audite

Robert Schumann: Kerner Lieder op. 35 & Liederkreis op. 39

aud 95.582

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Fanfare (Henry Fogel - 2007.11.01)

These are early broadcast recordings made by West German Radio in the mid 1950s, when Fischer-Dieskau was about 30 years old. This 1954 effort represents the singer's first recording of the cycle of 12 songs set to poems by Justinus Kerner. He was to record it three years later with Günther Weissenborn, and with Christoph Eschenbach in 1977. A 1959 live Salzburg performance with Gerald Moore was also issued. In the case of Liederkreis, containing some of Schumann's greatest songs, Fischer-Dieskau gave this broadcast production in 1955, but had already made a commercial recording in 1954 with Gerald Moore. (That EMI recording is available on the "Great Recordings of the Century" series, catalog no. 62771.) And he made later recordings of it with Eschenbach and with Alfred Brendel.

In some ways, the young Fischer-Dieskau is the most satisfying to listen to. While a strong case can be made that he deepened his interpretations over time, an equally strong case can be made that the effort and thought he put into those interpretations became increasingly evident, resulting in overly artful and even precious singing. There is none of that here—listening to these performances is pure unalloyed pleasure. The voice is smooth, flexible, solidly produced at soft and loud dynamic levels. His ability to float soft tones is almost without equal among German baritones, and here he does so with a naturalness and ease that is simply engrossing, and he does it when it fits the flow of the music perfectly. Nothing seems applied externally—it all comes from within.

If you set this disc against his 1954 EMI recording of Liederkreis, you'll hear very similar singing and more imaginative piano-playing from EMI (Gerald Moore vs. Günter Weissenborn). But taken on its own merits, this is a spectacular performance. And the only comparably early recording of the Kerner cycle is with Weissenborn instead of Hertha Klust. Klust is more to my taste—lingering over the music when appropriate, as opposed to Weissenborn's more efficient approach. This broadcast, if you consider it to be a recording, serves as the first complete recording of Schumann's op. 35 cycle. (Otherwise, Fischer-Dieskau's 1957 version with Weissenborn fills that role.)

To some degree, I suppose how the enthusiasm behind my recommendation of this disc affects you will depend on how devoted you are to Lieder and on what other recordings you already own. If you own Fischer-Dieskau's earliest recordings of both of these cycles, it is probably a needless duplication to get this. But if you do not, I can very strongly recommend this as a set of performances that will leave you astonished at the combination of vocal, musical, dramatic, and intellectual skills demonstrated. The monaural sound is at the highest level of mid-1950s broadcast quality, and Kurt Malisch's essay on the music and these performances is way above the norm in insight and quality, and it is well translated. No texts or translations are

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