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Once More for Fischer-Dieskau

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SALZBURG, Austria

Last May, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau turned 80, and the festival honored that milestone with a concert on Friday night. The featured performer? Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

The great baritone had made his Salzburg debut exactly 54 years before: on August 19, 1951. The conductor Wilhelm Furtwangler had asked him to sing Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer." Up to his official retirement from singing in 1992, Mr. Fischer-Dieskau sang 32 recitals in Salzburg, in addition to all the orchestra concerts and opera roles. It's fairly safe to say that Mr. Fischer-Dieskau is more closely associated with the Salzburg Festival than is any other singer. His only rival in this respect may be the soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

He has not been idle in "retirement," has Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau: He conducts, he teaches, he writes books. He also performs a good many speaking roles, as he did on Friday night. The piece was Schumann's "Manfred," a "dramatic poem with music." The text is Byron's, translated into German, of course, and fiddled with by the composer (who, in effect, acted as dramaturge). "Manfred" is a virtuoso opportunity for a speaker, or actor, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau made the most of it. He is still the summit.

Before he took the stage, the bells outside the Felsenreitschule rang, as if in celebration. And then he appeared: slightly slow of step, but immensely distinguished, and ramrod straight. Mr. Fischer-Dieskau seems to have every follicle of hair he ever grew. And he is still about the handsomest guy around. The critic sitting next to me broke out into a kind of happy laughter. He said, "I never thought I'd see him come onstage again." I think a lot of people in the audience felt the same way.

As the music began - the overture is really the only thing we ever hear from "Manfred" - the look of concentration on Mr. Fischer-Dieskau's face was striking. He seemed to live and feel every note, and he also did a little conducting with his head: That must be irresistible to him.

The fabled singer proved himself an amazingly expressive speaker, with

every word having its proper effect. He riveted everyone in the hall. You could have heard a pin drop. Frankly, I found Mr. Fischer-Dieskau more emotional - more openly emotional, let's say - than I ever found him as a singer. You almost literally rose and fell with him. And I'll tell you this, too: I bet he can sing a little, still. You can tell, by the sound of that voice, the sight of that posture, the confidence and mastery that pour forth from him.

Leading the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra was Ivor Bolton, the English conductor. This orchestra is no threat to the Vienna Philharmonic's reputation, but it was adequate. And Mr. Bolton had the sweep of "Manfred" in mind, and hand. The Salzburg Bach Choir was helpfully sturdy and compact.

And there are four singing soloists in this piece, all of whom have relatively brief parts. The soloist who sings the most is the baritone (!), and this was Jan Buchwald, who has a fine instrument, and a good sense of musical drama. The orchestra sometimes covered him, but this was not ruinous. The young soprano, Nadine Lehner, has a superb pedigree: She has studied under Mr. Fischer-Dieskau, Miss Schwarzkopf, Julia Varady (Mr. Fischer-Dieskau's wife), Inge Borkh, the late Hans Hotter, and Wolfram Rieger. She has a liquid, fast-running voice, which she deployed accurately. Dorthé Haring, the mezzo-soprano, was lovely and clear. Ferdinand von Bothmer, the tenor, completed this worthy quartet.

After "Manfred" - and before the intermission - a local official presented Mr. Fischer-Dieskau with the Golden Honor Award of the Province of Salzburg. In doing so, he gave nearly a Castro-length speech. Even the decorous Salzburg crowd had trouble sitting still. In (finally) accepting, Mr. Fischer-Dieskau was economical and gracious - his performer's awareness never fails him.

In the second half of the program, Mr. Bolton and the Mozarteum Orchestra offered Schumann's Fourth Symphony. I was not able to stay to hear this - but I can tell you a very interesting anecdote. It comes from George Sgalitzer, a Seattle doctor who was born in Vienna and is the festival's senior patron. He attended the very first performance - on August 22, 1920. A 7-year-old, he was brought by his grandparents. He has attended every summer since, except for the war years. In any case, Dr. Sgalitzer once asked Herbert von Karajan how many symphonies he knew by heart. The conductor responded, "One hundred and three." Then Dr. Sgalitzer asked which was his favorite. And do you know what Karajan said, out of all those symphonies - by Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, and the rest? Schumann's Fourth.

So it's got that going for it.