



Johannes Brahms: Die schöne Magelone

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[Fanfare](#) (Lynn René Bayley - 2008.05.01)

Could it be possible that, during his lifetime, a work by Johannes Brahms was booed off the stage? That is exactly what Brahms himself claimed of this rather rare song-cycle when first performed by baritone Julius Stockhausen and the composer at the piano in 1869. Apparently, it's not exactly welcomed warmly today either, which accounts for the fact that there are only about a dozen recordings of the work, half of them by Fischer-Dieskau, for whom this was his first performance of the cycle.

Die Schöne Magelone is not a string of musically connected songs, like Schubert's Die Schöne Müllerin or Winterreise, nor a "sontata-type" song cycle like Beethoven's An die Ferne Geliebte or Schumann's Dichterliebe, but a collection of contrasting mood-pieces written in a specifically dramatic style closer to opera than to Lieder. The "plot" concerns Peter, son of the Count of Provence, who goes out into the world to gain experience and falls in love with a beautiful woman named Magelone. The poems, alternating between third person and first person (itself an unusual form for a cycle), are set to music that is simple and strophic in format, yet creatively varied in harmony, rhythm, and layout of variations. There is an optional narrative before each song explaining the plot, which Fischer-Dieskau does not perform in this early Cologne radio broadcast from 1952. The baritone did record the narrative in his first studio recording with pianist Jörg Demus in 1957, but this narrative was cut for the CD release.

As a whole, there is an emotionally strong, extroverted, almost rustic quality to these songs that I love. Peter is obviously both warrior and lover, so his emotions flip between his desire to prove himself a "man" in Magelone's eyes and his wish to have her see his poetic nature. Undoubtedly the most intimate song is No. 9, "Ruhe, Süßliebchen im Schatten," in which Peter sings Magelone a lullaby of great tenderness. Harmonically, it is no match for some of Brahms's later, more sophisticated songs, but it is exactly the lack of studied sophistication that makes it, and the cycle as a whole, so touching and direct in expression. In a very real sense, this is a mono-opera with piano. If someone were to be clever enough to orchestrate it, I'm sure it would work fantastically well as a concert work for baritone, in the manner of Mahler's Das Klagende Lied.

As recordings of this work go, this one holds a very high place of honor. Of Fischer-Dieskau's later recordings, the ones from 1957 (Demus) and 1965 (with Gerald Moore) are more subtle and cautious, though subtly colored, the 1970 versions (two, with Sviatoslav Richter) more weighty in both vocal declamation and the piano accompaniment, the 1978–1982 recording with Daniel Barenboim the least engaged or engaging. Yet recordings by modern singers are even less engaging, the performances by Hermann Prey, Michael Volle, Andreas Schmidt, and Wolfgang Holzmaier being more routine and workaday, with little variety of expression. Only

two modern versions, by Konrad Jarnot (2002, Orfeo 50041, reciter Inge Borkh) and Roman Trekel (2003, Oehms 331, reciter Bruno Ganz) are in the same league as Fischer-Dieskau's in penetrating insight. The three separate Lieder from 1954 are similarly excellent—valuable because Fischer-Dieskau rarely sang them later. Highly recommended.

