

Fischer-Dieskau: an appreciation

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By Robert Croan

Post-Gazette Senior Editor

In the height of the LP era, German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was the most recorded classical artist. His enormous repertory ranged from art song to opera, from Bach and Schubert to Debussy and Britten. His roles spanned Handel's Julius Caesar and Reimann's King Lear to Mozart's Don Giovanni and Puccini's Scarpia. Mr. Fischer-Dieskau died May 25, aged 86, in his Bavarian home.

He did not sing often in the United States, never at the Metropolitan Opera, and his special penchant for German Lieder was less appreciated here than abroad. For me, he was the greatest classical singer of the 20th century (though I know many will argue this statement). He had a voice of extreme beauty, an awesome vocal technique, and consummate interpretive skills in just about every period and style. Many singers of his time had great voices and the ability to move people with their singing. Maria Callas had the interpretive skills, though not the perfection of sound. Placido Domingo has the range of repertory and high musical intellect, but a narrower repertory (mostly opera, little art song), and less interpretive variety.

Because most Americans knew Mr. Fischer-Dieskau primarily from his recordings, it was often said that he had a small voice, not suited for opera. I know that not to be the case. In the summer of 1976, traveling through Germany and Austria, I heard this singer twice within the space of a week. The first time was at the Bavarian State Opera, as Amfortas in Wagner's "Parsifal." My seats happened to be in one of the higher balconies, yet his resonant, mellow baritone cut through the voluminous orchestral texture, with diction so clear that every word carried its own color, every phrase an emotional wallop. A few days later I heard Mr. Fischer-Dieskau in the small concert hall of the Salzburg Festival. There, in an intimate and rarified Lieder recital, he scaled down his sound to give a degree of nuance that would have been impossible in the larger spaces of an opera house.

Had I only heard the Lieder recital, I would have thought, as many did, that it was a small voice. The fact is simply that this artist was able to do just about anything he wanted with his voice, and that he was smart enough to calculate everything he sang to produce the maximum effect. My voice teacher, the great Danish tenor Aksel Schiøtz and a great Lieder singer himself, used to say, “If you want to know how to sing a Schubert song and I’m not around, go to Fischer-Dieskau’s recordings.”

Most of Mr. Fischer-Dieskau’s recorded legacy is available on CD. There are even a few DVDs of his later recitals. My favorites include the songs of Schubert he recorded with Gerald Moore at the piano, especially his “Winterreise” cycle, and his Mozart – a nastily hard-voiced Count in “Marriage of Figaro” contrasting with the smoothest, most seductive Don Giovanni. He will remain for me the touchstone of all he purveyed.