

# Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, one of the great vocal artists of the 20th century, dies at 86

Dorian Griscom  
25 May 2012

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the German lyric baritone whose recordings and performances introduced several generations to the songs of Schumann, Schubert and Brahms and whose prolific career as both a recitalist and an operatic baritone spanned four decades, died on May 18, just ten days short of his 87th birthday.

The significance of his contribution to musical culture the world over can be gauged in part by the enormous outpouring of praise for his accomplishments in newspaper obituaries, internet postings and private conversations on the news of his death. Fischer-Dieskau has been called, without exaggeration on the commentators' part, the most influential singer of the last century.

He was also among the most recorded, with a discography spanning nearly 500 recordings. Fischer-Dieskau's recordings of Franz Schubert's major song cycles *Winterreise* (*Winter Journey*) and *Die schöne Müllerin* (*The Miller's Beautiful Daughter*) and Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe* (*The Poet's Love*) and *Liederkreis* (*Song Cycle*), as well as his recording of all of the Schubert lieder appropriate for the male voice, are the standard against which every future effort in this repertoire must inevitably be measured.

His recordings of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*), *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (*Songs of a Wayfarer*) and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Magic Horn*)—alongside the soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf—are all classics. His recorded performance in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* under Otto Klemperer and alongside Schwarzkopf, Nikolai Gedda, Christa Ludwig, Walter Berry and Peter Pears, dating from exactly 50 years ago, is another milestone.

Fischer-Dieskau collaborated with many of the most colorful and important musical personalities of his era. He

had memorable partnerships with such pianists as Gerald Moore, Sviatoslav Richter, Jörg Demus and Daniel Barenboim, sang under conductors Klemperer, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Leonard Bernstein, Herbert von Karajan, Karl Böhm and Carlos Kleiber, and worked alongside innumerable luminaries of the opera world of his day, including Schwarzkopf, Gedda, Carlo Bergonzi and Brigitte Fassbaender, to name just a few.

While Fischer-Dieskau was most famous for his interpretations of Schumann, Brahms and especially Schubert, his repertoire included music of the 20th century, such as compositions of Alban Berg, Ernst Krenek, Benjamin Britten and others.

Born in Berlin in 1925, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau came of age under the Nazi regime. He had scarcely begun his studies at the Berlin Conservatory when he was drafted into the Wehrmacht in 1943 and sent to the Russian front to take care of army horses. During this time, his mentally disabled brother was starved to death in an institution run by the regime.

Shortly thereafter, his mother's apartment was bombed. After being granted leave to return home and help her, Fischer-Dieskau was redeployed, this time to Italy, where just before the end of the war he was captured and remained in an American POW camp for more than a year after the Nazi surrender, entertaining Allied soldiers and officers. He later said that he "had a dreadful aversion for the Nazis ... I withdrew into myself and lowered my head."

In 1947, a last minute substitute performance in Brahms' *Requiem* launched the then 22-year-old Fischer-Dieskau into stardom virtually overnight. He sang in opera houses throughout Europe and also toured the United States extensively as a recitalist. He retired from opera in 1978 and gave his last recital in 1992. After his retirement from singing, he coached younger singers extensively and conducted a fair amount, and gave

occasional performances reciting poetry set to music, such as Richard Strauss' melodrama *Enoch Arden*, based on the Tennyson poem of the same name. Painting was another of his interests and developed into more than a hobby.

Fischer-Dieskau possessed a uniquely sweet and colorful voice, best suited to art song accompanied by piano. His vocal technique was centered on an intensely focused sound production, supported above all by the fanatical attention he paid to diction. Sviatoslav Richter bemoaned in his diary that when the two were recording Brahms' cycle of 15 songs *Die schöne Magelone* (*The Beautiful Magelone*—a recording which won a Grammy award in 1973), "Dieter's insistence on every vowel and every consonant often got in the way of the free flow of the music and I wasn't able to adapt to it." (This momentary frustration, however, did not shake Richter's opinion that Fischer-Dieskau was "the greatest singer of the century.")

The natural inclination of his voice toward the finer palette of art song did not prevent Fischer-Dieskau from achieving great success as an operatic baritone. His imposing presence, his ability to communicate and his practically unparalleled diction more than compensated for the relative lightness of his voice. He sang nearly all the major baritone roles of Wagner, as well as those in Mozart's most significant operas, such as the title role in *Don Giovanni* and Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, and he performed all of Richard Strauss' most important operas. He also sang a number of Verdi and Puccini roles, among many others.

There were those who felt this portion of Fischer-Dieskau's career did not suit him and was perhaps even dangerous for his voice. In fact, it was rewarding to observe how the singer was able to adapt his powers to the operatic stage and achieve unique results in doing so, above all through dramatic and musical expression, rather than sheer vocal power.

Stanislavski once said, "Generality is the enemy of all art." Despite the extensive range of his output as a performer and recording artist, including massive and stylistically homogeneous song cycles of Schubert and Schumann, Fischer-Dieskau never lapsed into generality. He had the remarkable ability to bring out the unique and essential character

of each melody he sang and each line of poetry with which it was in synergy.

This did not lead at any point, however, to a mere piling

up of beautiful yet unrelated moments. On the contrary, Fischer-Dieskau's interpretations built, phrase by phrase and section by section, a compelling, almost inevitable yet never predictable narrative, which maintained its dramatic intention and logical integrity from the first note to the last. As a performer, he embodied the great musicologist Hans Keller's statement: "Art arises where the arbitrary and predictable are superseded by unpredictable inevitability."

This was all accomplished with a remarkable efficiency of means. Fischer-Dieskau did not seek to overpower, impress, or create a spectacle, either with his voice or with the gestures of his body. He committed both so completely to the service of the works he sought to recreate through performance that in watching him one becomes almost unaware of the singer and his craft and is instead brought into a complete and direct communion with the music and the text itself.

With his eyes and his bearing, and without a single extraneous movement of the rest of his body, Fischer-Dieskau was able to immediately embody the emotional atmosphere of the music he was performing. It is at least as captivating to watch his movements during musical interludes when he is not singing as when he is singing. His performances were direct, authentic and unmannered.

They were also deeply informed performances with respect to style, form and tradition. This was an artist who in every sense *understood* what he was singing and the cultural traditions he represented in doing so.

Those who wish to better acquaint themselves with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's life and work might start with a magnificent documentary, *Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau: Autumn Journey* by Bruno Monsaingeon, who directed equally excellent films examining the careers of Sviatoslav Richter (*Richter: the Enigma*) and the violinist David Oistrakh (*David Oistrakh: Artist of the People?*). The reader is also naturally encouraged to watch and listen to his many recordings, some of which can be accessed on YouTube:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m\\_7-KEelaLw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_7-KEelaLw)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jC1ZJT6ZD6w>



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**