



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

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These archive performances are issued for the first time. A very interesting essay by Kurt Malisch relates the position of these recordings in the Fischer-Dieskau recorded oeuvre. The 1955 "Liederkreis" comes a year and a half after the baritone's first commercial recording of 1954, with Gerald Moore. This in its turn was preceded by a so far unissued Berlin Radio recording of 1951 with Hertha Klust. Later recordings were made in 1959 (live from Salzburg with Gerald Moore), 1977 (with Christoph Eschenbach) and 1985 (with Alfred Brendel).

The op. 39 "Liederkreis" occupies a position in music lovers' affections scarcely lower than the ubiquitous favourites "Frauenliebe und Leben" and "Dichterliebe". In spite of its spellbindingly passionate tenth song, "Stille Tränen", the gloomier, pessimistic Kerner set – Schumann did not call it a cycle – is less loved. Fischer-Dieskau believed strongly in it while admitting that "Not one of the poems celebrates joy or calm happiness. Each one speaks of sadness, loneliness, renunciation, madness – but also of dramatic impulse".

While the op.39 "Liederkreis" made it onto disc well before the Second World War, the present issue now becomes the earliest complete "Kerner-Lieder" in existence. It was followed by Fischer-Dieskau's first commercial recording, with Weissenborn, in 1957, a live version from the 1959 Salzburg Festival with Moore and a studio recording with Eschenbach in 1977. Malisch also mentions that various radio archives contain further performances.

Do we need all this Fischer-Dieskau? For those who can afford it, yes. Whatever reservations one may have over his sometimes forceful, interventionist approach, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau has a chapter all his own in the history of lieder singing. Strong as his own personality was, he always worked each performance afresh in collaboration with the pianist for the occasion. Any archive recording which brings a different pianist from the commercial recordings is therefore of interest.

Günther Weissenborn (1911-2001) shows a powerful intellectual engagement with the music. In the opening song, each one of accompanying semiquavers is placed with clarity, with a life of its own, whereas even a classically restrained pianist such as Imogen Cooper (with Wolfgang Holzmair) lets them run into one another more romantically. With Weissenborn there is little romantic dawdling – ritardandos at the end of songs are used sparingly, as is rubato. But, while Holzmair seems restrained by Cooper's emotionally polite playing, Fischer-Dieskau rises to the challenge of giving a performance which is intensely committed within these parameters. The result is the closest one would get to a non-interventionist Fischer-Dieskau performance and some will like it all the more for that.

Hertha Klust (1903-1970) is more romantic, with leanings towards slower tempi and thicker textures. Fischer-Dieskau's commitment is not in doubt and this looks like being the "Kerner-Lieder" recording from him which gives fullest rein to the pessimistic side of the cycle. Much of it is sung in the husky half-voice of which he was such a master. I should like to remind readers, though, of the superb version by the young Peter Schreier. Perhaps for the very fact that his voice was not intrinsically very large, he can sing these songs more. I find his emotional punch in "Stille Tränen" unmatched even by Fischer-Dieskau. Perhaps, too, the higher tenor key helps to make these songs not sound any gloomier than they absolutely have to.

All the same, Fischer-Dieskau is in a class of his own and these additional recordings take their place in history. There is some distortion at climaxes, the piano sound is a little muddy, particularly in 1954, but generally the quality is very acceptable for the date.