

THE SONG AND THE SINGER

For many he is the greatest Lieder singer of the 20th century. As he turns 80, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau reflects on his long career with Jon Tolansky

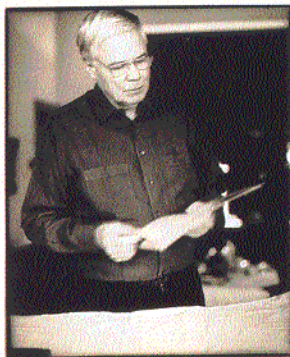
My mother loved to go to recitals, and one day she took me to a whole concert of Reger songs in the Beethoven-Saal in Berlin with the contralto Emmy Leisner. I remember a point during the programme when I said to myself: I also want to do this.' That impulse by a youthful Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau gave the world an artist who many would claim to be the greatest song interpreter of all time. Now, as he celebrates his 80th birthday, the great German baritone recalls that turning point in his life.

'I was very moved, and Mme Leisner even noticed me in the front row looking quite glowing. Afterwards my mother and I went to see her and she said "You must become a singer – but you must not come to me, you must have a male teacher". She recommended I go to Georg A Walter so I began to have singing lessons with him. I stayed with him for about a year, but I always wanted to find out much more about the really fundamental techniques of singing, so in 1943 I went to Hermann Weissenborn, and he was by far the most important and in fact really the only teacher I ever had. His guidance was invaluable, most especially in respect of melodic facility and phrasing, and I continued to study with him right up until his death in 1959.'

In January 1943, not long before Fischer-Dieskau started lessons with Weissenborn, he had already given his first performance of Schubert's *Winterreise*, a particularly enormous challenge for a 17-year-old. And just five years later this song-cycle was to be one of two major

catalysts in his early rise to fame. After being called up by the German army and becoming a prisoner of war with the Americans in Italy, it was one of the first works he performed for the RIAS radio station in American-occupied West Berlin. He had already made a strong impression giving recitals in the prisoner-of-war camp, from which he had recently been released; in January 1948 his broadcast of *Winterreise* was heard far and wide and created a major reaction – and not only in Germany (it can still be heard today, as a tape was finally issued on CD some years ago on the Archipel label).

Before long, word was around that a remarkable new baritone was at large. Later that year the influential stage director and manager of all of West Berlin's opera houses, Heinz Tietjen, engaged him to sing Posa in Verdi's *Don Carlo* at the Berlin Städtische Oper. That became the second catalyst in accelerating his rise to major fame. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was soon celebrated for the bloom, radiance and great expressiveness of his voice, his outstanding command of *legato* line and the dramatic power of his interpretations. The following year, 1949, he began what was to become one of the most voluminous and comprehensive recording careers of any classical artist.



IN A SINGING CAREER SPANNING 45 years, from 1948 to 1993, Fischer-Dieskau's impeccable technique, flawless intonation and perfection of tone production were merely the conduits for the remarkable range of expression, colour and feeling he brought to his vast repertoire of nearly 3000 songs, hundreds of

cantatas and oratorios and more than 100 operatic roles. In Lieder particularly, his dramatic incisiveness, lyrical expressiveness, *legato* phrasing and vivid projection of words have been yardsticks for two generations of singers after him. In opera, his searching intellect and imposing presence made him the choice of directors such as Luchino Visconti, Carl Ebert, August Everding, Günther Rennert and Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and conductors such as Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, Georg Solti, Karl Böhm and Carlos Kleiber. In music of his own time, his vocal mastery and artistic imagination especially inspired composers such as Stravinsky, Henze, Reimann and Britten, who invited him to sing in the world premiere of his *War Requiem*. And in later years his meticulous musicianship and deep erudition increasingly impressed symphony orchestras as he developed a new career as a conductor.

His 80th birthday celebrations – the actual anniversary fell on May 28 – see offerings from DG, EMI, Orfeo, TDK, INA Mémoire and Profil which range back in time from a new set of melodramas by Schumann, Liszt, Strauss and Ullmann with Fischer-Dieskau as narrator to a reissue of his first studio recording, Brahms's *Four Serious Songs*, made in 1949, and included as part of a nine-CD retrospective in DG's Original Masters series. (That work by Brahms was also the first music Fischer-Dieskau sang in public when he was just 16 years old, by which time he had most definitely decided he had to be a professional singer.)

IT WAS IN THE LIEDER OF SCHUBERT and Schumann particularly that Fischer-Dieskau achieved some of his earliest international acclaim. He brought them alive with theatrical characterisation and a poetic beauty that seemed to flow effortlessly from his remarkable breath control and his meticulous projection of words. In the dramatic songs he could create frightening suspense with the controlled dynamic reserve in his voice, creating lines that seamlessly grew from the quietest whisper to intense declamation, while in the lyrical songs he created a rapt and tranquil atmosphere with the sustained tenderness of his singing. *Winterreise* made an especially remarkable impression when his first studio recording was released in 1955. Many people marvelled that someone so young – he was just 30 – could perform with such depth and psychological power. However, for Fischer-Dieskau it was natural and appropriate to sing this music at that early age.

'Schubert himself was, of course, not an old man when he composed *Winterreise*, so I don't think the music is associated with old age in any way. If you are convinced by the sounds you evoke when you sit at the piano and play through the score – even without the voice, which I did first before I started to sing the music – you are deeply affected, whatever age you are. And then when you come to the poems, it is a young man who is speaking. Also, I must say I do not feel you need necessarily have had the same experience yourself to understand *Winterreise*. I am sure Schubert himself didn't suffer everything he describes



ON BENJAMIN BRITTEN

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in the cycle. Yes, he was very much in love with a girl he wasn't able to marry because her parents wanted her to have a wealthy husband, and this pained him of course, but I feel he wrote *Winterreise* because he was so profoundly affected by Müller's poems rather than because of anything in his own life.'

Including a few unofficial CDs, there are at least nine recordings of *Winterreise* by Fischer-Dieskau in the catalogue, with a couple more emerging from the archives this year. They span most of his singing career – proof that he did in fact perform *Winterreise* when he was no longer young, but also that he constantly felt compelled to revisit the work. 'If I were able to perform it now, I would right away attempt to interpret it yet again. The music is so rich and so unreachable in a way that you can encircle the work as often as you want – you will never reach the centre. I tried to do so – sometimes I got a little closer to the essence of the work, but not very often and *never* completely.'

A disarming statement from a legendary interpreter of *Winterreise*! His performances of this and all the Lieder of Schubert have exerted a striking influence on other singers and also accompanists from the time of his own generation up to the present, as one of the world's foremost accompanists, Graham Johnson, observes: 'He has so dominated the entire performing life of my generation, always having been there at the summit, from the time I began to think about Lieder as a possibility in my work until now. He is by nature an encyclopaedist, and he placed before us fine performances that immediately bent our ears over the comprehensive Lieder oeuvre of a wide range of composers – all Schubert, all Schumann, all Brahms, all Wolf. He made us aware that one had this huge treasure-trove of material, and he went through it with the type of zeal of a Domesday Book-chronicler, bringing to it his intelligence, his musicality and his desire to paint a huge, overall, historical picture.'

THE YOUNG GERMAN BARITONE Christian Gerhaher is one of today's singers who acknowledges Fischer-Dieskau's vital influence. Virtually two generations down the line, he of course heard his famous recordings, but he also came face to face with him in some masterclasses. His admiration is boundless. 'He was the one who elevated Lieder singing into a kind of vocal chamber music. And the sheer scale of his achievement is extraordinary. He made so many recordings, and even if some of the later ones were a bit mannered, most were technically so good and beautiful that he was altogether outstanding. I do not think anyone will reach the amount of work he did in his life – it would be a lifetime's work just to attempt to match it.'

That achievement has historical connotations, too. Not only were there the groundbreaking editions of virtually the complete Lieder of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf, there were also forays into the music of Mahler at a time when his work was widely held to be *recherché*. When he proposed to Wilhelm Furtwängler, who was a deeply valued mentor and considerable artistic influence on

him in his early years, that they perform the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, he had to talk the great conductor into it. 'He was quite shocked at first because he did not like Mahler at all. Although he had conducted the *Wayfarer* songs much earlier, and even the Third and Fourth Symphonies on one or two occasions, he always said "Maybe the first two movements of the First Symphony, but after that I cannot". In due course he did accept my suggestion and we performed them with the Vienna Philharmonic at Salzburg in 1951 and later recorded them with the Philharmonia Orchestra. At that time he was far from being alone in his aversion to Mahler – there were many people who could not appreciate him one bit. I was really the first singer to perform complete Mahler *Lieder* programmes and I was one of the few people who sang most of the orchestral songs in those days.'

Fischer-Dieskau went on to record most of the Mahler songs with some of the greatest conductors of the day, including Barenboim, Bernstein, Böhm, Kubelík, Sawallisch and Szell, and on occasion with Barenboim, Bernstein and Sawallisch as piano accompanists. Viewing them as a whole just for now, one of the most remarkable attributes is the immense range of vocal, dynamic and expressive contrasts – from the intimate, delicate simplicity of 'Ich atmet einen linden Duft' in the *Rückert-Lieder*, conducted by Böhm to the macabre, demonic irony of 'Revelge' in the *Knaben Wunderhorn* songs, in the classic version conducted by George Szell.

It was this kind of masterly projection of the text's atmosphere, as well as its meaning, that so strongly appealed to a composer who himself was greatly influenced by Mahler: for many years Fischer-Dieskau was one of Benjamin Britten's favourite artists, and the composer invited him to sing the baritone part in the world premiere (and subsequent recording) of the *War Requiem*. The premiere in Coventry Cathedral in 1962 was the first time they met, and subsequently they performed together on many memorable occasions, interpreting a wide range of composers' works with Britten both as conductor and pianist. 'His approach to conducting and playing the piano was so different. There was somehow more fantasy when he played the piano but, on the other hand, he absolutely achieved his intention with the orchestra. I have never forgotten how he did this with Schumann's *Scenes from Faust*, a very difficult work to conduct. I have sung this work very often since but I have never performed it again in the way I did with Britten conducting. This love he brought to everything he did was of a very special, rare quality. I can still see him holding up the score of the *Scenes from Faust* to the audience as they were raving at the end of the performance, as though saying "Look at this – Schumann!"'

When they performed and recorded the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, which the com-



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poser wrote for him in 1965, shortly after the death of the baritone's first wife, Irmgard Poppen. He was one of Fischer-Dieskau's favourite accompanists, along with Gerald Moore, Jörg Demus, Karl Engel and Hartmut Höll, as well as the aforementioned conductors. Höll accompanied him in a recording of rarely performed songs by Grieg, made in 1984 when Fischer-Dieskau was 59 and still displaying an extraordinary range of expression, dynamics and colour. He magically captured the Nordic atmosphere and poignant intimacy that are the essence of Grieg, even in these settings of predominantly German texts. 'Grieg himself had a very fine feeling for the German language, so it was natural for him to set these poems in his own, personal musical style. I love the simplicity of these songs – like most of what he wrote they are very close to the uncomplicated folkloric element that was very strong in him. There are, of course, some exceptions when he imitates Wagner's Valkyrie sonorities; in fact, some of the Heine songs are a little thicker in texture, really mixing up many accompanying voices. But most of the time he is wonderfully clear and writes in his own unmistakably personal way.'

TWO YEARS AFTER RECORDING THE Grieg songs, Hartmut Höll again accompanied Fischer-Dieskau in a recording of rarely performed songs by Wolf, originally made for Claves and subsequently licensed to Brilliant Classics. They are a fascinating addendum to his almost exhaustive Wolf recordings with Daniel Barenboim, where the two create an often spellbinding atmosphere in songs that can still sound extraordinarily novel and strange even today. Fischer-Dieskau recognises Wagner's influence in Wolf's life, but insists it is minimal in his music. 'He would not have liked to have been called a Wagnerian at all. He admired Wagner above all, but I think he found his own language by obeying the melody he heard in the words themselves, as opposed to letting the voices accompany the thematic material in the orchestra, as Wagner did. It was the other way round from Wagner – in the words he found the melody, in a way like Schubert really, who found the melody after reading the words many times, although of course Wolf's declamatory language is so different. And when he wrote his own opera, *Der Corregidor*, this was very much the same procedure.'

Der Corregidor is a work Fischer-Dieskau has championed in an extensive operatic repertoire that ranges from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* up to Reimann's *Lear* and Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*. He was maybe a more controversial artist in opera than in *Lieder* but that is not meant as a pejorative observation: on the contrary, if he had his critics he nevertheless offered interpretations that could often be challengingly thought-provoking and dramatically powerful.

One of his most famous and acclaimed stage roles was Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, in which he particularly stressed a disturbed element in the role, in contrast to the general ambience of the work. 'Sachs is a very complex character. There is a constant juxtapo-



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ON WINTERREISE

'If I were able to perform it now, I would right away attempt to interpret it yet again. The music is so rich and so unreachable in a way that you can surround the work as often as you want – you will never reach the center, really. I tried to do so – sometimes I got a little closer to the essence of the work, but not very often and never completely.'

ON KARAJAN

'He came to my house and we had a long piano rehearsal of Wotan together. He did not say very much, but the few sentences he spoke were enough for me to know just what he wanted. He conveyed so much with his conducting that he did not need to say very much – you saw what he did and you immediately understood his intentions.'

sition of opposites in him: the sarcasm and wit in the sharp remarks he makes so much of the time, and then so much melancholy as he keeps thinking about the world and all the evil things that are there – "Wahn, wahn, überall wahn!" The combination of all this makes him almost a sinister figure. But on the other hand, he has sufficient humour to enable him to be above all the things and people that upset him so much. After all, everyone admires him so much because he has such a dignity and philosophy. So he is very complicated, with many colours – most of the time I hear Sachs sung with thick tone all the way through so that there is no feeling of characterisation, which is so important. Certainly Wagner conveyed this feeling when he read just the words of this opera for audiences, which he did sometimes.'

Fischer-Dieskau was Georg Solti's and Decca's choice as Gunther in the famous 'Golden Ring' recording and, a few years later, Herbert von Karajan invited him to sing Wotan in *Das Rheingold* in his recording of the work. Karajan's at times almost chamber-opera approach to *The Ring* provoked mixed reactions initially, but in time it became an influential reading, which Pierre Boulez among other Wagnerians has acknowledged. Karajan knew precisely how to satisfy himself with his casting, and his choice of Fischer-Dieskau as a lyrical but authoritative Wotan ideally suited his concept of the role. There was a rapport between the two artists.

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ANOTHER OF FISCHER-DIESKAU'S most celebrated operatic roles in the German-language repertoire was Mandryka in Richard Strauss's *Arabella*, with which he made his Covent Garden debut in 1965 (an 80th-birthday DVD release from DG includes four extracts from a performance in Munich, appearing on video for the first time). He was also famed for his powerful although sometimes more controversial interpretations in some of Verdi's greatest baritone roles.

**'HE GAVE US A NEW MODEL FOR
LIEDER SINGING... THAT HAS
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THE POST-WAR GENERATION'**

GRAHAM JOHNSON

**Above, from left as Count Almaviva in Mozart's
Le nozze di Figaro, as Amfortas in Wagner's Parsifal and
in the title role of Falstaff in Verdi's opera**

He himself has said that it is not easy for a German singer to perform opera in Italian, or for that matter French, and there are some who have expressed reservations about his Verdi performances. But the audience at La Scala loved his *Rigoletto* and there are many who have been deeply affected by his searching interpretations in Italian and several other non-Germanic operas. Baritone Anthony Michaels-Moore feels that Fischer-Dieskau's Iago in Verdi's *Otello* is especially illuminating.

'The recording he made with Sir John Barbirolli is very interesting indeed. It may not be the most authentic Italian sound, but the musical intelligence that he brings to the role really does make it live in ways that I have not experienced in other interpretations.'

In that recording of *Otello*, with James McCracken in the title-role and Gwyneth Jones as Desdemona, Fischer-Dieskau and the entire cast were undoubtedly affected by some of Sir John Barbirolli's spacious tempi, which are particularly slow in Iago's fabricated account to Otello in Act 2 of Cassio calling out Desdemona's name in his sleep, 'Era la notte'.

Notwithstanding that, Fischer-Dieskau's Iago is remarkably effective here, meticulously observing Verdi's markings. 'It has to be whispered and sung at the same time,' Fischer-Dieskau says. 'It has a completely convincing influence on Otello, and yet at the same time Iago is expressing his own secret feelings about Desdemona. You have to combine all this in one short piece and perform as quietly as possible – just as Verdi has indicated.' A challenging idea about Iago's private feelings, and certainly the almost hauntingly dreamy way that Fischer-Dieskau sings this dramatically crucial aria is psychologically striking and entirely convincing.

'FISCHER-DIESKAU, IN EVERYTHING he did, had something to say and contribute to the general picture,' Graham Johnson says. 'For instance, he recorded Poulenc's *Le bal masqué*, and it's very interesting indeed – it may not be definitive in the way that Pierre Bernac's performance with the composer is, but I feel that be it Poulenc, Verdi or whoever, the repertoire is bigger than just its authentic roots and too big to avoid the contribution



that Fischer-Dieskau has made. The curiosity and passion for music that surrounded the margins of his central, German-speaking repertoire, such as Fauré or Ravel, in a sense contributed to his interpretation of his main work – for instance, the opening song of Berg's *Seven Early Songs* has a Debussian texture, and Fischer-Dieskau even wrote a book about Debussy. Of course, an artist who is born and bred in the country of a composer's origin has an authority that is difficult for people who have come from outside that environment to grasp immediately, but great art does not belong to any one nation, and it is wonderful that Fischer-Dieskau took such trouble with such a wide range of repertoire.'

Fischer-Dieskau's curiosity and passion certainly covered an exceptionally wide geographical and ethnic gamut. He took immense trouble to familiarise himself with the colours and musical speech-language of Hungary when he took on the title-role in Bartók's masterpiece, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, an opera he deeply admires.

'In a way it is almost an expressionistic work, even though it was composed before the time of expressionism as we know it, mixed with so many elements of folk music that when you interpret it you have to know exactly how the Hungarians sing their songs, how they perform with all their many subtle *rubati* – and if you don't do that, the piece is lost. I remember so well when Antál Dorati conducted *Bluebeard* in Paris, he came to me and was very concerned to explain all the many places where there is *rubato*, and he was really quite happy that I knew it and could do it for him. As regards both *Bluebeard* and *Judith*, with their feelings of mistrust and guilt, I sometimes think of Bartók's attitude to his second wife when they had a contract before they went to marry and she had to sign "I will not think of

another man, I will not say a word against this marriage" and so on – like a sick kind of dictatorship born out of such insecurity. Maybe there is a subconscious, unintentional autobiographical element in *Bluebeard* there. Who knows?'

Singing *Judith* on Fischer-Dieskau's second recording of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, made in 1979, is his fourth wife, the superb soprano Julia Varady, with whom, in stark contrast to *Bluebeard* and *Judith*, he is most profoundly and devotedly happy. As well as having performed together many times on the operatic stage, they have successfully collaborated from time to time when Fischer-Dieskau has accompanied her as a conductor. Some recordings of their work together on the Orfeo label are testimony to his considerable conducting talent, especially in notably demanding Verdi arias where he accompanies with great insight and subtlety, coaxing from the orchestra playing of impressive expression, flexibility and precision.

As he turns 80, Fischer-Dieskau abounds with energy and an undiminished passion for the enormous range of music he has loved and performed with such command, and which he now hands down to the young students fortunate enough to take lessons with him. In wishing him many happy returns, we must salute his unique contribution to our experience and understanding of music – an enrichment that is penetratingly summed up by Graham Johnson: 'If we try to imagine the world of song without Fischer-Dieskau, almost all the achievements that have come after him would not have been possible without the ground-base that allowed them to be launched. He gave us a new model for Lieder singing, and whether people have agreed with or diverged from his interpretations, that has been his greatest gift to the entire post-war generation.' ©

FISCHER-DIESKAU AT 80

Bach Cantatas

Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge

Various artists

Profil Medien

Some of F-D's earliest recordings and demonstrating the beauty of his voice in his 20s. See review on page ??

Schubert Die schöne Müllerin

András Schiff

TDK

A live DVD recording of a 1991 performance at Feldkirch. Complete with an interview with the singer. See review on page 105

Mahler Lieder

Daniel Barenboim

EMI

A valuable collection of four sets of songs, recorded in 1980. See review on page ??

'An die Musik'

Various artists

DG

DG's 80th birthday tribute: two discs complete with an invaluable DVD of F-D performing Schubert Lieder with Sviatoslav Richter. See review on page ??

Early Recordings on Deutsche Grammophon

Various artists

DG

A nine-CD set which demonstrates F-D's extraordinary vocal versatility and range: everything from Bach and Handel via operatic excerpts to Fortner and Henze. To be reviewed next month.

Liszt. Ullmann. Schumann. R Strauss

Melodrammas

Burkhard Kehring

DG

A new recording with F-D narrating. See review on page ??

Schubert Winterreise

Gerald Moore

INA Mémoire

A stunning live account from the 1955 Prades Festival. See review on page ??

From Orfeo expect a 1958 Vienna *Arabella* with Della Casa, Edelmann and Rothenberger, a disc of highlights from a 1964 *Macbeth* as well as a 10-CD Lieder box which includes a first outing for a 1960 Wolf/Goethe programme with Gerald Moore. A further birthday tribute is scheduled from DG later this year – a DVD containing opera and Lieder performances.

symphony. Which is just as well, because this mock-Handelian 'Hymn to Art', to the young Scriabin's own enthusiastic text, is hard to take seriously. Until that point the piece is an engaging example of Russian Silver Age symphonism, and the new disc is broadly successful both as performance and recording (the solo voices in the finale are placed too far forward).

Polyansky's trademark concern for tonal warmth and spaciousness makes him a fine choral conductor (his Chandos recording of the Schnittke Choir Concerto is one of the classics of the entire choral repertoire, for instance), but it rarely serves him so well in front of an orchestra. Fortunately Scriabin's First places a high premium on languid characterisation, and Polyansky is more than happy to oblige. For sheer quality of playing, Muti's Philadelphians are superior, while for raw intensity of interpretation (emphatically not for performance or recording) the historic Golovanov sweeps the board.

David Fanning

Schubert

Winterreise

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau *bar*

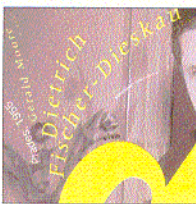
Gerald Moore *pf*

INA Mémoire Vive mono © IMV058 (71' • ADD)

Recorded during the Festival du Prades on

July 4, 1955

Even among F-D's great recordings, this one stands out for its truthfulness



This previously unissued live recording may be from 50 years ago but it sounds as arresting as it must have done to those who were at the Prades Festival that summer, and it makes a

wonderful pre-birthday present for a singing icon turning 80 this year.

Earlier in 1955 Fischer-Dieskau had made the first of his recordings of the cycle, with Gerald Moore for EMI, one that still has much going for it, but in this account a few months later it is at once apparent just how much the interpretation gains in terms of emotional involvement and direct communication, and the intimate recording carries us to the heart of the performers' interaction with the audience.

Perhaps for that reason the speeds, to their advantage, are that much quicker, the line and phrasing marginally more vital and the tone, for some reason, a little lighter and more flexible. The differences are small but important, as I found marvelling anew at the freshness and spontaneity of the reading. I could give detailed examples but any such dissection might detract from appreciation of the overwhelming 'rightness' of the whole; do listen throughout, though, to the smoothness of line, impeccable phrasing, daring dynamic contrasts and keen insights as far as word-painting is concerned.

Fischer-Dieskau's many later recordings, notably those for EMI in 1962, again with

Moore, and for DG with Demus and later Barenboim, are also on a very high level of achievement, but just at the moment this one has become my favourite, not least because Moore acts absolutely as the baritone's alter ego.

There is one curiosity. 'Der Lindenbaum' was not recorded because of a power failure. The artists nevertheless continued with the performance, so here – with the singer's compliance – that song has been supplied from Fischer-Dieskau's 1953 account with Hertha Klust. If I hadn't been told, I doubt if I would have known.

This contained, ideally judged performance proves how self-indulgent, by comparison, many of its successors have been. What at pity that, at full price, INA excludes texts and translations, though this is not sufficient reason to withhold commending this invaluable document to all Lieder-lovers. **Alan Blyth**

Fischer-Dieskau is interviewed on page 22

Stainer

The Crucifixion

James Gilchrist *ten* Simon Bailey *bass*

Stephen Farr *org* Clare College Choir,

Cambridge / Timothy Brown

Naxos © 8 557624 (67' • DDD • T)

Includes 62-minute bonus disc of

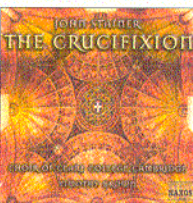
'English Choral Classics'

Selected comparisons:

Kay (A/97) (CHAN) CHAN9551

Rose (8/03) (LMM) LMM154D

A warm, fresh, direct performance of a work that has endeared itself to many



This is a clear, meticulous, tasteful performance of a work which in itself does not instantly call to mind any of these adjectives. Not that it (the performance) is

lacking in the warm, direct and reverent attributes which are also the work's own; in which case it might be reasonable to conclude 'Well then, it's got everything hasn't it?', and take that as a recommendation. I still hesitate, as before an anomaly. The personal fact is that the admirable performance has put the work's inadequacy (to its subject) in a clearer light than ever before – at least since childhood when aversion to 'Stainer's *Crucifixion*' (the unaccompanied 'God so loved the world' apart) was more or less instinctive.

Nevertheless, admirable the performance certainly is. The choral sound is fresh and well balanced, the style carefully attentive to detail, directed always with intelligence. And, if it hasn't opulence or sheer bulk, it is not a starved or over-refined sound either. The soloists are well-suited, James Gilchrist with his natural beauty of tone and reserves of power, Simon Bailey (a little less steady) with vivid enunciation and plenty of body to the voice. The organist, Stephen Farr, is judicious

Tributes to a great singer showing the range of his repertory and achievement

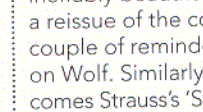
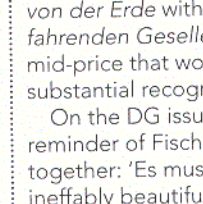
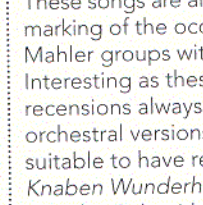
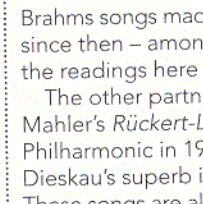
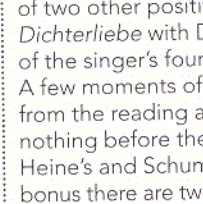
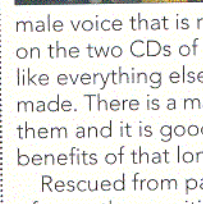
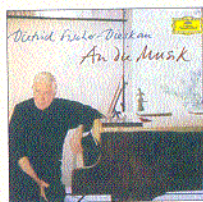
'An die Musik'

Includes arias and songs by **Bach, Brahms, Debussy, Gluck, Liszt, Mahler, Mozart, Orff, Schoeck, Schubert, Schumann, R Strauss, Wagner and Wolf**

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau *bar* with Daniel Barenboim, Jörg Demus, Karl Engel, Hertha Klust, Gerald Moore, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Margrit Weber *pfs* orchestras conducted by Karl Böhm, Ferenc Fricsay, Otto Gerdes, Eugen Jochum, Joseph Keilberth, Karl Ristenpart

Also includes a DVD of eight Schubert Lieder, recorded in 1978, accompanied by Sviatoslav Richter *pf*

DG ③ (1 DVD + 2 CDs) 477 5556
(150' • ADD/DDD)



and soul engaged in communicating with those before him. It is also a happy souvenir of his partnership with Richter, the pair obviously in total accord in their interpretations.

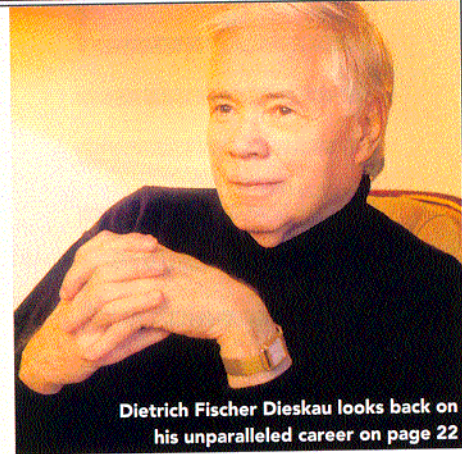
That said, I have to confess a smidgeon of disappointment in Richter's rather reticent approach to Lieder accompanying, a lesser contribution than Barenboim or Gerald Moore made to the singer's performances. And it is the partnership with Moore in the late '60s and early '70s in recording all of Schubert's songs for

male voice that is recalled in several songs on the two CDs of 'An die Musik', the choice, like everything else on this issue, discerningly made. There is a magical rapport in all of them and it is good to be reminded of the benefits of that long association.

Rescued from partial neglect are the fruits of two other positive partnerships. The 1965 *Dichterliebe* with Demus produced the best of the singer's four recordings of the cycle. A few moments of overemphasis can detract from the reading as a whole but they are nothing before the profound sympathy with Heine's and Schumann's inner feelings. As a bonus there are two marvellous accounts of Brahms songs made in 1967 and neglected since then – among the most important of the readings here restored to circulation.

The other partnership is with Böhm on Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1963, revealing Fischer-Dieskau's superb identification with Mahler. These songs are also part of EMI's sole marking of the occasion – recordings of four Mahler groups with Barenboim in 1978. Interesting as these may be, the piano recensions always leave one longing for the orchestral versions. It might have been more suitable to have reissued the orchestral *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* with Szell, *Das Lied von der Erde* with Kletzki and *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* with Furtwängler: at mid-price that would have been a more substantial recognition of the occasion.

On the DG issue there is just one, precious reminder of Fischer-Dieskau and Barenboim together: 'Es muss ein wunderbares sein', so ineffably beautiful and inward that one wants a reissue of the complete Liszt set – and a couple of reminders of their extensive work on Wolf. Similarly, from the same year, 1981, comes Strauss's 'Ständchen', recalling the



Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau looks back on his unparalleled career on page 22

singer's partnership with Sawallisch on most of that composer's Lieder. Even more worthwhile are two songs from Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch* from a 1950 recital with Hertha Klust, one of the singer's early mentors: I would like to see this recital reissued complete, so spontaneous are these two performances.

Klust is the pianist in a mesmeric account of Brahms's *Vier ernste Gesänge*, also from 1951, a profound reading that shows the singer already, at 25, in total command of these pieces, although he tends to become over-exuberant in the last song. This comes on the Profil issue which has as its main offering 1951 DG recordings of Bach's two solo cantatas for bass. Apart from some weakness in his lower notes, Fischer-Dieskau never surpassed his singing of Bach here; of all these performances I would choose this above the others.

Finally, DG includes on 'An die Musik' souvenirs from Fischer-Dieskau's operatic career. His Papageno (from the complete 1958 Fricsay *Die Zauberflöte*) is charming, the tone lightened for the bird-catcher's opening solo. With the same conductor he is frighteningly demonic in Don Giovanni's Champagne aria, a real shot of erotic adrenalin.

He is as mellifluous as one can wish in Wolf's 'Abendstern' solo in 1969 but I still find his Hans Sachs – here the 'Fliedermonolog' recorded in 1976 – disappointing because of the hectoring tone and nudging of notes foreign to this *legato*, musing solo. Something of that also occurs in Mandryka's encounter with Count Waldner from *Arabella* (the 1963 live Munich set) but such slight overemphasis is here more appropriate. Examples of the baritone singing Schoeck and Orff remind us that music written early in his own lifetime finds in him a sympathetic interpreter. This grand master knew no limits to his capabilities. **Alan Blyth**

A nine-CD Original Masters set of early DG recordings will be reviewed next month.

Bach • Brahms

Bach Cantatas^a – No 56, Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen; No 82, Ich habe genug
Brahms Vier ernste Gesänge, Op 121^b
Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau *bar*
^bHertha Klust *pf*^aBerlin Motet Choir;
^aKarl Ristenpart Chamber Orchestra / Karl Ristenpart

Profil Medien mono ③ PH05013 (61' • ADD)

From DG originals, recorded in ^b1949 and ^a1951

Mahler

Lieder und Gesänge aus der Jugendzeit. Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen. Lieder aus 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn'. Fünf Rückert-Lieder

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau *bar*

Daniel Barenboim *pf*

EMI ③ ② 476780-2 (121' • ADD • T/t)

From HMV SL55173 (6/80)

My shelves are overloaded with discs celebrating landmarks in Fischer-Dieskau's career, all proclaiming his creative energy and the width of his musical scholarship. For his 80th birthday, three companies offer, by and large, recordings that are lesser-known.

Most important by far is the bonus on DG's 'An die Musik': a DVD of a television broadcast by Bavarian Radio in 1978, a priceless souvenir for future generations, of the singer seen as well as heard while in his prime. In eight Schubert Lieder it displays his unrivalled range in terms of dynamics, expression and inner understanding of text and music. It is also a reminder of his arresting presence, his whole voice, body

'Melodramen'

Liszt Der traurige Mönch. Lenore **Schumann**
Zwei Balladen. Schön Hedwig **R Strauss**
Enoch Arden **Ullmann** Die Weise von Liebe
und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke
Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau *spkr*
Burkhard Kehring *pf*

DG ② 477 5320GH2 (129' • DDD • T/t)

At 80 Fischer-Dieskau is a powerful advocate for these curious works



Melodrama has always been a difficult medium, effective at key moments of operatic tension (*Fidelio*, *Der Freischütz*) and even in some of the 18th-century 'duodramas' that impressed Mozart, but harder to handle in recital. If anyone can bring off Strauss's *Enoch Arden*, which has attracted half a dozen recordings, Fischer-Dieskau is the man. Here, in the German version set by Strauss for a distinguished actor and cutting some of Tennyson's more mawkish and bathetic lines, even he needs all the considerable vocal resources and mastery of dramatic timing he can still command. An hour is, all the same, a very long haul, especially as Strauss provides comparatively little music to underpin or (mostly) separate the passages of declamation. Burkhard Kehring does well to make the piano contributions as integral to the whole as he does.

A more thorough engagement with the medium is undertaken by Viktor Ullmann. After studying with both Schoenberg and Alois Hába he contributed much to Prague's musical life in the time he had before the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia and suppressed Jewish musical life. In Terezín, where he was imprisoned before his murder in Auschwitz, he seems to have been an invigorating musical presence. It was in these dispiriting circumstances that he composed and played the elaborate piano part in performances of his setting of Rilke's popular ballad. The music is late-Romantic in manner; necessarily terse but highly charged, it makes its contributions trenchantly and effectively.

Of the two Liszt melodramas here, the more interesting is *Der traurige Mönch*. It belongs to his last period, when he was experimenting with harmony that took him up to and across the boundaries of tonality. Here, the rather vapid spookiness of Lenau's brief ballad is given a genuinely sinister hue by the astonishingly original use of the whole-tone scale, suggesting a harmonic unease that effectively shadows the whole, rather absurd scene.

Schumann's three melodramas are less successful, though Fischer-Dieskau himself enters a plea, if a cautious one, for the *Hebbel Ballade vom Heideknaben* in his book *Robert Schumann: Das Vokalwerk* (Stuttgart: 1981). He declaims it powerfully, and makes the best of *Die Flüchtlinge* ('The Fugitives'). Of this it can only be said that Schumann and Shelley vie to demonstrate how comprehensively, when they stumble, major Romantic artists call fall flat on their faces. **John Warrack**


Schubert

Die schöne Müllerin

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau *bar*

András Schiff *pf*

Video director Fritz Jurmann

TDK ©  DV-CODSM (83' • 4:3 • PCM stereo

• 0). Recorded live at the Montforthaus, Feldkirch, on June 20, 1991. Includes 1985 interview with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

An absorbing souvenir of the great baritone near the end of his career



To celebrate Fischer-Dieskau's 80th birthday, Austrian Television, with the performers' consent, has issued this film made at the 1991 Schubertiade. It marked the return, after a 20-year break, of the great baritone, aged 66, to Schubert's first cycle. In


re-studying the work, the singer comments that he tried, really for the first time, to sing these songs 'not so much by feeling as by narrative, not so much concentrating on the vocal line as responding with curiosity and openness to the wealth of colour and expression in the piano part – which calls for a pianist as sensitive as Schiff'.

He is as good as his word, singing the cycle even more off the words than he had in the past, giving his audience a kind of mini-drama, underlined by some movement on the platform and a wealth of facial expression. At this late stage in his career – he retired

not long afterwards – his voice inevitably shows some decline in tonal body, but in almost every other respect he retains the famed qualities of his prime: astonishing breath-control, an arresting command of wide-ranging dynamics and total command in putting his ideas into action. The hypnotic reading reaches its proper moment of epiphany in the two penultimate, tragic songs, delivered with all the varied resources the performers can offer them. Taking it on its own terms it is a riveting experience, wholly enhanced by András Schiff's imaginatively probing playing. As such it will tell younger collectors just why Fischer-Dieskau was so venerated in the field of Lieder.

At the same time, one would not necessarily want an aspiring singer to attempt to copy him. This is an interventionist, big-scale interpretation, *sui generis*, that inspires the listener because of its interpretative mastery, but the cycle actually predicates a less sophisticated, simpler approach to suggest the sad plight of the desperately vulnerable and forlorn protagonist, one heard on CD in several noted recordings from tenors.

As a bonus there is a 20-minute portrait of the singer, assembled at the 1985 Schubertiade. It includes a couple more valuable examples of his art and a fascinating interview, in which he tells us a lot about himself and his approach to his art, something that will be invaluable in years to come. His answers to questions are always to the point and revealing of his character. **Alan Blyth**

 **Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau looks back over an astonishing career with Jon Tolansky on page 22**