

DLA Doctoral Dissertation Theses

Szilveszter Ókovács

The Bright & Seamy Side –  
The Operatic World of DFD

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## I. Preparations

Anyone who has studied music in the world at least intermediate level in the last half century has certainly encountered the art of the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau on a shellack, vinyl or CD, and more recently by digital content providers – and there may be even more singing students. Along with these tens of millions, his influence in rural Hungary in 1987 reached me, which later led to a quasi personal relationship. Although almost every singing master or radio channel shows songs with him to this day, it is also clear from my profession, his role in opera, that I am paying close attention to the artist's opera performance, which is a separate, huge oeuvre in itself.

While every musician knows being his particular opera catalog — more than 100 sung roles that don't even completely overlap with the recordings, so it actually embraces an even more powerful oeuvre — its true richness isn't really recognized by the world. Of course, I myself have apertured that Fischer-Dieskau's voice is not

equally suitable for everything and not everything in the sounding (acoustic) opera space, but that shouldn't stop me, it makes the singer's "other professional life" even more interesting.

As a collector of the artist since I was a student and the owner of the world's largest collection of DFD sound recordings, I also felt obligated to engage more deeply with the epoch-making baritone. This dissertation is a kind of instrument or tool of my curiosity and respect.

## II. Methods

After a detailed, self-formulated biography, I first begin my dissertation with an explanation of the special sound genre. The so-called *Zwischenfach* is an existing category, but it is also special, as most of the works are written for the major subspecies, the owners (singers) of the tone par excellence: soprano, mezzo-soprano, alt, tenor, baritone, bass singers. Fischer-Dieskau's material, on the other hand, lies between the tenor and the baritone, and although it has a very large voice range, it can withstand the tenor and the bass register under certain conditions, its color is tenoral throughout the most active decades of his carrier, and the Italian style and its rich tone or high-volume type stayed far from Fischer-Dieskau.

I then compiled the artist's theatrical and record/radio recording catalog, from which the operative arc of the track can be drawn – this aggregation brought data from many sources to the same platform, which has not existed until now. (Although the length of Fischer-Dieskau's

opera career is long, but not remarkable – 35 years – he has sung opera parts on records for 43 years, and in terms of the number of recordings he had become the most recorded artist in the world: so there was plenty to sum up.

After that, I selected seven iconic opera roles of him, which on the one hand are an important junction of Fischer-Dieskau's career, perhaps a personal favorite, and which are far enough apart for the opera area they encompass to be wide and rich enough. Live recordings and studio records of two Mozart, two Verdi, two Strauss and one Wagner roles were finally scrutinized. I wanted another Wagner and one, but rather two roles in the XXth century, or also from the second half of the century, but in the end this scope was not enough.

Also, due to the barriers of scope, it was not possible to carry out the study that I would definitely like to replace in the next three years: how did Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's soul, his music, feed him from the opera career? According to my hypothesis, the art of miniatures requires dramaturgy in the same way, which an artist who has palletized on the opera stage can produce and

build in the songs with multi-interest knowledge and practice.

### III. Sources

The life of the world's most recorded artist is richly documented on every media platform, even if he didn't live the life of an opera star, he avoided the boulevard media, but even the music "boulevard", the gala evenings. Ten years after his career, a picture book was published already about it, which was followed by a number of interviews, albums, monographs, sketchbooks, autobiographical monologues (*Erzähltes Leben*), mastercourse recording, and a film cycle about him. In addition, he himself excelled in writing books: the first swallow of the seventies, *In the Footsteps of the Schubert Songs*, Goethe, Reichardt, Zelter, Debussy, Brahms, Schumann, Wolf, Mörike, Wagner and Nietzsche or even Furtwängler, but also edited an encyclopedic work entitled *The World of Singing* and a book about the history of interpretation of German song (*To Sing The*

*Word, To Say The Sound*), and he also edited song score volumes for Peters Edition. A collection of articles was also available in digital form, which illustrated his performances for six decades from his first performances in the 1940s, and I was also able to browse the “golden book” that logs his singing and recordings like a diary. I visited two of his houses (Berg am Starnberg, Berlin) where his whole life was spent, but what shows him really, these are his recordings. What’s more, live recordings: this is how the pirate records that emerged from the most unexpected places during decades of collecting have become more valuable, and mostly the sound of early radio broadcasts, sometimes secret dictaphone recordings, has been preserved his art.

All in all, I would have struggled with the confusion of abundance even if the Master had more serious domestic literature (there are no translations and articles except his Schubert's and Brahms's books, record reviews yet), or if I had not had anything to say. At the same time, I consider it my duty to supplement the current dissertation, to write chapters on song and oratorio of his career, as well as conducting, recitation, singing,

musicology, and fine arts. In 2025, his first CV (*Echoes*) may appear in my own translation, along with the analytical volume, which may be based on the present dissertation.

#### IV. Results

A comparison of the selected roles and their recordings reveals that the bloody singer is able to hide in the skin of others with his voice: in many cases he can also become an “Italian” baritone to the extent of a necessary detail or phrase. The comparison did not prove that Fischer-Dieskau's Verdi art was worthless, only that in his primary acoustic conditions – in a huge theatrical space – his material was clearly lagging behind that of the great material owners (London, Capecchi, Capuccilli, Bruson, Wixell and others), and draws attention to itself primarily with its lyrical colours and solutions.

In contrast, direct hits such as Count of the mozartian *Figaro* or Wolfram of *Tannhäuser* show the first-class opera star in full, no matter how easy it is for the world to push Fischer-Dieskau into the box of Lied singers.

The two baritone protagonists of the two selected Richard Strauss operas move on a very different spiritual plane, but as Barak (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*) the artist brings the predominantly lyrical, beautiful-hearted fabric painter in the full opera “armament” of the unbridled, uncarved, bear-killing Mandryka. He plays in front of us (*Arabella*), along with the moments of love.

Overall, I feel justified in the preconception that articulated that, although Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's operatic art is not unparalleled in its entirety, it has an unparalleled educational character in every studio recording. The highly “photogenic” baritone sound brought close to the microphone, which does not compete with other acoustic conditions, shows a level of education, music, situation analysis and pronunciation that can be taken with a tutoring course for artists with better material abilities. The significance of this cannot be overemphasized: the perfect professor emerges here for young baritone artists who have completed and published everything they would not be able to gather because of their proper singing master, curiosity, ability, or lack of time – or their talent.

