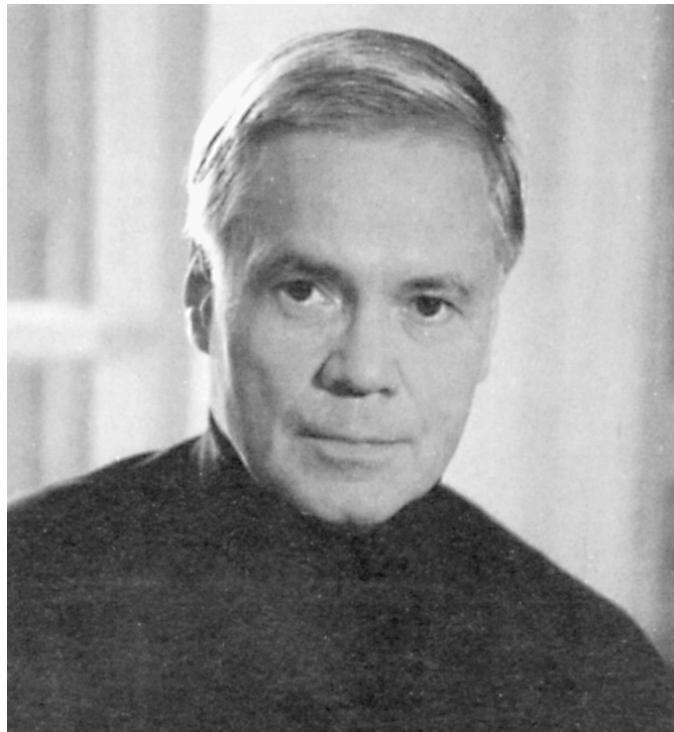


Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau,  
Baritone

# ‘Between the notes, that’s the main thing’



*Professor Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was interviewed for Fidelio on Oct. 22, 1996, in Berlin, by Ortrun Cramer and Stephan Marienfeld.*

**Fidelio:** At the beginning of next year, we will celebrate Schubert’s 200th birthday. This will be the occasion for many concerts and readings, in many cities, such as the big concert series in Cologne, of which you are now the artistic director, and which you have kicked off with a lecture. In the course of this concert series, every song that Schubert ever wrote will be performed . . .

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** . . . all of them, with only a few exceptions.

**Fidelio:** We would like to dive in with our first question: What, in your estimation, is Schubert’s special significance? Why should we, today—in an era threatened with economic, moral, and cultural crisis—bother ourselves about Schubert?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** I am not of the opinion, that works of art must be unconditionally linked to what was happening at the time they were created. Admittedly, it is *really* our duty, as artists, to hold up a mirror to our own era; but, on the other hand, these works have lives of their own, and they’re still alive today. The reason why Schubert is celebrated so much today, lies rather in the fact that there has been nobody else like him—not before him, not after him. Today, the *lied* genre is long dead; the art-song no longer exists. Yes, songs for voice and piano are still being written; but, to describe these as *lieder*, would be the height of impudence in most cases. Schubert brought this form to perfection over the course of only a few years. And therefore, it’s important that we orient ourselves toward this man. It’s a question of his musical nature—something that is no longer possible today, in that form.

But, all of his external circumstances—the oppressive and confined surroundings he grew up in, the difficult circumstances under which he had to learn, and how his life was plagued by illness, and how short it was—all that is quite irrelevant. After all, in those days, people tended to die young.

**Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau** has played a key role as a singer in shaping musical life from the end of World War II down to the present day. His numerous recordings attest to his standard-setting *lieder* interpretations. Above and beyond this, he has made a name for himself as the author of numerous books on *lieder* and song, and has also appeared as an orchestral conductor. He currently devotes his time to teaching and promoting young artists.

Rather, I believe that it is very good, if, with the aid of his songs, we can be reminded, among other things, of the social conditions under which Schubert had to work. Completely aside from the fact that the songs themselves have such a whirling life of their own, which you can never completely grasp, but which you can perhaps approximate in little pieces, without ever really reaching it. And all this is bound together in one single mind, with one single way of experiencing music.

**Fidelio:** You're saying you would not necessarily look at a work of art in connection with the realities of its own era, since it has its own intrinsic value.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** I'm saying that about art in general. That doesn't mean a *l'art pour l'art* ["art for art's sake"] standpoint, but, art should not be an appendage of the times. Rather, it is *permitted* to reflect the times, but it is not *required* to do so, or, so I have found. It stands on its own—or, at least, it used to. The big question is whether it could still do so today; I doubt it. When I see what passes for "creative" today, it's pretty poor pickings.

**Fidelio:** People generally emphasize the fact that Schubert had a wealth of opportunities to dip into the latest works of contemporary poets. **Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** That's true. But, on the other hand, if Schubert were alive today, he would find even richer fields to plow. He would see, spread before him, an infinite spectrum of lyrical poetry, which simply did not exist in his own day. Because lyrical poetry was still relatively new; it only first emerged with Klopstock, or, if you will, you might go back to Gryphius. This was a completely new mode of expression. It emerged, at the very latest, during the Enlightenment.

**Fidelio:** Schubert was apparently rather arbitrary in his selection of poems to compose . . .

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Not at all, I don't believe so. It's simply absurd, when, as often happens, people do up a balance-sheet of the 100 good poems which he set to music, against the other 400 which were not so good. For one thing, he gives them a wide variety of treatments, and does magnificent justice to the good poems. But, above all else, he let himself be guided by musical aspects: What is rhythmical, what is harmonic? How can a melody be built up? The composition of a single melody is born out of a bit of text, perhaps the first line, but it can also be the entire strophe; it can even be the poem's overall form.

**Fidelio:** So, a poem is already a sort of musical score?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Yes, that's so. Many, many composers have only found their way to a certain form, through familiarizing themselves with texts. A famous example is Nietzsche, who was a musical dilettante, but who wanted to compose anyway. And Hans von Bülow, after looking over his compositions, gave him this very intelligent advice: "Write songs, and stick to the text. Then you will find at least *one* red thread, or a guiding hand, that will show you the way." And so it came to pass, that his songs were far and away the best musical pieces he ever produced.



*Fischer-Diskau (left) with the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. "After he had inspired me to the 'Four Serious Songs' of Brahms at a manorhouse in Salzburg, he treated me as his own son."*

**Fidelio:** There were some poems which Schubert rejected . . .

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Not all that many! There were a few which were not suitable for musical setting, but which he liked anyway, and he tried to adapt them. On a number of occasions, these attempts failed, such as, for example, in his cycle of three hymns by Novalis, which simply didn't work; but things like that happen. Brahms believed that there was no need to publish absolutely everything that Schubert ever wrote. When Schubert's collected works came out, Brahms said that "Schubert himself would never have allowed it; it will denigrate him, if you actually print everything he ever wrote, since there are weak pieces here, too." But I must say that, in comparison to other composers, the weak Schubert pieces are quite rare. . . .

**Fidelio:** Brahms also said that “There’s something you can learn from every Schubert song.”

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Of course. But Brahms himself was extremely self-critical; he was always pruning and polishing his works. Those things that he actually published, were correct down to the dots on the “i’s,” and nothing could be altered.

**Fidelio:** Going further into the content of the poetry: For Schubert, there was yet another, spiritual level with which he conversed, while composing his songs.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Yes, there is the widest imaginable array of references in his works—more of them biographical, than with other composers. He selects poems that coincide with his situation at the moment, and that express what he has experienced, or can imagine experiencing. Perhaps this is why he composed so many poems written by his own friends, since they certainly must have had some insight into what he was going through.

**Fidelio:** Many poems which Schubert set to music, had also been previously composed by others before him, such as Reichardt and Zelter. Why are Schubert’s different?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Reichardt is perhaps his most immediate predecessor. Schubert copied out some of Reichardt’s songs by hand, in order to practice that way of writing, and to familiarize himself with the declamatory style, only sparsely underlaid with chords. Reichardt’s “Prometheus” can really be seen as a run-up to Schubert; I think Schubert’s own “Prometheus” profited from it. And who else? Well, of course, as a young beginner, he adopted Zumsteeg as his model, setting the same texts as he did. But then Schubert raced ahead. It’s a unique course of development.

**Fidelio:** People say that “Gretchen am Spinnrad” was his one great, audacious leap. From then on, he was a genius.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** He was so, even before that. But, you must admit that the art-song was indeed perfected around that time.

**Fidelio:** But, did Schubert develop even further after that, or is he already complete by that point?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** There was continued development, of course. But “Gretchen am Spinnrad” did represent a huge leap; there really aren’t any forerunners. It was like a bolt of lightning.

Afterwards, of course, there was even more development. Schubert repeatedly revisited the old forms, his early style, and tried to give them new life. But then he would very quickly abandon them again. Toward the end of his life, one can sense that he was no longer

thinking his way into the minds of others, causing them to speak on his behalf, but that he was now speaking for himself. Up to that point—approximately up to the time when he composed “Einsamkeit,” I’d think, when he was in Zseliz in Hungary—he makes others speak for him in his songs. But then, with this song “Einsamkeit,” which he himself described as the best song he had ever written up to that point, he attains a level on which he truly and entirely identifies himself with what he has composed. For example, by studying his two different settings of Goethe’s “An den Mond,” you can reconstruct a picture of how rapidly he developed over a very short time. The first version is lovely and pretty, and thoroughly listenable, but it’s not nearly as important as the second one, composed shortly thereafter, which is laid out completely differently, with a totally different arrangement of strophes—everything is different.

**Fidelio:** At your lecture in Cologne, you emphasized that Schubert usually composed bunches of poems by the same poet.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Yes, as much as possible, quite often.

**Musikalische Akademie,**  
die heute am Pfingstsonnabend den 26. May 1822,  
**zum Vortheile der öffentlichen Wohlthätigkeitss-**  
**Anstalten**  
im K. K. Hoftheater nächst dem Karlsbaderthore  
gespielt werden wird.

- E r s t e A b t h e i l u n g .**
1. Ouverture zu der Oper: *Lodoiska*, von Cherubini.
  2. Die Kränze des Ibykus, von Fr. Schiller, vorgetragen von Hrn. Anschütz, k. k. Hofchauspieler.
  3. Adagio und Rondeau für die Violine, von Baillot, gespielt von Hrn. Escudero, Schüler des Hrn. Baillot.
  4. Geist der Liebe, von Marsikoff, in Musik gesetzt von Fr. Schubert, gesungen von Hrn. Barth, Tiefe, Nejebe und Nestrov.
  5. Arioso aus der Oper: *La donna del lago*, von Rossini; „O tu ch'io chiamo,“ gesungen von Dile. Eckelin.
- Z w e i t e A b t h e i l u n g .**
1. Ouverture von Herrn Fr. Schoberlechner, Kapellmeister am Herzogl. Hofe zu Lucca.
  2. Variationen für das Flügeloforte, mit Orchester-Begleitung, komponiert und gespielt von Herrn Fr. Schoberlechner.
  3. Der Christabend, Gedicht von Fr. Kind, vorgetragen von Dile. Weber, k. k. Hofchauspielerin.
  4. Romanze: „Die Ihr die Triebe des Herzens kennt,“ aus der Oper: *Die Hochzeit des Figaro*, von Mozart, mit deutschem Texte, gesungen von Dile. Eckelin.
  5. Introduction und Variationen für das Waldhorn, gespielt von Hrn. Bergonzi, worin verschiedene verschiedene Instrumente nachahmen wird.
- Herr Hofopern-Kapellmeister M. Umlauf hat die Leitung aller Musiksstücke, und der k. k. Hofopern-Orchester-Director und Mitglied der k. k. Hofkapelle, Hr. Fatter, die Direction des Orchesters gefälligst übernommen.
- Alle übrigen vorbenannten Künstler haben sich nur in der edlen Absicht, den wohlthätigen Zweck zu fördern, zur Mitwirkung bereitwillig herbeigeflossen.

*Music Academy concert program, May 1822, when Schubert’s works were not well known, features his lied “Geist der Liebe.” In addition to musical works, poems—for example, “The Cranes of Ibykus” of Friedrich Schiller—were performed on the program.*



Autograph of "Gretchen am Spinnrad" ("Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel") (1814), Schubert's first masterpiece of *lied* composition. "The song represented a huge leap; there really aren't any forerunners. It was like a bolt of lightning."

**Fidelio:** And therefore he was seeking not just to compose a poem, but rather he was trying to grasp the poet's underlying character.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** That's right. Which is why, in my *lieder* concerts, I always strove, when possible, to sing only the works of a single composer, so that the audience could be gradually drawn into a particular creative genius' way of thinking, and could follow him. If you only do little clusters—three or four songs by one, and another, and then yet another—you lose the opportunity to think your way into the composer's mind, since, after all, most of these pieces are quite brief.

**Fidelio:** You said "this particular creative genius." I'd like to make that into a motto, since the composition of *lieder* distinguishes itself by the fact, that it works explicitly with metaphors. A while ago, Lyndon LaRouche wrote an interesting article, in which he demonstrates that creative mentation, creative insight, is mediated through metaphor. Metaphor as a thought-form . . .

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** In music, you have to speak about a form-form, of adopted formal elements that are applied in order to express certain specific things. Because painting with music, that's something completely different.

**Fidelio:** No, that's not what I mean. LaRouche is talking

about a "thought-object," with reference to Kepler. Kepler used this concept frequently in his *Harmonice Mundi*. It indicates that a creative composer, poet, or artist is driven to communicate his *new* discoveries—discoveries which had never before

existed *in that form*, the solution to self-imposed or pre-existing paradoxes that were impenetrable from the standpoint of currently existing knowledge and experience. It is precisely this step of coming to grips with what is incommensurable, the paradox, that must be communicated. And therefore, the challenge is to express this through metaphor, to evoke a mental image which can express precisely that creative process which I myself am going through.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** That will have much less relevance for Romanticism, I think. In Romanticism, the main determinant is the mood, the atmosphere. And in that regard, you could also describe Schubert as a Romantic. The mood of the poem. After all, lyrical poetry's main concern is to express, in this way, a fleeting constellation of various elements.

**Fidelio:** Schubert presses forward into the *core* of the poem, which he creates anew, in musical form. That is the idea of metaphor. This process cannot really be expressed in words alone. Furtwängler spoke about how he played what lies between, or behind, the notes.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** That's something else again. Now you're talking about interpretation. He himself has supplied the proof that things aren't so easy, when it comes to composition, whereas, as an interpreter, he was able to scale incredible heights.

**Fidelio:** But the idea of a poem does not exist in the individual words on the page, but rather in the whole.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** And that's so, even in Eichendorff, even though every word he uses is actually a symbol of some sort. But once you've analyzed everything, you still don't have an interpretation—not by a long shot. The interpreter is concerned with other things. You said it: between the notes, that's the main thing.

**Fidelio:** The idea is therefore to follow the spoor, to attempt to rediscover the creative process which the composer himself has gone through.

**Prof. Fischer-**

**Dieskau:** Yes, as much as that's possible; but, no one can fully attain that. All you can do, is try to trace things back: Where did this idea come from? Where did he pick up on it, and what is actually new here?

**Fidelio:** But, isn't that precisely what makes for the riches contained in Classical art?

The Granger Collection, N.Y.



**Right:** Schubert's close friend, the singer Michael Vogl, helped to make his songs better known to the public. (Pencil drawing by Leopold Kupelwieser, 1821.) **Above:** In "Schubert Evening at Joseph Spaun's Home," Vogl sits beside Schubert at the piano. (Watercolor by Moritz van Schwind.)

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** No; the real riches lie in the capacity—at least, for the era I'm looking at, between 1800 and 1900—not so much to reconstruct the form or the structure (all that has to be there, too), but rather to recreate the personalities who are there, speaking, singing, writing. To add your own personality to it, and to merge with it. And woe be it, when there's no pliant personality to do the interpreting, because then we arrive at the way Beethoven is often done nowadays: rushed through, at a rapid tempo, metronomically. That doesn't do justice to these pieces. He himself, as a pianist, took great liberties. We know from contemporary reports, that he was a highly gifted improviser; and, that alone already gives you an incredible freedom to take liberties. So, "Classical" cannot mean metronomic!

**Fidelio:** LaRouche describes the *lied* as a kind of Rosetta Stone, which assists us in approaching and understanding the larger, more extensive works of chamber music, all the way to the symphony. You can see this very concretely in Schubert, taking the example of those songs which he went on to develop in other forms.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** But then, considerable difficulties soon crop up. I'm thinking of the young Hugo Wolf, who sought Brahms out in order to show him his compositions, only to receive the curt verdict: "Go to the Academy, to Mr. Hellmesberger, and learn how to compose." You can see the extent to which a highly intelligent, intel-

lectually active man can have no comprehension of a young, gifted genius—and for many reasons! Stylistically, Wolf travels on such entirely different pathways—an entirely different declamatory manner, a special ear for the sound of words. The young Wolf was one of those people who would recite a poem to themselves a hundred times, until they had found the music that goes with it. Whereas, with Brahms, the creative process proceeds quite differently.

I believe Schubert had many different methods for familiarizing himself with a poem: reading it aloud and silently, always thinking up new ideas about it, first letting various things knock around inside his head, until he finally decides what to do. Unfortunately, most of that is

impossible to reconstruct in detail—as little possible, as it is for us to imagine how Michael Vogl sang—now, that I'd really like to know, too! Or, how Schubert played the piano: it's very difficult to get a sense of that in retrospect. I believe he was a very quick pianist; his contemporaries speak of the “neatness of his playing.” Surely, he was one of those people who, if he came into a room and heard someone practicing, would be the first to

say: “Why so slow?” Schubert has this tendency—in contrast to Brahms, for whom precisely the opposite was the case. “Why are you rushing like that? Stop and consider, that if you've got 4/4, first do it in 8/8, and then you'll advance a little ways.”



**Fidelio:** For you, is Schubert the center of everything else, as he is for almost all *lieder* singers?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Perhaps not the sole center, but certainly the brightest one. There are others, too: Schumann, Brahms, and Wolf. And also Beethoven, in his own way, although for him, the *lied* brought him into a sphere which was somewhat difficult for him; he didn't like to work with texts. He did it anyway, because it affected people far and wide—it sold better than purely instrumental music. He therefore wanted to confront this in himself, because he wanted to compose operas, but he didn't have much luck in that. Had Beethoven been able to carry out all his plans to fruition, then, for example, today we would have his opera *Macbeth*, a *Faust*, and many others. He would have contracted himself to write a whole series of operas. But then nothing came of it, after Napoleon's occupation. But Beethoven's preoccupation with words, and with *lieder*, extends well into his middle period.

**Fidelio:** Do you see similarities in the way Beethoven and Schubert created songs?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** In *Wachtelschlag*, which both of them composed, quite a number of similarities, some of which, of course, are conditioned by the poem's intrinsic rhythm.

But, in general, both men were immersed in the music that had been composed up to that time. Both composers had heard the young Hummel perform on the piano, both of them had attended Schlegel's lectures in Vienna, and so forth. There are many commonalities, from which they certainly did draw their own conclusions.

**Fidelio:** I'd like to loop back into this again: the imparting of ideas, creative ideas. Permit me to ask, once more, how you approach this question, first, as a singer, and, now, as a teacher? Do you see any change? Is there any development in one or another direction?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** No. Within each individual young person you meet, you have the same fields to plow. The trick is just to wake them up, to sharpen their ears for what's already there in the music. The prerequisites remain unchanged. And when young people have grasped that, part of it comes back to the teacher. It's not all that different with the orchestra. There are orchestras that seem to be encased in dough, so that first you have to break through the normal routine, and clear out the openings.

**Fidelio:** What, then, is the role of primary education, in elementary schools, and at home with the family, when we see today, for example, that the study of the Classics is being increasingly pushed to the sidelines in normal school curricula?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** I don't think it has anything to do with it. Take Zelter, for example: the son of a master mason and a clothmaker's widow, and absolutely not involved with music, nobody in the family. He wasn't yet twelve years old, when he first exhibited a love for music, and then he developed this unbelievably quickly, without the aid of a music teacher. He built himself an organ out of little slats of wood which you could step on. It didn't produce any sound, of course, but he could hear the tones in his imagination, since he had keys he could press. He took a piece of wood and made believe he could play the violin, until his father hit on the idea: “You're always making music; should I give you a violin?” “Yes!” And so, he began to scratch away at that. And that's how it started out; later, he became the counterpoint teacher here in Berlin. There are many examples like that: Dvořák, a butcher's son: there was no talk of music previously.

You have to make a distinction between creative, and re-creative. With creative people, truly new horizons open up. But the re-creative person relies on individual abilities; his “education” never ends. And, I try to give a little nudge to what's possible for an interpreter to do.

The interpreter has to practice by himself, discovering the possibilities of his own voice, but this experience really remains his alone. He has to learn to be critical of himself, and must find out precisely where his vocal organ possesses the most beautiful tonal possibilities. Others can use only very vague words to impart this to him. You could also suggest it to him in sound, but he has to find his *own* sound! And, of course, his own personality, too, for expressing what must be expressed.

**Fidelio:** In other recent interviews, you mentioned that in our society, education of the personality gets short shrift.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** No, not education of the personality, that I don't believe. What concerns me, is the general social tendency to enforce a level, above which nothing rises and stands out. Anyone who draws attention to himself as an individual, is viewed with suspicion. We acquired this tendency, of course, from America, and we must resist it: levelling, and imitation of what others are already doing.

When, for example, a member of an orchestra wants to do something especially good, he is looked upon with suspicion, because the apparat says, "We're doing our jobs here, and doing it on a certain level; but anything beyond that. . . ." That's why orchestra directors have a much tougher time than they used to. Whenever someone came, who had the aura of a special genius, all the musicians would immediately perk up and sit on the edge of their chairs.

**Fidelio:** That evokes the stock image of the chamber musician, the orchestra musician, who doesn't know how to sing. You yourself are also active as a conductor. What can you, as a singer, impart, which others, perhaps, cannot?

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** To be able to breathe, for example. All music has to speak in some form or other. It is desirable that people make music on the breath, with the breath. That's one basic prerequisite, but there are many, many others. Of course, if these things are overdone, they can lead to bombast and pretentiousness; indeed, there have already been quite enough composers, who have likely trod a dangerous path, such as Bruckner, for example. Today, people are attempting to compensate for this, by simply playing him down as he is in the printed score; but, that wasn't his original intent, either.

It's not often that we are blessed with a structural genius in performance such as Furtwängler, who approached everything that welled up—crescendos and decrescendos, accelerandos, ritenuitos—from the standpoint of structure. He always obeyed the laws that were

there in the piece. That's what makes his performances so genuine and convincing.

**Fidelio:** To what extent do you see in that, Beethoven's famous "as free as it is rigorous," which he prefixed to his "Grosse Fuge"? By which he certainly meant its mode of composition, although you could just as well take it as instructions for what the interpreter is supposed to do.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Well, let's hope he can do it! That's the question.

**Fidelio:** There exists a universal lawfulness which gives unity to the Many that is our universe. Johannes Kepler pursued this question intensively; Goethe speaks later on about "that which holds the universe together in its innermost essence."

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** In music, this unity has been sliced up. A lawfulness which Goethe still believed in, which he tried to fathom in the young Mendelssohn by having him play for him: what existed at that time? what followed? how did things actually go? He always wanted to grasp the connectedness of a given domain, and yet, the connectedness of the musical domain would never really open up for him. And then, Schönberg came along later, and said: I'm going to take a radical step, and this will all be taken care of: the end of musical history, it's over. Ever since then, we've been dancing, in convulsive spasms, around contorted musical questions.

Artistically, we are sick in body and soul. What the way out is, is unclear to me. And what unity is to be had, at a time when orchestras are dying out, and when opera houses are about to close their doors; what's going to come next—when nothing new in music, for the orchestra, is truly lasting: pieces are performed once, and then they're thrown away. It's all quite demoralizing.

**Fidelio:** If I may follow up with one more question. That's certainly true: on the one hand, you have the economic pressure, while on the other, there is such a great hunger for music, for concerts.

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** It has never been as great as it is right now.

**Fidelio:** But, what will happen to this hunger? Will it be fed with acrobatic tricks, with some glitz . . .

**Prof. Fischer-Dieskau:** Each individual person can only try their best to counteract it.

**Fidelio:** Let's hope that such efforts are not in vain! Professor Fischer-Dieskau, thank you for speaking with us.

—translated from the German  
by John Sigerson