

Still busy at 80, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's legacy to the world of music is assured. But, the baritone tells **Shirley Apthorp**, he has real fears for what lies around the corner for music itself

KING FISCHER

With an apologetic wince, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau proffers his left hand in welcome. Recently he fell, he explains, and the recovery process has been slow. The injuries do not stop him from being a gracious host, taking my coat and pouring tea, although the actions cause him pain. There's no self-pity, only annoyance at unaccustomed limitations.

At 80, Fischer-Dieskau is fit enough to be thoroughly irked by such an impediment. He looks at least 15 years younger, still a towering figure exuding strength and energy. And he is a busy man with his 80th birthday bringing a gruelling schedule. On top of his media engagements, he has scores to study: Schubert's first and fifth symphonies plus

exaltation at the prospect of turning 80. The thought of having so little time left saddens him, he says, and looking back, he sees things he would do differently, perhaps better, given a second chance.

Surprising revelations from such an artistic giant, a man whose name is synonymous with Lieder singing in the second half of the 20th century, a singer whose musical and historical greatness is beyond dispute. Fischer-Dieskau is a living legend, and he casts a long shadow.

'I am tall enough,' he smiles wryly, 'so my shadow must be long. I only hope that it is long enough to reach on beyond my death, at least a bit.' He may be famous, he concedes, but he was never a star: "Star" is a word that I've always avoided. A star, for me, is artificially created. Film stars are the product of incredible

and went on to hear a great deal more. For me, that is the greatest thing. Then you know that there was a point.'

ENTIRELY WRONG?

Like many of his generation, Fischer-Dieskau prizes self-criticism as a fundamental virtue. 'Naturally I spent my time working on myself. At the same time I followed what was required of me [by others], though sometimes there were trends which seemed to indicate a kind of decline. For instance, the mania for anthologising. To record all of Schubert's songs – does it really do Schubert a good turn to put all his strong and weak works next to one another on a disc? I was talked into doing it, and in the end I learned something from every piece. From Schubert, always. But from a younger composer, Schreker or Zemlinsky for instance, I would have learned less. You could say that Schubert was a better composer, or had a more direct connection to the source of music.'

Is there such a thing? 'Yes. It exists. Defining it is difficult. In Schubert's case I'd call it an absolutely natural relationship with music. He had powers of melodic invention which others could only approach with tremendous effort. How Beethoven fought for his melodies! He had to struggle to get even one line of a song the way he wanted it. Schubert would think of things in the night, or even while he was busy playing other music. Brahms was similar.'

Though Fischer-Dieskau could trace his career through the number of world premieres that he has sung, and neglected repertoire that he has championed, from Hindemith, Arthur Honegger and Gottfried von Einem to Hans Werner Henze and Benjamin Britten, ▶

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Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*. There will also be master-classes and he is looking at pieces by Czech composer Viktor Ullmann. His literary work also continues, as will his painting, as soon as his hand recovers. Of course, he has no time for injuries. Not that his vexation ever impinges on his good manners. Fischer-Dieskau is courteous to a fault, well-spoken, attentive yet introverted, the nuances of his conversation betraying a level of sensitivity at odds with his self-assurance. Famously averse to parties, and an avowed enemy of small talk, he expresses little

propaganda campaigns – placards, advertising, huge pictures and so on. That kind of power has nothing to do with real art. It's about consumerism, and money.'

So how does he perceive his own place, then, in the history of the 20th century? 'There were others who worked in this direction at the same time. It wasn't only me,' he tempers. 'We tried to deepen people's understanding of what they heard. Over time, a great many people have written to me to say that my singing brought them to music. They heard me sing, and began to approach music with curiosity,



ON STAGE (from left): As Verdi's Falstaff; Jokanaan in Strauss's *Salome* (1952); Amfortas in *Parsifal* (1973); as Reimann's *Lear* (1978); in Puccini's *Il Tabarro* (1973)

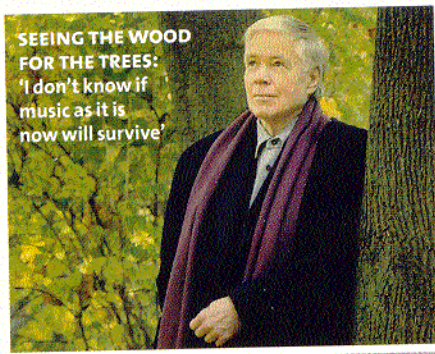
he is critical of what he sees as a trend on the part of contemporary composers to distance themselves from tradition.

'Most of the new works I performed are old-fashioned by now. I don't believe that many of them will be still performed in 80 years time. There are exceptions. Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, his *Blake Songs* or the *Cantata Misericordium* will of course still be performed. But it is also music which was not subject to fashions or modernism as such. So much new music today is applauded politely because it is difficult to perform. But that's not really a goal worth striving for.'

Certainly Fischer-Dieskau himself will be remembered as much for the extraordinary breadth of his repertoire ('this was largely the product of curiosity') as for his insistence on perfect diction. The latter, though, is something that has polarised listeners: 'If you really sing clearly today, it is criticised as over-intellectualism. It's completely insane.' Among the other changes he has witnessed in the course of his career, he says, are a growing gulf between performers and their listeners and improving technical standards of instrumental playing that are partnered by a general tendency towards soulless reproduction. 'When I began to perform, you would sometimes experience concerts where performers and listeners were united by what Furtwängler called a bond of love. In other words, the listener becomes so involved that a separation is no longer possible. The public is one being which shares the same experience. That doesn't happen any more. Listening has become more cynical, more aloof, more comparative. People aren't really willing to receive the music. Orchestral standards have improved incredibly, but external perfection cannot replace inner life – neither for the performers nor for the public.'

WARNING FOR THE FUTURE

Fischer-Dieskau's 80th birthday coincides with the German commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, discussed in a storm of media features and further emphasized by Berlin's new memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe. Fischer-Dieskau has enough reasons



to remember the war. His middle brother Martin, who had both physical and intellectual disabilities, fell victim to the Nazi euthanasia programme. He himself was conscripted in 1943, sent to the Russian front, and spent two years in an American prison camp. Today, he says, he finds it difficult to imagine it: 'Nobody today can really imagine what the war was like. Even I can't. I was forced to experience the war in full, and it was not worth remembering. It is a human trait to suppress negative memories. What remains are a couple of friendships, or a particular human encounter – and that's a lot.'

'At the same time, we must not forget. Most importantly, we must not forget our guilt. Whether the guilt is carried by those now living or earlier generations plays no role. The responsibility should be inherited, and with it, the sense of that for which one should have been responsible. It is difficult to deal with, but it is essential that people think about it.'

Does he worry that it could happen again? 'Yes. Especially when certain parts of the earth build themselves up to a level of power, financially and in other senses, to a point of domination. Terrible things will happen. That is quite clear.'

It is a context in which he can find little optimism for the future of his art-form. 'I don't want to appear so resigned, but frankly, I don't know if music as it is now will survive. One day we will lose our orchestral culture completely. And opera, too. Other things will replace them. Television is the medium of today, and it's more important to people than what happens in an elitist opera house. As long as schools do not educate children to appreciate opera, it will remain an elitist artform. They need to be musically prepared,

and to be able to tell the difference between what is good and what is not so good, what works and what doesn't.

'Children have to be raised not just to hear pop, and not just to let indiscriminate sounds from the media wash over them all day. Whoever sings must begin singing at the age of three, from dawn till dusk, constantly, always testing what the voice can do. You have to imitate everything you hear, to mimic every voice, the way we used to parody Hitler and Goebbels, speaking from the throat – and we enjoyed ourselves tremendously doing so!'

There is a glint of amusement. He is teasing, but only a little. 'I want to be positive. I do have hope. "Hope is my life" – that's the title of a cantata by Telemann. Or as Busoni's Doctor Faustus says, "The only lasting thing is the forward gaze".'

Fischer-Dieskau's own gaze falters as he rises from his chair, but he is determined not to give in to mere affliction. On the way out, he offers his right hand. He has better things to do with his time than wait for bones to knit. ■

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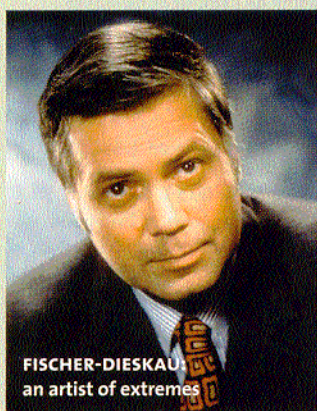
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As DG's 80th birthday box of (mainly) early recordings reminds us, the range of Fischer-Dieskau's accomplishment was protean. Beside his omnivorous surveys of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf, he unearthed worthwhile forgotten songs by figures such as Reichardt, Zelter and Meyerbeer, all duly represented here. He also relished the challenge of new music. His 1963 recording of Frank Martin's magnificent *Jedermann Monologues* is unrivalled in its characteristic fusion of intellectual understanding with overwhelming emotional intensity; and he conveys all the mingled anguish, exuberance and sensual warmth of the *Five Neapolitan Songs* which Henze wrote for him in 1956.

The mellow, rounded beauty of the young Fischer-Dieskau's voice, and his ethereal *mezza voce*, are movingly heard in his 1957 recordings, both with Jörg Demus, of *Dichterliebe* and Brahms's then rare *Die schöne Magelone* cycle. *Dichterliebe* also reveals F-D's tendency to seek out a work's psychopathology. Here, as in his later recordings, Schumann's jilted poet veers neurotically from dreamy inwardness to hysterical anguish.

In Bach, too, it was Fischer-Dieskau's way to dramatise rather than relate, as you can hear in 1951 recordings of cantatas Nos. 56 and 82. A highpoint is No. 82's sublime lullaby, 'Schlummert ein', where the refrains are wonderfully dulcet, the episodes uncommonly urgent and restless. In the cantata's gig-like final aria, though, F-D's exultation comes across as severe determination, a reminder that pure joy never lay easily within his expressive orbit.

Fischer-Dieskau the opera singer is celebrated in a clutch of arias, all done with a scrupulous attention to detail. Yet for all F-D's intelligence, a number like the Prologue from *Pagliacci* does not quite convince, mainly because his voice lacks a true Italianate vibrancy and richness. A curiosity,



FISCHER-DIESKAU
an artist of extremes

though not one I should want to repeat, is a German performance of Gluck's *Orfeo* under Fricsay, where the style is too sophisticated and the baritone timbre all wrong for Orpheus's otherworldly hero. My biggest gripe, though, is DG's omission of all texts and translations – especially frustrating when so much of the repertoire is virtually unknown, and a serious blot on an enterprisingly planned birthday tribute.

Hänssler likewise stints on texts and translations in the single-disc release of the same 1951 Bach cantata performances, plus a 1949 Berlin recording of Brahms's *Four Serious Songs* also included in the DG box. Not so EMI in the two-disc reissue of Mahler songs with Barenboim. By 1978 Fischer-Dieskau's tone had become less plush, and could grow harsh under pressure. Despite marvellous performances – including a terrifying 'Revelge' and a mesmeric 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen' – the *Knaben Wunderhorn* and Rückert songs lose something essential when given with piano rather than orchestra. Fischer-Dieskau can be over-emphatic, even hectoring, in some of the lighter songs from the early *Lieder und Gesänge*. But he is unsurpassed in, say, the gentle whimsy of 'Ich ging mit Lust', or in the aching 'Zu Strassburg auf der Schanz', where, as so often, this uniquely challenging, questing singer shows an uncanny gift for locating the music's raw nerve-ends.

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See Fischer-Dieskau interview, p34

of marriage; the first inklings of the composer's deafness; the report of Napoleon declaring himself Emperor; and the aged Haydn, at the end of the symphony, declaring that 'everything is different from today', while Ian Hart's expression balances apprehension and satisfaction as the music unfolds.

Most of the dialogue happens while the Symphony is being played: if you want to hear just the performance, you can, though be warned that the visuals then become distracting.

Martin Cotton

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AN DIE MUSIK

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DG 477 5556 ADD/DDD CD: 155:46 mins (2 discs) + DVD: 27:43 mins

SCHUBERT

Die schöne Müllerin

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (baritone), András Schiff (piano) (Schubertiade Feldkirch 1991)

TDK DV-CODSM 83 mins

If this month's feature on this awesome singer (p34) and Richard Wigmore's round-up of his CDs (p70) moves you to sample the sheer breadth of his achievement, you could do worse than try *An*

die musik. This celebratory set is more than just a rehash; it contains a 1978 DVD Schubert recital with the great Sviatoslav Richter, which even aficionados will want, along with earlier recordings, the complete *Dichterliebe* with Jörg Demus, and two tracks new to CD. Whether or not this represents Fischer-Dieskau's best is more arguable; the Schubert recordings with Gerald Moore, certainly, and lieder ranging from Wolf and Debussy to Schoeck, embodying his characteristic blend of intellect, word-awareness and sheer tonal beauty. His opera extracts add his vibrant characterisation and sense of drama; but his *Don Giovanni* in particular also demonstrates the somewhat hectoring approach of which critics complained. That, though, dwindles before his overall accomplishment. When filming the recital he had a cold, but you would hardly know it; his rapport with the turbulent Richter seems perfect.

It's something of a shock to turn to this 1991 *Schöne Müllerin* with another great pianist, András Schiff. That creamy upper voice often thins and wavers, the rich lower notes are lighter and less inflected. But there is still a freshness here, as Fischer-Dieskau, never content with one interpretation, now lets himself be led more by narrative than by words; also by the rich piano part with its watery figures, which Schiff makes wonderfully eloquent. A valedictory, maybe, best appreciated by those already familiar with his art; but anyone interested in singing would perceive this was a great artist.

Michael Scott Rohan

PERFORMANCE (AN DIE MUSIK) ★★★★★
PRESENTATION ★★★★★
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