

"Nowadays there are conductors who know nothing else but how to wave their hands"

## An interview with the conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau

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The name of the legendary baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is well known to most classical music lovers. The singer with his unique voice, who passed away four years ago at the age of 87, had become legend in his lifetime when he performed and recorded a vast range of compositions. Married four times, Fischer-Dieskau had three sons by his first wife, one of whom will soon be appearing in Israel. The conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau (61) will be performing for the first time with the Raanana Symphonette Orchestra accompanied by his daughter, the pianist Manon Fischer-Dieskau (29) for part of the concert. "This coming trip will be my first with the Symphonette, but my eighth visit to Israel," Martin Fischer-Dieskau related in an interview he gave from his home in Berlin. "I have conducted most of the orchestras in Israel and I am always happy to return. I have fond memories of Israel ever since I was a boy in the 1970's, when the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra sent my father a box of oranges for Christmas following his performance with it."

Growing up in the house of a living legend, Martin relates that in his youth he was always known as "Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's son"; and this pedigree had its pros and cons. "Thirty years ago, when I began my career as a conductor, I didn't have to make much effort to promote myself because the name was enough," he says. "People wanted to hear Fischer-Dieskau's son conducting. On the other hand it was a great responsibility to perform under this name. Moreover, it was a challenge for me to develop as a conductor, because a conductor must be dominant and I grew up in a home with a very authoritarian father who ruled over everything."

Fischer-Dieskau relates that thanks to his family connections, he got to meet some of the greatest musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in person. "Composers such as Stravinsky, Britten, Frank Martin and others, came to our home. Some of them composed pieces especially for my father and for me these visits were a natural occurrence."

### **With such a father, why didn't you decide to become a singer yourself?**

"None of us three brothers even tried to. It was clear to us that it would be insane. I didn't even consider the option."

### **Did your father practice every day?**

"He never practiced his scales. He only learned new roles or refreshed pieces that he had sung in the past. Before concerts he would only warm up his voice."

Martin himself made his debut as a conductor when he was 19. From this point onward he focused on realizing his aspirations to acquire the tools he believed that a "real" conductor should possess. According to him, this approach is completely different from the current

approach, where conducting has become the prerogative of people who are interested not in music but in conducting as a career. "Young conductors today say they want a career in conducting," he says. "I feel that it's a terrible thing that conducting has become synonymous with power and strategy."

### **So what are the requirements for a "real" conductor?**

"First and foremost he must be a musician and to be a skilled instrumentalist. I myself learned to play the violin and the piano and subsequently worked in opera houses accompanying singers. When I conduct, I try to make myself invisible. You must remember that conducting is a relatively new profession and its ideology developed only around the 19<sup>th</sup> century."

As part of his doctoral thesis, Fischer-Dieskau explored the history of conducting, and arrived at some fascinating insights. "In Italy, the conductor's baton appeared only around 1870. Until then the performances were led by the first violinist or the pianist, who played simultaneously. Nowadays there are conductors who know nothing else but how to wave their hands."

The concert in Raanana, which Fischer-Dieskau will conduct, includes works by Brahms (*Tragic Overture*), Beethoven (*Piano Concerto No.4*, with pianist Manon Fischer-Dieskau) and Friedrich Gernsheim (*Symphony No. 3*).

Gernsheim's symphony is the most intriguing work in the program and well worth getting to know (you can also listen to it on YouTube). Gernsheim was a Jewish composer, a close friend of Brahms, who stood in the shadow of his famous friend and was eventually forgotten. His Third Symphony is a fascinating four-movement program piece, which describes the story of Exodus through music. The first movement describes the slavery in Egypt, the second movement is Miriam's song; the third movement is the exodus from Egypt and the fourth movement is hymns of victory and joy.

The work is tonal and very pleasant to listen to; its musical style is reminiscent of the composer's famous friend, Brahms. "I must admit that we did not plan to perform this Symphony so close to Passover," Fischer-Dieskau laughs, "but it's wonderful that it turned out to be so."

Thursday 17.3 and 19.3 in Raanana