

'It is the start of the final episode'

He was the greatest lieder-singer of the 20th century, setting new standards and influencing a whole generation. As Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau turns 80, Martin Kettle talks to the prolific Berliner about his extraordinary career

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Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau does not attempt to hide his dismay about his approaching birthday. "It is not good to be 80. I did not like being 70, and I like being 80 even less. It is the start of the final episode. I wish I could ignore it."

It is more than 12 years since the most influential singer of the 20th century stepped quietly out of the limelight and brought the curtain down on his 50-year career. Now, to mark his 80th birthday on May 28, there will be ceremonies and awards; a new pictorial biography by Hans Neunzig; large selections from his enormous recorded legacy are poised for reissue by DG; and the singer himself is giving a steady stream of interviews in the Berlin house where he has lived for more than half a century.

The familiar tall figure comes to the door to greet the photographer and me, shepherding us in out of the rain and offering us a cup of tea. He is the same handsome man he was as a performer but he shakes hands gingerly. Two months ago Fischer-Dieskau fell off a podium in Essen, severely damaging his shoulder, and he is still feeling the effects.

We sit in his drawing room, a long bright room with his grand piano by the garden window and his shelves lined with records and drawings, some of them his own, as he is a keen painter. He is full of wit and authority, yet there is an air of melancholy in his conversation - he feels that a generation has grown up casually unaware of his contribution to the classical music of the post-war era. "The next generation is not so interested in the artists of the past," he reflects.

To those who grew up with Fischer-Dieskau as a towering icon of the musical world, such neglect seems almost scandalous. At the height of his reputation, from roughly 1950 to 1980, the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau cast more light on the art of singing than anyone either before or since, and certainly in the era of recorded sound. Not only did he make more recordings of art songs than anyone else - many of the most important ones recorded several times - he also recorded most of his many operatic roles too. He set new standards and influenced every singer of his era as well as a number of composers.

The eulogies began early in Fischer-Dieskau's career and never ceased. "He had only to sing one phrase," his frequent accompanist Gerald Moore wrote in his memoirs, "before I knew I was in the presence of a master." Sviatoslav Richter, who accompanied him too, was in no doubt either: Fischer-Dieskau was "the greatest of 20th-century singers", the Russian pianist wrote in his notebooks. John Steane, most probing and unsentimental of all critics, threw up his hands after listening to Fischer-Dieskau and, quoting Dryden on Chaucer, simply concluded: "Here is God's plenty." The writer John Amis concluded that Fischer-Dieskau is "a miracle and that is just about all there is to be said about it".

"I am hard to please," Fischer-Dieskau admits. He thinks "much is being lost about the good ways of making music", and regrets the decline of "true legato singing" - a charge that critics occasionally made against his own performances. "When you have something to say in music the phrases must be clear - the beginning, the climax, and the ending."

He has praise as well as criticism for the English tenor Ian Bostridge and he enthuses unreservedly over Bryn Terfel: "He has huge presence and a marvellous voice, real focus and brilliant strength." It is important to be strict with young singers, he says. "Singing is hard work, it involves great discipline."



'I have never seen a composer or a conductor more nervous than Britten was before the War Requiem' ... Fischer-Dieskau. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

Yet for him one of the most important qualities is curiosity. "The repertoire is so enormous. For many years I literally learned a new piece every day."

Fischer-Dieskau was, is, and will always be a Berliner. He has lived through some of the great city's best times and most of its worst. This most refined and intelligent of artists began his career in circumstances from hell. In early 1943, aged 17, his first public performance of the greatest of all song-cycles, Schubert's *Winterreise*, given in the town hall of the Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf, was interrupted by the RAF.

"We had a terrible bombing of the city that day," Fischer-Dieskau recalls, "and the whole audience of 200 people and myself had to go into the cellar for two-and-a-half hours. Then when the raid was over we came back up and resumed." I ask him whether he can remember where in the cycle he began again. "It was *Rückblick* [Backward Glance]," he grins. "So we looked back to the part already completed."

As a conscript soldier he was captured by the Americans in Italy in 1945 and spent nearly two years as a prisoner-of-war. "I believe it forces you to straighten out your thinking at an earlier age than you would otherwise do," he says. "You have to survive. You have to stay focused, otherwise you will not live. That was my first thought."

It was this German experience of suffering and war that partly led Benjamin Britten to invite Fischer-Dieskau to sing in the historic premiere of his *War Requiem* in Coventry Cathedral in 1962. Britten's letter - "with great temerity I am asking you whether you would sing the baritone" - tells us something both about the composer and about the grandeur that Fischer-Dieskau had attained in the musical world by then. But Fischer-Dieskau's memories of the event are mainly about Britten's nerves.

"I think Ben's hesitation was partly because this was a work of a character that he had not written before then. He also said to me he considered it to be one of his most important works. I have never seen a composer or conductor more nervous before a performance as Britten was before the *War Requiem*. We were all moved to tears, everybody by this work. I did not know where to look or where to put my feet."

Fischer-Dieskau reckons he began singing at the age of two. "I would imitate voices and noises all the time. And I think this gave me great flexibility in the voice. This is essential for the lieder singer, to be able to characterise - though without losing your own distinctive colour of voice." His mother encouraged her young son, taking him to a recital by the contralto Emmi Leisner when he was just seven. "I was glowing, a kind of fanatic," he recalls. Leisner told him he would "certainly be a singer".

By the mid-1960s, Fischer-Dieskau and Gerald Moore had carried out a two-man revolution in the world of German song. Omitting only those songs that were specifically suited to a female interpreter, he recorded the complete songs of Schubert, Brahms and Richard Strauss, most of those by Mozart, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt and Wolf, and large numbers by composers from Bach to Henze. Listening to almost any of these recordings today, none of it ever sounds routine.

Fischer-Dieskau has always had an encyclopaedic knowledge of other singers. "It is remarkable when people say how different I am from earlier singers," he says, "because I overlapped with singers like Heinrich Schlusnus and Erna Berger and I was not conscious of being different in approach. On the contrary, I tried to be like them, to be as perfect as I thought they were."

He talks easily and frankly of the great musicians he has known, of Brendel and Beecham, Karajan, Kleiber and Klemperer. His own favourite singer, he says without a moment's hesitation, was "the young Hans Hotter". His best partnership was with Gerald Moore, "the perfect accompanist, with such a rhythmic character to his playing of Schubert." But his greatest influence, Fischer-Dieskau makes clear, was the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. "He once said to me that the most important thing for a performing artist was to build up a community of love for the music with the audience, to create one fellow feeling among so many people who have come from so many different places and feelings. I have lived with that ideal all my life as a performer."

Those performances have not ended yet. Fischer-Dieskau has an active career as a reciter and narrator in works by composers from Schumann to Schoenberg, and a new CD of his work has just been issued. He continues to conduct, too, providing his shoulder problem heals up.

But he fears that even he is being forgotten, slowly and inexorably. "The person who achieves most can also be forgotten most," he says, with the air of a man who has long been troubled by that paradoxical thought. But he is not unhappy, he insists. "I was a widower and I had much sorrow in my life, and I was a soldier, which was the worst thing of all. But it is a good thing to have led a life which has had good consequences."

P.O.W.who sang Schubert

1925 Born May 28 in Berlin

1943 First public recital, Schubert: Die Winterreise, Berlin

1945 Gives Schubert recitals in POW camp in Italy

1947 First professional engagement, Brahms' German Requiem, Müllheim in Baden

1948 Opera debut as Marquis of Posa in Verdi's Don Carlos, Berlin

1949 First recording, Brahms, Four Serious Songs

1951 First London concert, Delius, A Mass of Life, conducted by Thomas Beecham. Also records Schubert, Die Schöne Müllerin with Gerald Moore

1952 Records role on Kurwenal in Wagner's Tristan und Isolde conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler

1953 First US tour

1962 Premiere of Benjamin Britten's War Requiem, Coventry Cathedral

1963 His wife Irmgard dies after giving birth to their third son

1965 Covent Garden debut as Mandryka in Strauss's Arabella First recital with Sviatoslav Richter

1970 Completes recording of all Schubert lieder with Gerald Moore, who says of him: "This man, Fischer-Dieskau, has taken me deeper into the hearts of Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Brahms, than I have ever been before"

1973 First recordings as a conductor, Schubert symphonies 5 and 8

1977 Marries the soprano Julia Varady

1978 Premiere of Aribert Reimann's Lear

1983 Begins new role as teacher, Berlin

1984 Begins collaboration with Alfred Brendel as accompanist

1992 Final lieder recitals in Berlin and London. Final appearance as singer at Munich Opera gala, as Verdi's Falstaff