

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in Seoul

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Lee Rumi, an old friend of my parents, daughter of the eminent modernist writer Lee Hyo-seok, told me once that the great German baritone did indeed visit Seoul in the 1960's. She had a vivid recollection of his imposing stature, his passionate delivery of Schubert, and of his silver hair. Sadly, it is long since I have seen her, easy as it should have been for me to drop by her small flat in Ichon-Dong looking out on the Han river in the course of my frequent visits to the city. She has been disabled many years following a stroke, and finds it hard to receive visitors. In fact, I haven't been able to confirm the accuracy of her testimony. A proper venue for the recital must have been difficult to arrange in those days. Sejong Cultural Centre in the heart of the north bank was completed only in 1978, after which renowned singers like Gerard Souzay and Luciano Pavarotti were welcomed at least once or twice a year to Seoul by enthusiastic crowds, even before the deluge of music and music halls that were to follow in the 90's and the present times. But I must admit to being somewhat skeptical that Fischer-Dieskau was there in the 60's, in spite of the strong demand for western high culture that must have persisted through many a difficult period in modern Korean history. In any case, my intention is not to write about physical presence.

To the best of my recollection, I first read a reference to Fischer-Dieskau when I was almost thirteen, in a cartoon serial featured by a popular children's periodical, *The New Youth*. The pictures showed a wolf strolling down a country road with a badger, singing 'Vissi d'arte...'. During a pause, the animal spoke wistfully to his friend about his erstwhile dream to become a famous singer like Fischer-Dieskau. I ran the name by my father. We had then a rather large collection of LP's, but, as it turned out, very little in the way of lieder. The next evening, on his way back from work, my father picked up a local reproduction of an EMI recording, *Die Schöne Müllerin* by Fischer-Dieskau and Gerald Moore. On the cover, there was an enchanting watercolour of a mill and a stream behind a scattering of trees. A little work on Google leads me now to suspect that it was the very first London recording made in 1951. The record itself is long lost amid the chaos of brittle documents and dusty memorabilia piled into the numerous nooks and crannies of my parents' home. But my recollection of the striking voice has never been clearer: it was at once powerful and delicate, sophisticated and youthful in a manner that couldn't have been better suited to this story of a tragic young miller finding and losing love, and it swam comfortably amid the undulating fabric of Gerald Moore's virtuosity like an otter in a stream:

Ich hört ein Bächlein rauschen wohl aus dem Felsenquell

I don't think I ever got over that first impression. As much as I liked other albums acquired over the years, I was never able to recapture that initial shock. By comparison, in all other recordings, Fischer-Dieskau's voice was just a little scratchy here and there, or indulged in too many exaggerated fortes, or, as

in Mahler's *fahrenden Gesellen* recorded with Fürtwängler around the same time, seemed a bit wild. An objective reader will suspect this to be one of those idealizations that become ever more poignant as memory itself recedes into the past. Even after seeing many photographs over the subsequent years of Fischer-Dieskau's distinguished features passing into old age, it's true that I imagined him a young man sitting diffidently at the side of a fair and aloof country girl, contemplating the reflection of blue flowers and a canopy of stars in the gentle waters of a soulful stream. This image was never replaced, for example, by that of the forlorn Heine wandering along the banks of the Rhine.

Good recordings in Seoul were irregularly available then, in spite of the enormous numbers of young people studying music. Record shops were common enough and a local company called Sung-um distributed a selection of European labels, including the greatest hits from Deutsche Grammophone and EMI. But it was quite difficult to find anything beyond the most popular Schubert and Schumann when it came to lieder. Even the *Liederkreis Op. 39*, for example, was nowhere to be found, and it was only much later in America that I was able to get the beautiful DG release that combined it handily with *Dichterliebe* and a smattering of other nice songs.

Fortunately, there were other providers. An unusual institution in Seoul, whose like I have yet to find elsewhere, was the 'music appreciation room' here and there in the city. They were mostly modest commercial establishments organized around a dark chamber with padded walls and rows of seats, where aficionados could sip tea and lose themselves in music from the Western canon, occasionally slipping requests on paper under a glass pane that separated the listeners from a small corner booth where the disk jockey could move about amid shelves of records. Some of these establishments were better known than others for high quality equipment that people could be quite fussy about in the days of the LP. A few years later, much of my social life would revolve around a very popular music appreciation room in the middle of the student union at Seoul University. During a recent visit, I was pleasantly surprised to find it functioning in almost exactly the same state after thirty years. For the sake of old times, I entered again the soothing darkness through the ragged double doors, loose on the hinges that likely had also been left unchanged.

But in my early teens, a boy roaming about on his own in downtown Seoul was quite likely to meet with looks of moral disapprobation, so my forays into the recesses of the music world were necessarily intermittent. An older cousin studying the piano told me about a place in Myungdong that had an exceptional collection, where you could furthermore have the LP's copied on tape for a small fee. The adults probably had reason to be suspicious, since a bit of secrecy lingered about these rooms. Some of the people holding hands in the dark could have well have been younger than university-age, which was when the officially sanctioned fraternizing began. I must myself plead to having taken guilty note of the pretty eyes and long dark hair belonging to the young girl in the booth frequently taking my order. But the real prize from the few visits I managed was the *Spanisches Liederbuch* by Fischer-Dieskau and Schwarzkopf, for the sake of which I invested a substantial sum of money to insure that they

were recorded on magnetic tape of the highest quality. This was my first exposure to songs that were genuinely hard to sing. Here, I am referring only to hitting the right notes with a modicum of coherence. Several of the most attractive numbers, such as *Nun wandre Maria* or *Auf dem grünen Balkonen*, are remarkably romantic in their overall outlook and impact, but tend in detail to be built around combinations of irregular intervals and surprising modulations that deter an amateur. Now, in contrast to records, sheet music of all sorts was quite easily obtained in Seoul even then, perhaps in keeping with the culture of performance. Also in Myungdong was the Daehan music store, with its two rooms full of shelves running from floor to ceiling in every available space, haphazardly packed with what must have been hundreds of thousands of brightly-coloured publications. (A current incarnation is in the opera house of the Seoul Art Complex south of the river. It is still well-stocked, and the sleek open displays are impeccably organized.) An imported light-blue volume of Wolf was rather expensive, but my parents subsidized most such purchases very liberally. Many hours were spent following the score as the great man sang on, and many more at the piano trying to make sense of the subtle twists and turns.

My other source of Fischer-Dieskau was the occasional travel abroad by my father. One such trip brought home a dream come true, the complete Schubert, over four hundred songs suitable for the male voice. This was the year before I entered the university, at which point I think I already started to drift away a little from the total immersion into Fischer-Dieskau that I had indulged in for about five years.

In retrospect, Fischer-Dieskau's overwhelming superiority over other singers appeared primarily in the work of three composers: Schubert (of course), Schumann, and Wolf. Even though it is difficult to imagine a rival when it comes to average high quality sustained over a long career, it is not so hard to find specific composers or songs that are interpreted better by other singers, even within the standard lieder repertoire. Much of Brahms and Richard Strauss, for example, ranging from *Die Mainacht* and *Sapphische Ode* to *Allerseelen* and *Heimliche Afforderung*, was sung more convincingly by his contemporary Hermann Prey. With songs like these, it was hard not to feel that a voice that could take its time conveying a degree of sweetness even at full volume was the best fit. So when I try to sum up my own experience of growing up with Fischer-Dieskau, it is not the perfection of song that is the most lasting factor in the considerable impact he made on my view of the world. It is rather his continued presence as an excellent emissary and teacher of European culture.

It was Fischer-Dieskau who provided my first real overview of nineteenth century romanticism and beyond, albeit through the spectacles of the German-speaking world. At least, he was the first tutor to insist firmly on the sort of well-focused and pragmatic approach that ends in a genuine commitment to understanding. Specialists in mathematical education are fond of bringing up the important pedagogical role of *applications*. How to use an idea is supposed to engage a learner's mind much more readily than a careful discussion of theory. In Fischer-Dieskau's lessons, the omnipresent question was how a text, philos-

ophy, or even historical circumstance could be profitably tailored to the needs of song and performance. From the teacher's perspective, the course went on for nearly fifty years, covering material in a fashion that might not have been entirely systematic, but unquestionably wide-ranging, a phrase that appears in almost all critical assessments of Fischer-Dieskau's opus. To understand his singing, a devotee was forced to go line-by-line through an anthology of Goethe, Heine, Eichendorff, and Klopstock of course. But he also had to become familiar with an assortment of libretti featuring prominent baritone roles, at least the best lines from von Arnim and Brentano's collection, and make some effort to understand the complex relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche. Obsessed as I was with buying every last disk of Fischer-Dieskau I could lay my hands on, it did feel occasionally a bit too much to have to move into the modern age with Othmar Schoeck, Hans Werner Henze, and Aribert Reimann, even while the deep pathos of Britten's *War Requiem* was easy enough to understand. And then, one needed a degree of eagerness to move back frequently to Bach's cantatas, then rapidly forward again to Hindemith's rendition of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Walt Whitman. If not for Fischer-Dieskau, I surely would not have listened half as attentively to the stimulating disjunction of the second Viennese school, nor tried to decipher the mysterious poetry of Stefan George. Some of the relevant recordings I acquired in Seoul at the end of long and patient inquiries, while some others were recommended to me as compact disks when I was in graduate school by the amiable small owner of a small shop on Broadway in New Haven, Connecticut. Mr. Cutler with the pretty grey streaks running through his moustache and hair was a true idolator, and he often handed me the albums teary-eyed with emotion.

So Fischer-Dieskau taught applied European culture to his followers in the world, East Asia in particular. But perhaps it is obvious to specialists that a great singer encourages us to take note of the *texture* of language, in addition to the meaning and context of what is sung. The best illustration of this I know is a collection of songs by Ravel recorded in collaboration with Harmut Höll. He must have been quite close to retirement when it was made. For myself, I was busy at work on the upper west side of New York City when I came upon this compact disk, and nearing the end of my infatuation with recorded music. That is to say, I was ready to be disappointed. The songs themselves turned out to be real gems. Especially memorable were the effective blend of complexity and folk idiom in the *Cinq Melodies Populaires Grecques* and the mythological nostalgia of Quixote's tribute to Dulcinea. But what surprised me most was how Fischer-Dieskau's aged voice seemed almost ideally suited to Ravel at that point. When compared, for example, to the voice of the miller, the singer of Ravel was noticeably weaker in all registers. I have little doubt that a renewed attempt then at Schubert's earlier songs would have been quite disappointing. But with these songs, the weakness was transmuted into a multi-coloured softness, exactly as one might have expected from an aged knight in aged armour wooing his imaginary lover in tender tones, reminding her of his unflagging chivalry, devotion, and romantic spirit. I believe there are a few other recordings in French by Fischer-Dieskau from around the same period, and it

was almost as though he had waited for just the right time in life, for his voice to settle into an exactly appropriate mellow timbre. The young and powerful Fischer-Dieskau, I'm convinced, could not have rendered the plaintive lines of

Réveille-toi, réveille-toi perdrix mignonne

with any technique comparable to the sparse blend of delicate overtones commanded by the old master. Roland Barthes once wrote a flamboyant polemic in which Fischer-Dieskau's excessive refinement is compared unfavorably to the grain of Charles Panzera's deep voice. I couldn't help but wonder what he would have thought of this disk. My knowledge of German and French is still very sketchy, but I like to imagine that some of the characteristic resonances on both sides are audible to me on account of Fischer-Dieskau's tutelage.

The Ravel was the last Fischer-Dieskau recording I found really exciting. By that time, I felt that I had learned what I could of the music, seeing as I was nothing like a professional (or even an amateur) singer. A few later acquisitions filled some conspicuous holes in my library, such as Wolf's Goethe-Lieder with the wonderful interpretation of the *Rattenfänger* accompanied by Barenboim, something I would have been ecstatic about ten years earlier, and a new release of the complete Richard Strauss. Still, I think the spark was gone. Performances that would have sent me earlier into transports of joy, that I would have spent months anticipating, were an everyday affair in New York, and still are in Oxford and London, but I've been to no more than a handful in the twenty-seven years since I left Seoul. When I listen now to music, it's mostly for pedagogical reasons, for the sake of my children. I've never seen Fischer-Dieskau in person either. Somehow, to my mind, he is always a virtual presence in the Seoul of my youth.

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But the singer as teacher still remains a part of me, and I am aware of him almost daily, if somewhat passively. Many a sunset evokes the noble opening chords of *Im Abendrot*, and the Nebelglanz is not far from my mind when the moon comes up. Each time I go to the Max Planck Institute in Bonn, it's hard to resist a pilgrimage to Cologne to revisit the Starke Christoph and the Bildnis on golden leather.

The notion that the right sort of music educates the emotions, it seems, is at least as old as Plato. In our cognitive age, it is to be expected that this idea is being dissected, and will eventually be laid out to plain view on something like firm scientific ground. But my experience of being tutored by Fischer-Dieskau has always been more like the one described by Adorno, swaying furtively to the vibrations of the Kreutzer sonata played by a family friend, huddled near the top of the staircase in his parents' home long into the hours when he should have been asleep. It has always been largely personal and somewhat secret, reflecting in a peculiar manner the shadows of the music rooms in Seoul. I have never been entirely comfortable discussing with people my feelings about

Fischer-Dieskau or lieder in general, and when I do blurt something out, I feel deeply embarrassed. One might reasonably wonder if something has gone wrong with the emotion bit in my case.

When I read of the singer's death about a month ago, I can't quite say I felt saddened by the news, even if it did fit well that tired cliché, the passing of an era. But I wondered a while if there might have been a way to tell him about his enormous influence on a young boy in Korea decades ago. After all, maybe it makes a difference even to eminent people in their old age to be reminded of their profound and far-reaching contributions to the connectedness of the world.

There was a master class by Hermann Prey at the Mannes school of music in my New York days, around 1995, an event I attended in remembrance of Prey's Schumann recital in 1980, which remains for me the singular epitome of elevating musical experience. That evening in Seoul, long after the last crystalline waves of the bösen Lieder had dispersed into the evening air, devoted members of the audience had refused to let the singer go, and he had obliged them with seven encores that went on close to an extra hour. When he had finished with the ones he had prepared and begged to be excused, a student jumped up to the stage with some Schubert. The page-turner had left already, so that the young man himself crouched at the side of the accompanist, Helmut Deutsch, ready to assist. The small group of cheering youngsters huddled near the stage were treated thereby to a beautiful postlude of *Der Lindenbaum*. The entire song was aptly like a meditation, delivered with eyes half-closed and fixed to the ground. After the duo were finally allowed to exit, some overly energetic fans were even waiting outside near his car, grabbing him around the shoulder in a last attempt to get an autograph. His gentle smile was gleaming in the orange light of the streetlamp, and he gave a kindly wave through the window as the car made off. The Hankook Daily featured an interview the following morning, where he expressed genuine astonishment at being given the kind of reception in this remote country that one might have assumed reserved for rock stars. When Prey died in 1998, I regretted that I hadn't made use of the encounter in New York to tell him how moving the recital in Seoul had been. I also thought at the same time that I should probably find a way to write to Fischer-Dieskau.

Now it's too late of course and these things are likely of no importance in the long run of things. Nevertheless, I thought I might jot down a few reminiscences.

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