine recording.

12) 1957-9: WOLF: MÖRIKE LIEDER.

EMI CMS 7 6356.3 2 (www.emiclassics.com)

Despite the chilliness of Gerald Moore's accompaniment, Fischer-Dieskau in his youthful vocal prime possessed the complex artistry needed for these supreme creations by Hugo Wolf.

13) 1958: WOLF: ITALIAN SONGBOOK.

Orfeo D'Or 220901 (distributed by Qualiton Imports; www.qualiton.com)

The tender melodies of Wolf are knowingly rendered by Irmgard Seefried and Fischer-Dieskau, accompanied by Erik Werba, in this live 1958 performance from Salzburg.

14) 1959: MAHLER: SONG OF THE EARTH.

EMI Classics 69665 (www.emiclassics.com)

The Polish conductor Paul Kletzki is a convincing Mahlerian, and the singer is in his element here, rhythmically strong and persuasive.

15) 1963: BRITTEN: WAR REQUIEM.

Decca 414383 (www.cieccaclassics.com)

Written for Fischer-Dieskau and Peter Pears, who both perform authoritatively, despite the unseemly yowls of the Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. Britten himself conducts.

16) 1967: BARBER: DOVER BEACH.

CBS Masterworks 46727 (www.sonybmgmasterworks.com)

Also written for Fischer-Dieskau, this setting of Matthew Arnold's bitter ode is astringently performed with the Juilliard String Quartet.

17) 1968: HINDEMITH: CARDILLAC.

Opera D'oro 1427 (distributed by Allegro; www.allegro-music.com)

One of the singer's most intense roles, as a possessive, murderous goldsmith who gets his comeuppance in seventeenth-century Paris.

18) 1968: MENDELSSOHN: ELIJAH.

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EMI Classics 86257 (www.emiclassics.com)

A charming multinational cast in Mendelssohn's oratorio led by Rafaël Frühbeck de Burgos with Fischer-Dieskau, Nicolai Gedda, and Gwyneth Jones.

19) 1968: BERNSTEIN CENTURY-MAHLER: LIEDER.

Sony Classical 61847 (www.sonybmgmasterworks.com)

In this rendering, with Leonard Bernstein at the piano, Mahler's songs are emotionally wrenching, although Bernstein's approach seems mannered and extreme compared to that of other Mahlerians.

20) 1970: GREAT PERFORMERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY-FISCHER-DIESKAU

BBC Legends 4035 (dist. by Koch International; www.kochentertainment.com)

Mahler songs from a live recital in London's Royal Festival Hall, with the accompanist Karl Engel; more straightforward and unadorned than the version with Bernstein.

21) 1971: HUMPERDINCK: HANSELUND GRETEL.

RCA Victor Red Seal 25281 (www.bmgclassics.com)

The role of Peter, broom-maker and father of Hansel and Gretel, is rarely taken as seriously-both musically and dramatically-as it is by Fischer-Dieskau in this performance. Kurt Eichhorn conducts.

22) 1983: ROMANTIC LIEDER.

Orfeo 153861 (distributed by Qualiton Imports; www.qualiton.com)

Lesser-known composers like Neukomm, Reissiger, Herrmami, and Kraussold, authoritatively rendered by Fischer-Dieskau and Hartmut Höll.

23) 1985: THE ESSENTIAL LUTOSLAWSKI.

Philips Duo 464043 (www.deccaclassics.com)

The Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski wrote "Les espaces du sommeil" an impressionistic work for voice and orchestra, for Fischer-Dieskau; the composer and singer join to perform it here.

24) 1986: OTHMAR SCHOECK: UNDER THE STARS -SONG CYCLE TO POEMS BY GOTTFRIED KELLER.

Claves CD 50-8606 (www.claves.ch)

The Swiss composer Schoeck wrote this romantic song cycle during World War II. Fischer-Dieskau and his accompanist Hartmut Holl capture the range of moods expressed by these pieces.

25) 1990: BRAHMS: LIEDER.

Bayer Records 100006 (www.bayermusicgroup.de)

Songs sensitively interpreted by Fischer-Dieskau and Hartmut Höll, ranging from less familiar works to the well-known Feldeinsamkeit and Wie bist du meine Königin.

26) 1993: OTHMAR SCHOECK: DAS HOLDE BESCHEIDEN (SWEET ACCEPTANCE).

Claves CD 50-9308/9 (www.claves.ch)

Alongside the mezzo-soprano Mitsuko Shirai and Hartmut Höll, Fischer-Dieskau offers an imaginative rendering of Schoeck's songs addressed to questions concerning God, nature, and metaphysics.

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