



Barry McDaniel sings Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Duparc, Ravel & Debussy

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[Fanfare](#) (Lynn René Bayley - 2012.08.08)

Barry McDaniel was an American baritone who, like many classical singers of his generation, found it more congenial (and possibly easier) to make a career in Europe and, in his case, particularly Germany. He gave numerous Lieder recitals and opera performances in Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Hanover, Brunswick, and Berlin, and appeared at least once (in 1964) at Bayreuth as Wolfram in Wieland Wagner's production of *Tannhäuser*. Yet he, like so many other baritones both domestic and foreign who sang Lieder, toiled in the shadow of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. This two-CD recital hopes to set things straight by issuing recordings which McDaniel made in German radio studios between 1963 and 1974.

At least in the Schubert and Schumann, his singing is exquisitely rounded and well finished in phrasing, his general interpretations sensitive and beautifully articulated, yet he makes very little vocal contrast in these songs. This places his singing into the "very good but not great" category, similar to Heinrich Schlusnus, Herbert Janssen, and Gerhard Hüsch. It is not on the higher level of such pioneers as Karl Erb or Alexander Kipnis, or the more acted-out form of Lieder singing that came to fruition right after World War II in the styles of Fischer-Dieskau, Souzay, or Hotter.

It is a subtle distinction, and not every listener may feel the same way I do. It's the difference between telling a story (the old school) vs. acting out the words (new school). Particularly in the older style of French chanson, the singer was neither expected nor permitted to interpret the lyrics; one was simply supposed to sing them, musically but objectively, and allow the listener to add his or her own interpretation. Souzay was the first French-speaking singer to dare to perform chansons in the same manner as Lieder, and it caused quite a sensation in postwar France. I will say this much, however, that McDaniel learned his vocal and musical training from Mack Harrell very well. Harrell was much the same kind of singer, a warm, creamy baritone with a darkish timbre who gave generally fine interpretations of everything he sang. There is one song here that I happen to know very well from an archive recording by George Henschel, Schumann's *Lied eines Schmiedes*. Henschel takes it at a walking tempo, not too fast but much quicker than McDaniel and Hertha Klust, and it was not rushed for the 78-rpm disc because the song is only about a minute long.

But then we turn to CD 2, most of which was recorded in 1973–74, and one immediately discerns growth in his interpretations. There is more detail here, more attention to the text in terms of speaking as the character rather than speaking for the character. (In opera, but also to some extent in songs, the catalyst for this whole paradigm shift was Feodor Chaliapin.) Also, possibly because of the clearer sonics, McDaniel's high range comes across much brighter, which allows him to make a more effective contrast in vocal timbre as well as wordplay. I also think that perhaps his experience around this time singing *Pelléas* in Debussy's opera also helped him

rethink some of his chanson and Lied interpretations. In any case, he does bring the Lieder singer's gift for word-painting to his performances of Duparc and Debussy, also recorded around 1973-74 — listen to the way he floats the soft high note in Phidylé, then the open brightness of his tone in the louder passage immediately following it. Sandwiched between these composers' songs is Ravel's fascinating Chansons Madécasses in a performance given in 1966, and here, again, there is a duller sound up top. I'm still not certain if it's his voice placement, the recorded sound, or a combination of both. Yet because of the stronger rhythmic pulse of "Nahandove," he responds more tellingly at times to the words. Perhaps this was a difference he felt between Lieder and chansons? Yet his 1973 performance of Wolf's Abschied is also stronger in rhythm, better in [...]

