The Legacy of Fritz Wunderlich: One Performer's Perceptions of Selected Discography

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I would like to dedicate this treatise to my family. To my mother and sister who always reminded me to keep the train on the tracks. To my father, who never left my side, holding my hand to pick me up even when I could no longer run. You provided the strength to start this journey and go after my dreams.

With adoration, I thank my wife and son. Born through your love, you keep me steady. You gave me the strength to finish. Thank you for showing me the road not taken.

“I just want to initiate you in the unfathomable secret that is genuine music, good, great music.”

*Fritz Wunderlich*
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ABSTRACT

Tenor Fritz Wunderlich (1930-1966), one of Germany’s most famous lyric tenors, died in a tragic accident at the height of his career. Wunderlich’s professional career lasted only slightly more than ten years, but he left behind a vocal legacy through his numerous recordings, and he has had a lasting influence on the interpretation of many standard works in the tenor repertoire. In the years preceding his death, his success in Mozartian opera roles helped create this legacy that would make him internationally famous, particularly his performances of Tamino [*Die Zauberflöte*] and Belmonte [*Die Entführung aus dem Serail*]. His opera repertoire expanded into heavier roles, such as Alfredo [Verdi’s *La traviata*], Lenski [Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*], and Palestrina [Hans Pfiztner’s *Palestrina*].

Wunderlich achieved equal success in oratorio and *Lieder*. His recordings and performances of the Evangelist and tenor soloist in Bach’s two great *Passions*, as well as his interpretation of the tenor solos in Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* are revered. Wunderlich sang recital repertoire relatively late in his career. Many subsequent performers have modeled their interpretations of Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin* and Schumann’s *Dichterliebe* on his example.

Fritz Wunderlich’s legacy as one of the greatest tenors of the twentieth century is confirmed through the many audio recordings he made. An exploration of these recordings makes it possible to experience his unique voice, and to gain insight into his influence on the tenors who came after him.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Rare is the vocalist whose youthful exuberance yields to a solid technique that at career’s end retains a sound that is more than a reflection of the past. Rarer still is the singer who, in a professional life spanning less than a decade, is able to plumb unknown depths in human emotion to become a fixture in opera lore. Fritz Wunderlich was one such extraordinary tenor.”¹ In October of 1966, Germany’s leading lyric tenor, Fritz Wunderlich, was scheduled to make his Metropolitan Opera debut as Don Ottavio in Mozart’s Don Giovanni. A month before this debut, which would surely have propelled him into the international spotlight, he died as a result of an accident, nine days before his thirty-sixth birthday. It is rare in the history of classical music that a singer makes a significant and lasting impact on the world in such a brief time.

Wunderlich’s professional career lasted only slightly more than ten years, but his influence on the interpretation of many standard works in the tenor repertoire has been extensive. “It was after the decline of [Giuseppe] Di Stefano and before the rise of [Luciano] Pavarotti and the coming of [José] Carreras. When he awoke on the morning of September 17, 1966, Fritz Wunderlich was arguably the finest lyric tenor in the world.”² Many people consider his performances of Tamino [Die Zauberflöte] and Belmonte [Die Entführung aus dem Serail] to be definitive. His success in Mozartian opera roles made him internationally famous in the years preceding his death. He made his Covent Garden debut and was scheduled for his Metropolitan Opera debut in the role of Don Ottavio [Don Giovanni] and recorded Tamino under conductor Karl Böhm. He was a regular member of the Staatsoper in Munich, Germany from 1960 until his death, and he expanded his repertoire in that company to include Alfredo [Verdi’s La traviata] and Lenski [Tchaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin].

He performed most of these roles, with the exception of a few productions, in German, as was the common practice at the time. His interpretations, however, achieved international fame.

At the time of his death, he was beginning to expand his repertoire into heavier roles, had received offers to sing Rodolfo [Puccini’s *La bohème*] and was experimenting with Wagnerian roles.

Wunderlich achieved equal success in oratorio and *Lieder*. Critics, singers and lovers of singing revere his recordings and performances of the Evangelist and tenor soloist in Bach’s two great *Passions*, as well as his interpretation of the tenor solos in Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*. Although he began to sing recital repertoire relatively late in his career, his interpretations of Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin* and Schumann’s *Dichterliebe* have frequently served as inspiration for subsequent performers.

Fritz Wunderlich’s legacy as one of the greatest tenors of the twentieth century is confirmed through the many audio recordings he made. Through these recordings, it is possible to experience what a special and unique voice he possessed, and to gain insight into his influence on the tenors who came after him. In an interview with Rolando Villazón, one of our current day’s most successful tenors, he states, “Fritz Wunderlich is one of those singers whom I’ve never felt were [sic] historical. In his recordings he sounds so much of the present, so much of today, [there is] a timeless quality, … it is as though he were still among us. If you were to play him to people who don’t know him, they’d say: ‘Where does this man sing? Where can I hear him?’”

Nearly fifty years after his death, Fritz Wunderlich is “a far more potent presence through his recordings than he was during his own lifetime.”

The first sentence from Nigel Douglas’ chapter on Fritz Wunderlich in *Legendary Voices* underlines just how important a figure he remains in the world of singing.

Few singers would disagree with me, I think, when I say that the greatest tragedy to strike the operatic profession since the end of the Second World War was the early death, following a trivial domestic accident, of Fritz Wunderlich. Both vocally and musically his was the most blazing talent of my generation, and just as that talent was reaching maturity it was suddenly extinguished.

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3 Thomas Voigt, "As Though He Were Still Among Us," 4-5 (notes from DVD: Fritz Wunderlich, Leben Und Legende, Deutsche Grammophon, B0007476-09), 4.

4 Voigt, 4.

In the short span of only ten years, Fritz Wunderlich grew from a student into a talent that would serve as an example, inspiration and guide for future generations of singing. His vocal legacy of oratorio, opera, and Lieder recordings will forever remain a model for future generations of music enthusiasts. These staples are essential examples not only for students, but for every opera lover. In listening to his recording of the aria, “Dies Bildniss ist bezaubernd schön,” from Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, one could truly fall in love with opera for the first time, or all over again.

Wunderlich’s example inspires all classical singers, not just tenors. Thomas Hampson, whose career as a both performer and recording artist in opera, Lieder and oratorio invites comparison with Wunderlich’s accomplishments, had this to say about his predecessor: “The combination of talent, joie de vivre, energy and ambition in Wunderlich’s life was unique. Everyone, whether they be a tenor or not, should just think about it. That’s what we should aim for. That has to be said.”

In 1929, Paul Wunderlich, his wife Anna, and their eleven year-old daughter, Marianne, settled in Kusel, Germany. One year later, Friedrich Karl Otto Wunderlich, “Fritz”, was born on September 26, 1930. Although he did not have a charmed childhood, Wunderlich came from a musical family and was surrounded by music at an early age. His father Paul worked as a military and dance band leader as well as a cellist. His mother Anna was a violinist with a dance band. To try to provide financial stability Paul and Anna leased an inn and restaurant, “Emrichs Bräustübl,” but it was forced to close because of hard economic times. The 1930s was a time of worldwide economic depression and mass unemployment, and the family was in poverty. To make ends meet, Wunderlich’s father became the musical director of the Kusel Music Society and his mother taught private music lessons. Two local Nazis envied Paul Wunderlich’s post as Music Director and had him fired, and every attempt to obtain new employment was in vain. In 1935, when Fritz was 5 years old, his father committed suicide, leaving his mother to bear the financial burden of providing for their family.

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7 The Kusel area is also called Kuseler Musikantenland, for the many minstrel musicians who originally came from there and who spread music all over Europe.
Both Fritz and his sister Marianne had to earn money in order to help their mother. He learned to play the accordion, the piano and the French horn particularly well, and participated in several bands and even formed his own, which he called “Die Hutmacher” [The Milliner].

“He would travel with his mother and sister and play dance music at local festivals and weddings, and what they earned was just barely enough to live on.” His mother wanted him to have a proper job as a civil servant, for which Fritz would obediently write applications but secretly throw them away. Above all, he wanted to be a musician and most importantly, he wanted to sing.

As a young singer he sang for the conductor Emmerich Smola, who at the time was searching for an amateur choir. Fritz was part of the student choir that was to sing for Smola and continuously stepped forward to audition for the small solo sections. Smola was extremely impressed and told Fritz that he had a glorious voice. At that point his mother wondered if perhaps his becoming a musician was the right thing, and paid a visit to Emmerich Smola to ask his advice. Smola arranged for Fritz to be “enrolled at the Freiburg Conservatory with the intention of studying both the French horn and voice. His fine tenor voice was soon discovered and cultivated by the noted teacher Maria von Winterweldt, a blind woman who became his mentor and voice teacher at the conservatory.”

He was granted reduced tuition to the conservatory, and paid for the cost entirely through performing in his band, where he played the trumpet and accordion, and sang.

He studied at the conservatory from 1950 to 1955, also studying the classical horn which explains his extraordinary breath control. Even at this early stage of his career, he had a passion for music and a personal philosophy about the responsibilities of a true artist. In a letter dated January 5, 1953, the twenty-three-year-old conservatory student wrote:

And so my real work begins again tomorrow. My work, which I shall again find completely fulfilling and which will help me through all the cares and troubles of life. The more I continue on my journey, the closer I come to Beethoven: music is a higher form of revelation than all wisdom and philosophy. How right this great musician was, and how petty and pitiful one feels when experiencing the majesty of a symphony and feeling the whole elemental force that the word “music” contains within it as a concept.

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9 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
The tremendous responsibility that young musicians like us must bear when breathing life into the creations of our spirit and essence of art is called upon by Providence to be an artist. Today, the age of the atom bomb, this is much more difficult, incomparably more difficult. Many fail in their task by being distracted by the applause that whispers so beguilingly in their ear and by taking pleasure in the feeling that they are celebrated. That is the beginning of their decline. But I don’t want to lecture you on my view of art. I just want to initiate you in the unfathomable secret that is genuine music, good, great music.¹¹

He was discovered for the opera stage at a student production of Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte where he played the leading role of Tamino. From this success came two offers for permanent engagements and Wunderlich had to decide between major roles in Freiburg or small ones at the Württemberg State Opera in Stuttgart. He chose Stuttgart, which at that time was one of Germany’s most renowned opera houses. His first professional role was as Ulrich Eislinger in Die Meistersinger.

While in Stuttgart, Wunderlich fell in love with a young harpist, Eva Jungnitsch, who played in the orchestra for the opera. He would deliberately put himself near the pathway of where the orchestra would enter into the building for rehearsal just to see her. He told a colleague that he planned to marry her even before they were formally introduced. They did eventually meet and married in 1956. Within the first year they had their first of three children, Constanze. Eva gave up her career, as his was the more important of the two, but she didn’t mind because he always kept her involved with his music, always asking her opinion and depending on her ears regarding his singing.

In 1959, Karl Böhm booked Wunderlich for the prestigious Salzburg Festival, in a new production of Richard Strauss’s Die schweigsame Frau [The Silent Woman]. Fritz would be singing the role of Henry Morosus, a rather difficult and thankless role. Although “Karl Böhm was considered moody and obsessed with detail and generally feared amongst the singers, Wunderlich knew that this was his big chance. This production happened to be the most

important of the entire festival.”

According to the press, Wunderlich sang the role beautifully and seemed to have no difficulty with the extreme challenges of Strauss’s writing for the tenor voice, which include the high tessitura and extreme range. It was his breakthrough to an international career. After the performance, Herbert von Karajan visited him in his dressing room to offer him a permanent contract with the Vienna State Opera, which Wunderlich had to turn down. One week earlier he had accepted a position in Munich.

At that same debut at the Salzburg Festival, Wunderlich met a colleague who was also making his debut, the baritone Hermann Prey. Prey would become one of his closest friends and they sang together frequently. In his memoir Prey recounts his relationship with his “amico Fritz” [“friend Fritz”]

We first met in Salzburg in 1959, during rehearsals for Strauss’ Die schweigsame Frau. Fritz sang the part of the jovial young nephew of Admiral Henry Morosus, an old man who will only marry a woman who is silent, but ends up getting swindled like Don Pasquale. I was making my Salzburg debut as the cunning barber. Fritz was born in Kusel in the Palatinate in 1930, so we were about the same age. It was his second time in Salzburg, while I was still a novice. In The Silent Woman, the nephew and the barber are both involved in plotting against the old man. We immediately took to one another as coconspirators, and our friendship took off from there. It was to last seven years, up to Fritz’s sudden death in 1966. They were happy years of friendship and collaboration with a dear and talented colleague, who within the space of a few years established himself as one of the greatest singers of his time.”

There are numerous accounts of Wunderlich being a great colleague who was a pleasure to work with in addition to being a great musician. According to friend and colleague Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Wunderlich occasionally gave him suggestions for some improvement to a colleague. Not only did he have a world-class voice, but he would often learn and record roles in half the time it would take other tenors to do the same.

When Rafael Kubelik recorded Handel’s Xerxes in Munich in 1962, he scheduled the usual number of days for recording the title role. Astonishingly, though Fritz Wunderlich

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12 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
13 A play on word that references the title of Pietro Mascagni’s opera, L’amico Fritz
had never sung Xerxes before, by virtue of his musicality, sense of style and his superior
\textit{Stimmführung} \footnote{Voice leading.} he needed only a third of the time, despite the fact that Xerxes's arias contain extremely difficult coloratura passages that rarely turn out well straight off in broadcast recordings, where minute accuracy is of the essence. All conductors Wunderlich worked with had similar experiences. \footnote{“Fritz Wunderlich – The Great German Tenor.” Last modified June, 2003, http://www.andreas-praefcke.de/wunderlich/}

The rise of Wunderlich’s career coincided with the rise of television as a popular medium. Although skeptical of its value at first, Wunderlich agreed to a televised production of Pergolesi’s \textit{Il Maestro di Musica} for Austrian television. The broadcast was a huge success and generated great publicity. Afterwards, hardly a day would go by without rehearsals, performances, radio broadcasts or recording sessions. His schedule as revealed in his diary shows how intense and relentless it could be. \textbf{SEE Figure 1.1}

In order to deal with all of these events, he leased a fish pond in Munich, where he would go to gain balance and to recharge. Yet Wunderlich pursued even his leisure activities with characteristic drive and intensity. Hubert Giesen [1898-1980], a pianist, vocal coach and close friend whom Wunderlich referred to as his mentor and with whom he made some of the greatest recordings in the history of \textit{Lieder}, noted in his biography that there were concerns about the singer’s demanding schedule.

In the years of close co-operation with Fritz Wunderlich, I was sometimes overcome with a kind of fear: in spite of his carefreeness, in spite of his joy, confidence and coolness; he “burned the candle at both ends.” He drew on unlimited resources; he did everything with an enormous energy and intensity, as if he knew that he had only a limited period of time left. \footnote{“Hubert Giesen on Fritz Wunderlich.” Take from “\textit{Am Flügel: Hubert Giesen.” Translated by Adreas Praefcke, http://www.andreas-praefcke.de/wunderlich/index.html”}}
Figure 1.1: Fritz Wunderlich Schedule
Many of Wunderlich’s personal friends make mention that they felt that something was going to happen. Hermann Prey recalls that the week before Wunderlich’s death he was to leave for a recital tour, yet he felt as if something were wrong. “For some reason I felt unwell. Something was not right, and I kept thinking we ought to cancel the tour. ‘Something dreadful’s going to happen,’ I said…‘let’s call the whole thing off.’”

Shortly after Prey received news that Fritz was dead, he wrote:
My friend Fritz is dead. This simple sentence becomes more incomprehensible to me with every day. Our friendly and artistic collaboration developed into something very rare in the last few years. We shared many amusing adventures and spent many contemplative hours together. He could discuss life's problems and musical issues for nights on end. The most beautiful hours of my career were those spent together with him on the stage or in front of a microphone. We never discussed phrasing in advance or how we would colour certain passages - the sympathy was simply there. We used to play piano duets for hours, or roamed the forests making plans for the future.

When we first mounted the stage together during the schweigsame Frau rehearsals at Salzburg in 1959, we knew that our paths would converge then on. In those brief years we learned how to complement one another. He knew a tremendous amount about singing. I learned a lot from him. With his immense natural musical talent, this son of the gods was still at the beginning of a meteoric career. What might he not have achieved, given the time? At Schubert’s graveside Grillparzer said: “Here Death buried a rich treasure, and even richer promise.” How this statement applies to Fritz too! When we were last together he told me: “The best years are yet to come; a singer only gains command over tears at forty.” He did not know that he already had it.

Our dreams were truly boundless. We wanted to become the heavenly twins of song. Fate decided otherwise, decreeing that I be left alone, a deserted twin. We virtually improvised this record, our last one, together with Fritz Neumeyer and his musicians. Listening to it today, there are points at which I cannot really tell who is singing what. Our voices

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18 Prey, 209.
melted together to form one. The world is mourning for a gifted singer of his generation. I mourn for a friend and brother in song the likes of whom I will never find again.  

The events leading up to his death included a performance in Edinburgh of Tamino and a recital, which were to be his last public performances. Before his scheduled trip to the Metropolitan Opera in October 1966, he sought out nature and relaxation once more on a hunting trip with some friends. Peter Kager, one of his close friends, was there, and noted the pressures of such a demanding schedule, and his upcoming debut with the Met.

Going hunting was an attempt to push all that aside. He was so happy as he sat next to me. He put his arm round me and said: “Peter, tomorrow will be a marvelous day of hunting. But I’m going over now. I’m going to the house in Derdingen, to Heinz Blank’s. But before that I’ll sing you a nice little song. What do you want to hear?” And I said: “Any old song will do, Fritz.” So he sang “Rosemarie”. Then he left straightaway. He had most of his stuff over in the other house, and drove over there. That was the last time we saw each other.  

As he always did before going to bed, Wunderlich phoned his wife from the upper floor of the house and spoke for a time before saying he was tired and would go down to sleep. It is speculated that he had not tied the shoelaces on his boots and while going down the stairs, he tripped, pulled the rope that served as a stair rail out of the wall, fell and suffered a fractured skull. He was taken to a hospital, where he remained in a coma. A day later, on September 17, 1969, he died from his injury.

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19 Prey, 211.
20 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
Fritz Wunderlich’s success started while singing the role of Tamino in the Freiberg Conservatory production of Die Zauberflöte, and this is the role for which he is most remembered. His only voice teacher Maria von Winterweldt, recalls that Wunderlich said to her, “Look, if I manage Tamino, if I can pull it off, then I think I’ll become a decent singer.” In a letter to his mother, he stated: “I knew this performance would be crucial to my future. After the final note I thought ‘God, please let them clap!’ and when I heard the thunderous applause, I nearly broke down. With this success I conclusively pushed open the door to my beloved profession.”

Following the success of this performance, Wunderlich was offered a permanent position in the opera house at Stuttgart, one of Germany’s most renowned opera companies. The new tenor created quite a buzz within the company even though he was singing smaller roles, such as The Messenger in Aida. When this talk reached the ears of Josef Traxel, who was at the time the leading lyric tenor in the company, he wanted to give Wunderlich a chance to sing Tamino in his place. Knowing that Wunderlich had sung the role before with great success, Traxel called the theater on the day of the performance claiming to be too hoarse to sing that evening. He knew that by cancelling at the last minute, the company would not be able to hire someone else on short notice. They had no choice but to turn to their other company tenor. “The heldentenor Wolfgang Windgassen was to step in, however, he was in on it, too, and when the company rang him, he responded: ‘We’ve got a young beginner here, and he’ll sing this evening. I’ll sing the First Man in Armor.’” This is how Wunderlich came to make his major role debut at Stuttgart. When he was called to play Tamino for an ‘ailing’ Josef Traxel, Stuttgart had a new star and Fritz Wunderlich’s short but amazing career had begun.

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21 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
22 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
23 (1916-1975) German operatic tenor particularly associated with Mozart roles and the German repertory.
24 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
It is not surprising that Fritz Wunderlich became a rising star through his singing of Mozart’s music. Brigitte Fassbaender, who began her career in 1961 when Wunderlich was just establishing himself as a star in the international opera houses of Munich, Vienna and Salzburg recalls him well: “He was, probably the most important colleague I have ever had, and I sang a lot with him… He was an overwhelming personality, full of humour, and a good-looking man. He was always prepared to listen and answer questions.” Fassbaender also sang the role of Third Lady in the *Die Zauberflöte* to his Tamino, and says she would watch and listen to him from the wings when he was singing his other principal Munich roles… “It was always technical perfection, but above all, it was a really heart-moving voice. It was something special.”

He possessed every quality necessary to make him the quintessential Mozart singer. In an interview published in 1998, Paul Groves [b. 1964], one of the most highly regarded Mozart tenors of today, states the difficulties in singing Mozart:

The problem with Mozart – and people don't realize this – is that when it's sung well, it sounds easy. But it's never easy. It is the most difficult because it is so exposed that if there is one little glitch in your voice or one note that's not right on, it sticks out. In Puccini and Verdi, if you miss one little thing, you forget about it because it's just sweeping music. But in Mozart, you hear every little thing...It's very difficult, even for the basses and baritones, but mostly for the sopranos and the tenors because it's all in the passaggio and there's nothing high. There are no really high notes.”

Wunderlich was able to conquer the challenges that Groves identifies with apparent ease. In Mozartian roles like Tamino, Belmonte, and Ottavio, all of which Wunderlich sang, there are challenges for the tenor that Wunderlich makes seem inconsequential.

“*Dies Bildnis is bezaubernd schön*” is the defining aria for the role of Tamino, and the memory of Wunderlich’s performances is still alive in the minds and ears of opera lovers, and his recording of the part documents his perfection in the role. As a tenor who has sung Tamino, the author and perhaps other tenors can only aspire to achieve Wunderlich’s perfection of the

26 Canning, 89.
role. The aria is not high when compared to other roles in the lyric tenor repertoire, as Paul Groves alluded to when speaking about singing Mozart.

In order to sing “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön,” one must have clear diction and complete comfort and ease in singing the vocal line. In addition, the character, a prince, must be sincere, have the passion of a young man, and embody a heroic regality. To achieve these character traits and express them elegantly and effortlessly while singing is the main challenge. Wunderlich embodies all of the aforementioned qualities in his interpretation.

The trouble with this aria is that the singer must sing each phrase with ease and grace, giving the illusion that he is hardly working at all. The truth, of course, is quite the opposite. The text of the opening phrase of the aria is, “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön” (“This picture is enchantingly beautiful”) and it is one of the most difficult parts of the opera for the tenor.

Audio Example A2.1: SOUND CLIP OF “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön”

The vocal phrase begins with rising interval of a major 6th from B-flat below middle C to the G above. This interval appears to be simple enough on the page, but is in fact quite difficult to perform well. The voice is very exposed due to Mozart’s light orchestration. In addition to negotiating the opening interval with finesse, the tenor must communicate all the sincerity and awe for the portrait of Pamina that inspires the aria. To add to the difficulty, Mozart sets most of the aria in a piano dynamic, which helps to maintain the awe that Tamino is feeling but is technically challenging. The demands of the aria do not end with the opening phrase, but continue through its entirety. The tessitura of the aria sits within the compass of B-flat and high G, with the majority of pitches being in the tenor’s passaggio. This area of the voice, where the singer negotiates the transition between the middle and upper registers, is the most difficult range in which to sing for extended periods of time. Wunderlich, however, seems to have no difficulty at all in singing this music.

Wunderlich naturally possessed a steely quality to his voice that helped to display the heroic regality of Tamino. This trait is not something that one can learn. It was a natural quality of Wunderlich’s voice. An example of this heroic quality in the aria can be found when Tamino sings, “wie dies Götterbild” (“like this divine picture”). In Wunderlich’s performance he soars to a high A-flat with a lyrical heroism that shows how Tamino simultaneously becomes enamored
of the woman in the portrait he is holding and decides in that moment that he must save her from any danger.

Figure 2.1: Act I, from *Die Zauberflöte* (piano/vocal) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Another defining moment in the aria occurs in the last eight measure of the vocal line.

Figure 2.2: Act I, from *Die Zauberflöte* (piano/vocal) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Tamino sings the words, “und ewig wäre sie dann mein,” (“and forever then she would be mine”) three times in a row. Each time Mozart highlights the text with an ascending line culminating in a high A-flat, to exclaim that she will be his forever. This line appears simple on the page, but the control of breath necessary to sing it well is extraordinary. The tenor must sing this phrase with vibrant passion, intensifying each repetition of text. If the tenor falls short in delivering these requirements, his portrayal of Tamino risks losing the audience for the remainder of the opera.

Mozart does not make this job easy for the tenor. Once again, this phrase lies entirely within the tenor’s passaggio, with hardly a chance to establish the breath. At this point in the aria, the orchestration is texturally thin, exposing the vocal line. Any miscalculations in breath control, or waver in tone within the legato of the line would be revealed immediately. In this recording of “Dies Bildniss,” Wunderlich does not disappoint the listener, and he invests this glorious line with such soul and passion that the listener finds himself ready to set off and find the princess.

Wunderlich’s friend and colleague Hermann Prey understood the importance of this aria to the success of a tenor’s portrayal of Tamino and recalled an anecdote from a performance they sang together:

I was often tempted to play a schoolboy prank on Fritz. This once happened in Munich at the 1966 première of Die Zauberflöte. Fritz was in top form, and was soon to become world famous, having already signed a contract with the Met. There is a scene in the first act of the opera, in which the three ladies from the Queen of the Night give Tamino a picture of Pamina, whom he is to rescue from the clutches of Sarastro. He is supposed to fall in love with her. He is overwhelmed by her beauty. Gazing rapturously at her picture, he sings the aria, “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön” (“This picture is enchantingly beautiful”).

I have no idea what got into me. On the day of the première, I went up to Frau Moser, the props manager, and asked for some sellotape. Over the top of Pamina’s picture I stuck a photograph of my own face in a horrid grimace. I was standing backstage as the opera began. The overture had finished and the snake was beginning to move. I was suddenly afraid. This aria is vital for Tamino. If something went wrong
and Tamino were to laugh at my picture, it might stop the aria and create a scandal. In
desperation I looked for the three ladies, and caught them just as they were about to go on
stage. “The picture! Which of you’s [sic] got the picture?”

“For goodness’ sake, Hermann, leave us alone! We’re about to go on stage!”

“I must have the picture!” One of the ladies gave it to me. I ripped out my photo
and gave it back to her. What a relief! On that night of all nights, Fritz fluffed the top A
flat at the end of the aria, for the first time ever. If I had not taken my picture out, I
would no doubt have been blamed for this mishap.

I can never sing Papageno without thinking of Fritz.29

This author will note that from personal experience in singing this aria it is very difficult
to achieve the phrasing that Wunderlich established. Wunderlich was able to maintain a seamless
legato line, where each note was vibrant and full of passion, yet was combined with an intrinsic
delicacy. This recording gives all tenors a standard to try and emulate. Wunderlich’s execution
of this aria, and indeed the entire role of Tamino, is exquisite and every tenor who sings this
music strives to succeed as well as he did.

29 Prey, 208.
Wunderlich also excelled in other Mozart roles, specifically Belmonte (*Die Entführung aus dem Serail*) and Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*). The role of Belmonte is one of the most challenging roles for a tenor in the lyric repertoire, especially if no cuts are made in the score. Due to the sheer length of the aria “Ich baue ganz” (over six minutes), and the fact many tenors have trouble with the stamina required to sing the aria in its entirety, it is common practice to make cuts. In German-speaking countries, Belmonte’s aria, “Ich baue ganz,” is commonly known as the “Baumeister aria” (“master builder aria”). In the plot of the opera, Belmonte is posing as an architect, or *Baumeister*, and Wunderlich’s performance certainly deserves the appellation. His technical and artistic mastery of the role, and especially of the aria, “Ich baue ganz,” serves as a blueprint for other tenors who undertake this music.
Fritz Wunderlich recorded *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* under the direction of Eugen Jochum in December 1965, and the recording includes a complete performance of the aria “Ich baue ganz.”

While this is a studio recording and not a live performance, it is significant in that even many studio recordings take cuts in the aria. All of Belmonte’s arias are difficult, but it is truly “Ich baue ganz” that is the most demanding. In addition to Mozart’s typical long vocal lines and a tessitura that sits in the *passaggio*, Mozart composed some very challenging coloratura. He includes chromatic runs, awkward intervallic leaps, incredibly long sustained notes, and a difficult triplet pattern near the end of the aria that covers a range of one and a half octaves from low E-flat to high B-flat when the singer is almost exhausted, having sung for six minutes without pause.

This phrase shows the chromatic intervals that the tenor must navigate through the upper register of his voice, only to change to a coloratura line. Wunderlich sings the passage with confidence; there is not one doubt that he will complete the phrase. The author has attempted to sing this aria and can say with confidence that the extension from the lower E-flat with a run all the way to B-flat is treacherous. After the singer has navigated through the chromatic intervals, which must be sung with clarity, he must transition into to a coloratura phrase. Wunderlich excels at making this transition. One hears no changes in color and timbre as he works from his lower register to the upper range of his voice.

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30 (1902-1987) Eminent German Conductor.
Figure 2.4: Act III, from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (piano/vocal) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The following example shows the dexterity, agility and breath control that Mozart requires from the tenor in this aria. This phrase is extraordinarily demanding and requires a perfectly honed technique.
Figure 2.5: Act III, from Die Entführung aus dem Serail (piano/vocal) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
What makes this phrase so difficult is how Mozart changes and alters, and builds on what he has made before. Like a true Baumeister, Mozart creates a musical architecture combining the long coloratura lines with intervallic leaps from the lower part of the voice to the top. Wunderlich seemingly uses no effort to sing each passage. The coloratura passages are clean and precise. To add one last element of difficulty, Mozart changes to a chromatic triplet pattern that passes through the passaggio. The composer gives no time for the singer to take a solid breath, but demands that the tenor expresses Belmonte’s love for Konstanze through these triumphant runs. Wunderlich sings the whole passage with remarkable ease. It should be noted that it is this passage that is frequently cut in performance, and many tenors will not even attempt it.

Soprano Nathalie Paulin and baritone Gerald Finley, two successful Mozartian singers of today, attest to the challenges of singing Mozart’s vocal music:

Mozart may appear deceptively 'easy' to sing, but part of the trick is to be able to meet the technical demands so well that the singing comes across as effortless. Purity of tone,
clarity of diction, smooth, even scale and long breath line are just some of the requirements in Mozart…

Is Mozart's music “balm for the voice,” like some singers claim? “Only if you sing it correctly,” “If your technique is not in shape, you collapse in Mozart. He demands long lines and good breath control, together with a certain purity and clarity.” Suffice to say the technical facility has to be in place before a singer is free to express the emotions inherent in the music. Unlike Puccini and other verismo composers, the classical style does not lend itself to histrionics…A lot of the expressions are already written into Mozart's vocal line and in the orchestration, and if the singer is faithful to the composer, the emotions will come through. Best is to let the music speak.

In all of the aforementioned requirements for singing this role, Wunderlich achieves a level of perfection that justifies the legendary status of his performances of Belmonte. Not only does he navigate the coloratura passages with ease, he does so with extraordinarily clear articulation.

Don Ottavio in Don Giovanni was to have been Wunderlich’s debut role at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Many of the qualities that are essential to sing Belmonte are also required to perform the role of Ottavio. In an interview, Wunderlich recounts his own personal difficulties in the role, specifically in the challenging aria, “Il mio tesoro.”

It is right to say that a singer has to have a long breath, just as he must have a pleasant voice. But you can extend your breath if you know how not to waste it between the single notes. For the singer, the problem of breathing consists in coping with the nitrogen that builds up when he holds his breath. We sing with used breath - not with fresh. But after a certain time the body calls for its oxygen again. I have to try to use my breath in the best possible way, so that I do not need to take another breath until the phrasing demands one. To a certain degree breath capacity can be increased by training - divers have always done this. And sometimes even an accidental occurrence may show you that you have a longer breath than you thought. I want to tell you a little story: In June 1963 I sang Don

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Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* under Herbert von Karajan at the Wiener Festwochen. At the dress rehearsal, Mr. von Karajan asked me to breathe at an unaccustomed place before the reprise of “*Il mio tesoro*”. I did so at the rehearsal but forgot to do so at the premiere. This meant that I had to decide in a split second whether to interrupt the flow of the coloratura passage or risk singing the whole phrase on one breath. I tried it and it worked. Herbert von Karajan, who did not fail to notice why I had sung the whole phrase on one breath, afterwards approached me with a grin and said: “You see that pure accident can sometimes show you what you are able to do.” From this day on, I have always sung the aria this way.33

Here you see the phrase of which Wunderlich speaks. **SEE FIGURE 2.6** The seven-measure phrase is so challenging for the tenor because, once again, Mozart asks for chromatic coloratura that extends from the lower range of the tenor voice to the highest. The last two measures are particularly difficult in that Mozart writes a natural *ritardando*, by changing from a sixteenth note pattern to eight notes. Wunderlich has such breath control within the phrase that he even slows further in the last measure of the phrase.

Wunderlich recorded the aria in both German and Italian. In Germany he frequently sang the role of Ottavio in a German translation, but he also knew the role in Italian, the original language of the libretto, and would have made his Metropolitan Opera debut in Italian.

Audio Example A2.3: SOUND CLIP OF “Il mio tesoro” Sung in German

Audio Example A2.4: SOUND CLIP OF “Il mio tesoro” Sung in Italian

Both recordings are impressive, but in the author’s opinion, Wunderlich manages to sing the aria with more bravado and an even purer legato line in the Italian version.

Figure 2.6: Act II, from *Don Giovanni* (piano/vocal) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Although Mozartian roles were staples in Wunderlich’s operatic career, there are two other roles that are worthy of mention: Lensky from Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* and the title role in Hans Pfitzner’s *Palestrina*. Wunderlich’s performances in these roles bear witness to Fassbaender’s sentiments, “but above all, it was a really heart-moving voice.”

*Eugene Onegin* is a Russian opera, but Wunderlich sang the role in a German translation. His recording of Lensky’s aria from Act II, Scene 2 of the opera, sung in German as, “*Wohin? Wohin?*” provides yet another example of the beauty of Wunderlich’s voice.

Audio Example A2.5: SOUND CLIP OF “Lensky’s Act II Aria” Sung in German

When listening to this recording, made in July of 1966, one can hear a mature lyric tenor. The natural steel in his voice was proving to provide an extra amount of vocal weight as Wunderlich matured. Fritz Wunderlich was at the height of his career and was gravitating into heavier repertoire. In this recording one can hear the natural growth in his voice. Fischer-Dieskau had this to say about Wunderlich’s performance of this aria: “… his singing of Lensky’s aria was wonderfully effortless…”

The most significant factor in Wunderlich’s success in singing this music is his ability to give each word of the aria deep meaning and to use his voice to express Lensky’s strong emotions as he faces death and the loss of love. His presentation is so honest and soulful that the listener instantly feels a connection to the character’s emotions. Lensky and his best friend Onegin are about to fight a duel over Olga, the woman whom Lensky loves, and Lensky is fully aware that he will die. The text, translated from the German, reads:

Oh where? Oh where?
Where have you gone, o blessed happy days of youth?
What is this dawning day to bring me?
In vain I strain my eyes to see it.
In deepest gloom it hides itself.
I know not what my fate will be.
Perhaps my death is what is fated,

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perhaps the new day shines on me,
I bear it—all things come from God,
all life and all eternal rest.
His will sends the golden day,
his will too the gloomy night.
Soon will dawn a bright new morning,
with cheery sunlight streaming down.
By then the secret world of shadows perhaps has carried me away.
What fame there was of this young poet will fade away as time is passing.
I will be forgotten…
but you, you, Olga.
Oh tell me: How will you look upon my grave.
And will you shed a tear for me, and think…he did love me.
He gave his youthful life for me and the joy of his young days.
Oh Olga, yes, I did love you.
My life intended just for you.
You were the picture my soul had dreamed of,
oh Olga, I did love you.
Oh come, oh come, my dearest love, oh come to me!
I wait for you! Oh come! I wait for you!
I call you to me! Oh come oh come!
All of my yearning just for you,
oh hear me, beloved, come.
Oh where, oh where, oh where have you gone?
O days of youth, o happy bliss of love’s sweet joy.

The poetry this character speaks is heartfelt and filled with passion and despair. Wunderlich expertly colors each of the lines to suit the mood. When he sings the heart-wrenching line, “Du sag mir: Wie wirst du kommen an mein Grab?” (“Oh tell me: How will you look upon my grave?”), the sweet beauty of his voice streams out, almost as if he is too afraid to say it. Then we come to the point where he says, “Ich harre dein!” (“I call you to me!”), and the listener can
hear that Wunderlich is beginning to lean towards a heavier vocal approach. The sheer power of
the line combined with this clarity of his sound, left this author in tears upon first hearing it.

Wunderlich was very well aware of this relative strength and size of his voice and the
trade-offs that going outside of a voice’s natural voice and singing heavier repertoire could bring.

In an interview conducted by Egloff Schwaiger, he was asked:

“Do you distinguish sharply between lyric and dramatic tenors?”

“That is again a difficult question, the subject of much discussion. There is surely no
definite dividing line, but I think you are born a lyric, dramatic or heroic tenor. As he gets
older - say, forty-two or forty-three - a lyric tenor may go over to singing heavier roles,
but this is not inevitably the case. It is possible to make the voice heavier and more robust
by working it harder, but then its light character, the pliant bel canto, is gone.”

“Where do you think your limits lie?”

“I have set the light Italian parts, such as Rodolfo in La bohème or the Duca in Rigoletto,
as my limits for the next ten or twelve years. Rodolfo is really an exception, and I can
only include him because Puccini composed his melodies in a manner so kind to the
voice that a strain seems audible that is in reality just a natural vibration of the voice.
Puccini’s melodic gift ensures that the high notes simply come of their own accord. A
good example is the final high ‘c’ in Rodolfo’s aria ‘Che gelida manina’. It is one of the
most easily reached top notes in the tenor repertoire, because it arises from a melodic
phrase in a completely natural way. You simply have to open your mouth, and it is there.
Verdi’s high notes are much more precariously placed, because they often involve large
intervallic leaps. Verdi makes great demands on vocal agility and hence vocal endurance.
Puccini is a composer who accommodates singers, while in Verdi singers have to
accommodate the composer. For this reason my limit is higher in Puccini parts than in
Verdi.”

Wunderlich began exploring larger repertoire, and one of the biggest clues we have about
what the future might have brought is in his portrayal of Pfiztner’s Palestrina. Palestrina is a
three act opera written in 1917 by Hans Pfiztner [1869-1949], based on the legend of

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Renaissance composer and musician, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina [1525-1594], and his quest to save polyphony for the church with his composition, Missa Papae Marcelli. Pfitzner himself wrote the libretto to the opera about the historical figure, Palestrina. Pfitzner’s music for the opera “…represents an important, if often ponderously discursive, late application of the techniques of Wagnerian music-drama in Germany,”36 and as such requires the heavier voice types usually associated with Wagner. Many people thought this role would be Wunderlich’s undoing, but his success provides insight into where he may have been heading. The timeless quality of his voice is further described in this modern CD review by Christopher Fifield:37

As news spread during 1964 that Wunderlich was scheduled by the State Opera to sing the title role in Palestrina, so did incredulity. This had been the domain of Julius Patzak, before him Erich Schmedes. How would Wunderlich cope with the top C, let alone the brooding, restless nature of the hero himself? Barely five years since his debut in Freiburg as Tamino in Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, and only two since he had sung for the first time in Vienna, Wunderlich’s voice was considered too light and lyrical for such a densely scored post-Wagnerian drama, but as events turned out it proved to be the highlight of his pitifully short seven-year career. He sailed to the top C with head voice, his relative youth belied the success of his probing search for the character of Palestrina…It must have made a deep impression upon the hushed audience in this live recording, and remains a wonderfully clear rebuke to those who rejected the possibility that he would develop into a Wagnerian singer (the Steersman in Der fliegende Holländer was one of his roles, so too was David in Die Meistersinger)…this production put him on the road leading to Florestan and Walther von Stolzing. That he would eventually sing Parsifal is surely one of the great might-have-beens in twentieth century opera.

Despite the amazing cast of singers assembled for this production, of which these excerpts are a treasured legacy, it is the unforgettable voice and impeccable diction of

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37 Christopher Fifield—English symphony orchestra conductor, classical music historian and musicologist.
Fritz Wunderlich, which will sear itself upon your memory. There’s simply nothing more to say.\(^{38}\)

To give us a little bit more of an idea of what his contemporary critics had to say about this foray into larger repertoire, here are two reviews of the 1964 premiere:

Mr. Wunderlich sang his first Palestrina, and he could not only stand against the memory of [Julius] Patzak\(^{39}\) [An Austrian tenor who had great success with the role of Palestrina] but also really convince in the part. Although he should be too young of age for this role, he has wonderfully adopted Palestrina's mood, resignation and unworldliness to such an extent that he really stands and sits on the stage like a tired old man, repelled by all the bustle around him. His gestures are terse and calm, and his singing is of a mild tranquility, nearly Lieder-like simplicity, never operatically arose, rather emerged from a quiet internal dialogue. A moving rendering of the difficult part.\(^{40}\)

Herbert Schneiber wrote in "Kurier", Dec. 16, 1964 as quoted on Andreas Praefcke’s website: "Fritz Wunderlich has fully adopted the part with his precious tenor voice. His sense and sensibility seal this property to such an extent that it seems virtually implausible that this performance was his role debut. But this is the case, and the audience, which was more enthusiastic than usual recently, was quite right to fête him particularly."

One can see from the critics’ comments that they thought Wunderlich was too young for the role, yet each mentions how wonderful his singing was.

Wagner would say to his singers, “…learn how to sing Mozart. You will then be able, without harm to your voice, to sing my operas.”\(^{41}\) With his command of the Mozart roles, and his


\(^{39}\) Julius Patzak 1898-1974 was an Austrian tenor who sang Mozart roles and was best known for his portrayals of Beethoven's Florestan and Pfitzner's Palestrina.


growth into larger repertoire, there is a strong probability that he could have ventured into Wagner. We can only speculate about what could have been.

Fritz Wunderlich established himself as one of the greatest lyric tenors in opera. In a 2009 CD review, Ted Libbey writes:

Tenor Fritz Wunderlich was fated to live only as long as Mozart himself did, dying before his 36th birthday… he had become the greatest German singer in this repertory, and he remains the greatest Tamino in recording history. He sings with beauty of tone, maturity and a sensitivity to the line that inspires, yet cannot be equaled.\textsuperscript{42}

In the opinion of this author, those words remain true; there is no tenor that will ever match what Wunderlich did in the Mozart roles. We shall never know what he could have accomplished in other repertoire if he had lived a longer life.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCERT REPERTOIRE

Wunderlich began his recording career in 1954 with radio recordings. In subsequent years he recorded a wide range of concert repertoire, notably J. S. Bach’s Weihnachts [Christmas] and Oster [Easter] Oratorios, both Bach Passions [St. John and St. Matthew], Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony 9 and Gustav Mahler’s Das Lied von der Erde. In particular, his recordings and performances of the Evangelist in Bach’s two great Passions are revered, as is his interpretation of the tenor solos in Mahler’s Das Lied von der Erde.

Wunderlich began his foray into Baroque music while studying in Freiburg:

I come from Kusel, a little Palatine town and in 1950, by circuitous routes, found my way to the Freiburg College of Music, which had been founded by Gustav Scheck and Willibald Gurlitt shortly after the war. I was at once admitted to Dr. Scheck’s well-known “Kamermusikkreis Scheck-Wenzinger”, which had been formed in 1930 and was the first ensemble to play solely on period instruments. To earn my living, I played jazz music on the side. At night I blew the trumpet, played the accordion, sang popular songs; in the morning, after snatching a few hours of sleep, I studied Monteverdi and Lully at college. This growing into early music was crucial for my musical development because I learned something very important for singers and musicians generally: a feeling for style. If you have it and can distinguish between the various styles, you are all set; you can perform all kinds of music. 43

Due to this wide-ranging exposure to many different genres of music, from early music and folksong to jazz to popular songs, Wunderlich was naturally at ease in many styles. Although he had developed a familiarity and natural feeling for Baroque style, he seems to have had a particular affinity with the Bach Passions. He sang both tenor solos and the Evangelist for each of these oratorios.

turning it into an operatic performance. Fritz understood this and never went too far in his interpretation. In an interview Wunderlich had this to say about the Evangelist:

The Bach Evangelist is one of the most difficult parts of all. There is a good reason why Bach wrote it for the tenor: in the higher tessitura the words are generally easier to understand. Intelligibility is most important in the Evangelist's part, for he is telling a story. Yet he is more than just a narrator, being at the same time involved in the events. This difficult combination of matter-of-fact reporting and inner involvement is the real problem in the Evangelist part.44

An example of this combination of narration with emotional expression occurs in the first recitative that the Evangelist sings:

Audio Example A3.1: SOUND CLIP OF “Johannes-Passion”

Jesus went with his disciples over the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which Jesus entered with his disciples.

But Judas, who had betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus had often assembled there with his disciples.

When Judas had procured for himself the crowd and the chief priests and the Pharisees' servants, he entered there with torches, lanterns and weapons.

Now as Jesus knew all that he must encounter, he went outside and said to them:

44 Fritz Wunderlich interviewed by Egloff Schwaiger from: "Warum der Applaus - Berühmte Interpreten über ihre Musik", pp. 317-323
Figure 3.1: Part I, from *Johannes-Passion* (piano/vocal) by Johann Sebastian Bach
Figure 3.1 -- continued
Wunderlich delivers the first line as matter-of-fact narration, using a dry color that has little emotion. In the second line of text, he changes to a darker color when discussing Judas, to heighten the narration. As he sings the third line, Wunderlich’s diction becomes more incisive and precise, and he adapts a more emotional approach to the words to depict the incited crowd, as if he were there “in the moment,” drawing the listener into the fray. Finally he switches to another color, a purer and clearer tone, as he mentions Jesus. The listener learns to associate this pure, clear vocal color with Jesus, as Wunderlich reserves it for Him throughout the recording.

Wunderlich’s ability to soar in the upper register for long periods of time without straining the voice or sounding tense also serves to make him an ideal interpreter of the Evangelist. In an article written for the Opera Quarterly in 1988, Duff Murphy highlights the attributes that enable Wunderlich to portray the Evangelist to perfection:

It is with a sense of awe that one hears in Wunderlich not only a well-developed healthy voice, but also one that etches an arching phrase with great style and unstrained ringing sound. He was a tenor who sang with transparent ease in the upper register, and while there, as if by magic, created a quiet hush or magnificence that seemingly froze time until the line descended.

The ease and grace of Wunderlich’s interpretation of the Evangelist are equally evident in his 1960 recording of the Johannis Passion. The great German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau also remarked upon Wunderlich’s ease and comfort with the role when he first recorded it:
…his next recording, the Evangelist in Bach’s *Saint John Passion* was his first major one. I was impressed by the relaxation with which the young man with a glint of mischief in his eye let the whole process of rehearsal and retakes run off his back…Though this outward calm did not particularly contribute to his stage performance, it did preserve the smooth and flawless sound of his voice. This superlative musician quickly and surely grasped both notes and presentation\(^45\)

As the storyteller of the Passion, the Evangelist must create a certain sense of drama. Wunderlich had the ability to convey the music and deliver the text in such a way that the listener is drawn into the moment of the story and experiences it on a deeper level. An example of this is the depiction of Peter denying Jesus three times.

(Evangelist)

But he denied it and said:

(Peter)

I am not.

(Evangelist)

Then saith one of the high priest’s servants, an acquaintance of him, whose ear Peter had smitten off:

(Servant)

Did I not see thee with him in the garden?

(Evangelist)

Peter once again denied it and at once the cock did crow. Then did Peter think back to the words of Jesus and went outside and wept most bitterly\(^46\)

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\(^45\) Fischer-Diskau, 302-303.

Figure 3.2: Part I, from Johannes-Passion (piano/vocal) by Johann Sebastian Bach
Figure 3.2 – continued
In this section Wunderlich must again switch between the matter-of-fact delivery of narration and personifying the drama and music. In this case, when he says, “krähete der Hahn,” (“the cock did crow”) his subtle vocal change on the word crow sounds as if the cock were indeed crowing. Immediately after this moment Wunderlich has to depict Peter weeping. Wunderlich employs a mournful and deeply soulful color to enhance the chromatic line Bach provided for the phrase, and as a result “und weinete,” (“and wept”) is a uniquely precious moment. It sounds as though Wunderlich is weeping the phrase with tears and best of all, he adds another layer, that of the shame that Peter has for denying Jesus. Wunderlich manages each of the intervals with such ease and grace that it seems as if he himself is transcended into the moment of truly weeping.

In addition to his ability to color and declaim the poetry, Wunderlich sings Bach’s difficult music with a complete mastery of vocal technique. In the recitative, “Barrabas aber war ein Mörder” (“Barrabas was a robber”), Wunderlich displays his agility in the onomatopoeic passage describing how Pilate scourged Jesus. One of the longest phrases in the score, he has no issue with breath through the phrase and each note is clearly articulated and precise. It is as if every note were one of the times Jesus was whipped, each blow stinging a little more than the previous one, with knife-like precision.

Audio Example A3.3: SOUND CLIP OF “Johannes-Passion”
Figure 3.3: Part II, from *Johannes-Passion* (piano/vocal) by Johann Sebastian Bach
While this phrase shows the agility and power that Fritz could command in his voice, the short recitative, “Und neiget das Haupt und verschied” (“And bowed his head and was gone”), displays something altogether different.

Audio Example A3.4: SOUND CLIP OF “Johannes-Passion”

Figure 3.4: Part II, from Johannes-Passion (piano/vocal) by Johann Sebastian Bach

As he sings this line, the hushed color of his voice, the elastic stretch of each vowel and consonant make this simple two measure phrase one of the most impressive on the recording, full of heart and soul only Wunderlich could achieve.

One of Wunderlich’s most famous recordings is of his timeless interpretation of Mahler’s Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth). This large-scale work is written for two vocal soloists; a tenor and a baritone or alto. This symphony for voice and orchestra is comprised of six separate movements, each movement an individual song. The text is adapted from Hans Bethge’s The Chinese Flute, a collection of translations of classic Chinese poetry published in 1907. It is worth mentioning that Das Lied von der Erde is the first work that completely integrates a song cycle and symphony.

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47 “The Song of the Earth”
48 Hans Bethge 1876-1946 was a German poet who is best known for his versions of Tang dynasty poetry set in Gustav Mahler’s "Das Lied von der Erde".
Best of all is his part in *Das Lied von der Erde* in the great recording under Klemperer. His finely differentiated tones on the three repetitions of the words “Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod” [“Dark is life, dark is death”], the softness of his voice as he listens to the “Vogel im Baum” [“bird in the tree”], the great beauty of tone at all points in the difficult score…his singing here makes a fine and no doubt enduring monument.

Wunderlich’s delivery of the line, “Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod,” from the first movement is truly a marvel. This text is repeated three times, and in each of the three musical phrases the words are set to descending line that starts in the upper register, first on G, and then twice on A. Wunderlich floats his voice on these difficult high pitches at the top of each phrase, easily singing the notes with no waver of pitch or loss of control.

Mahler himself believed it to be the most personal composition he had created thus far, and upon further investigation, these Chinese poems rendered into German proved more to Mahler than mere subject-matter upon which to base his song-symphony. “In [this] Chinese poetry Mahler found what he had formerly sought in the genre of German folk song: a mask or costume for the sense of rootlessness or ‘otherness’ attending his identity as a Jew.” The text for the first movement is full of somber thoughts including the previously mentioned, “Dark is life, dark is death.” Wunderlich easily sustains the emotional line throughout and is detailed with his attention to text, highlighting important words with the most delicate nuance. His flawless ability to use text to tell the story in *Das Lied von der Erde* is similar to his declamatory Evangelist in that one is instantly transported to a different emotional place while listening to him sing.

Not only is the poetry dark and full of emotion, but Mahler’s orchestration is heavy and dense. Normally reserved for larger and more dramatic voices, *Das Lied von der Erde* is the heaviest piece of music that Wunderlich recorded. The orchestration is almost on the scale of a Wagner opera. The texture of the orchestration is especially thick in the opening movement on the text, “Im Mondschein auf den Gräbern” [“In the moonlight on the graves”] yet Wunderlich is able to soar easily over the orchestra.

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49 “Dark is death, is death”  
50 “Bird in the tree”  
53 In the moonlight, on the graves
Figure 3.5 Part I, from *Das Lied von der Erde* (piano/vocal) by Gustav Mahler
Figure 3.6 Part I, from *Das Lied von der Erde* (Orchestral) by Gustav Mahler
Figure 3.6 – continued
Modern recording technology allows singers to record repertoire that they could not successfully undertake in live performances, but this is not the case with Wunderlich’s recording of *Das Lied*. He was contracted to sing the cycle with orchestra for live performances before he recorded it, and he was able to project and color his voice effectively even over Mahler’s orchestration.

One last recording must be mentioned: Joseph Haydn’s *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*). In “Haydn’s *Creation*, Wunderlich sings not only with wonderfully wholesome resonance and evenness, but also with a sense of drama...”\(^54\) Wunderlich recorded the arias in *Creation* prior to his death, but did not complete the recitatives and ensembles. Herbert von Karajan, the conductor of the recording, must have felt that the arias were too good to replace, because he engaged tenor Werner Krenn [b. 1943] to record the missing music but retained everything that Wunderlich had recorded when the LP project was released in 1969. Wunderlich’s sense of style and his unique ringing sound is evident in all of the arias in Haydn’s oratorio, and posterity can only be grateful that his partial performance of the role was preserved.

\(^{54}\) Steane, 546.
Fritz Wunderlich’s earliest performances of Lieder were not met with the same rave reviews as his operatic career. By 1960, Wunderlich was the Mozart singer of Munich, and with his rapid rise to fame came invitations from concert artists’ agencies and opportunities to tour as a recitalist in addition to his opera and oratorio engagements. Although at the height of his operatic career, it seems that his first attempt at singing a Lieder recital was a complete failure. He first gave Lieder recitals both in Vienna and at the Munich Herkules-Saal. After his recital at the Herkules-Saal on March 19th, 1963, “Walter Panofsky from the ‘Süddeutsche Zeitung’ (‘South German Newspaper’), one of the finest music critics in Germany, had confirmed that Wunderlich was a great opera singer but would not understand anything about singing Lieder.”

Fritz was devastated by the negative review and immediately confided in his dear friend and colleague Hermann “Hermi” Prey. Prey recommended that Wunderlich contact pianist Hubert Giesen and instructed him to “…be careful: Do not contradict him, but do everything he tells you to do…” At once, Wunderlich made it his personal quest to track him down and implore him to teach him the art of singing Lieder.

In an interview, German tenor Jonas Kaufman [b. 1969] states his opinion on why Wunderlich felt so compelled to focus on perfecting his Lieder singing:

I know the Wunderlich family very well, and from the stories, I know he was very strongly trying to achieve and to establish what some of the others of his generation had already done – people like Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau – they’ve been the masters of the Lied, along with his very close friend, Hermann Prey. So he just wanted to do something equal, and I think in the end he really did, because some of his live recordings of Lieder recitals are just so breathtaking and honest.

57 Opera Chic, June 2, 2010,” Interview: Jonas Kaufmann Speaks With Opera Chic About Franz Schubert,
Hubert Giesen (1898-1980) was a German pianist and composer, highly regarded as an accompanist for Lieder recitals, who often played for singers from the Stuttgart opera. He admittedly was never a great lover of opera, and when he and Wunderlich met for the first time, he had only heard of him and about his intelligence and singing ability, but had never heard his singing firsthand. After Giesen agreed to work with him, they immediately went to work on Schumann's song cycle, Dichterliebe. Hubert Giesen recalls this first session together:

After we had come to the end of the first sheet, I stopped playing. He looked at me and asked me: “What do you think about it?” and I asked, “Do you want me to be honest?” “You have to be honest,” he said. “That's why I'm here.” I responded, “Right then... I think it's rather bad.” “You see! That's just what I think,” Wunderlich said with a sigh of relief, as if I had paid him compliments. We kept on practicing seriously for some hours. In the end, we had worked through four bars where his articulation, intonation and legato now were as I wanted to hear it.  

Fig 4.1 Fritz Wunderlich with Hubert Giesen

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Wunderlich was so serious about learning from Giesen that he canceled engagements to continue his study with the pianist.

After that, he [Wunderlich] had to go back to Munich. The very next day, he phoned me and told me he had cancelled an operetta production with the Cologne broadcasting corporation to be able to practice with me. He asked me if I could come to Munich for the following three days. I came, and we continued our work. After these days he said: “Prey was right. It's no use contradicting you. What could I say then? It would only hold us back.”

In order to sing Lieder, the singer must be so secure in his technique that the voice becomes completely secondary to the expression of the text and music. “A good Lieder singer must be able to narrate a story or visualize the poet’s description of a landscape or a situation, to express feelings. A beautiful singing voice isn’t out of place either but expressivity is more important than beauty. Dramatic opera singers can sometimes be splendid Lieder singers but sometimes they crush the little intimate song between shining Wagnerian shields.”

Above all, the singer should be engaging, and possess the ability to transport the listener into the mood and situation of the song. The finest Lieder singer would have the listener forget the singer altogether, lost in the mood of song. Wunderlich believed that this could not fully be achieved until he had a solid grasp of vocal technique.

In an interview with Egloff Schwaige from his book Warum der Applaus, Wunderlich discusses how he came to sing Lieder:

Singing Lieder compels you to exercise the utmost control. I came to the Lied very late. Not because I did not have an affinity to it, but because I knew that I could only sing Lieder when I had gained full control over my voice. That is the most important prerequisite for the Lied. You cannot have even the smallest technical difficulty under any circumstances. The Lied is my measure of whether I am really able to sing. I have been giving Lieder recitals for some years now because I feel that I am gradually learning to truly sing.

59 http://www.andreas-praecke.de/wunderlich/giesen_e.htm#remark2
61 Fritz Wunderlich interviewed by Egloff Schwaiger from Warum der Applaus pg 317-323
Wunderlich was able to channel emotions through his voice and give great depth to his performances. In his Lieder recordings, the listener can hear the pure emotion, color, and above all, honesty with which he performed. Because of these traits, his recordings have become a model for singers today wishing to learn the intricacies of performing Lieder, or for the listener who wishes to enjoy such an honest performance. Modern day tenor, Juan Diego Florez, [b. 1973] says that when searching for tenor interpretations one should:

Look into Wunderlich first because he’s always honest with all his passion and soul. And to look into him for everything he puts into his music and his words, as words are very important to him and a very interesting aspect of his Lieder because unfortunately many singers forget the content when they try to make the most beautiful sound and they don’t realize that there’s actually a story behind it. But that was never the case with him.

*Dichterliebe*

*Dichterliebe (The Poet’s Love)* by Robert Schumann was composed in 1840 and is one of his best known song cycles. The texts for the sixteen songs come from the *Lyrisches Intermezzo* of Heinrich Heine, written 1822-1823 and published as part of the poet’s *Das Buch der Lieder* [*The Book of Songs*]. The music mirrors the intricate details of each poem and is delicately set with chromaticism and suspensions highlighting the poetry perfectly. Each song calls for a different mood, and requires the singer to have a varied palette of colors and nuances. “Heine’s poetry is rooted in riddles, allegories, allusions, dreams and above all ambivalences and contradictions. Heine mixed naked honesty with savage irony, constructed a folk-like simplicity with the keenest artifice, mingled autobiography with fantasy, comedy and tragedy, love and hate.”

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62 Juan Diego Florez, tenor who frequently sings with the Metropolitan Opera.


The *Dichterliebe* that Wunderlich recorded with Hubert Giesen for Deutsche Grammophon is a stellar example of his artistry and sensitivity. Reviews of this recording, some as recent as 2010, provide proof that his vocal legacy is still active in the singing world to date and they have not been forgotten. This song cycle is one of the most difficult to interpret as it requires both singer and the pianist to invest fully in each of the sixteen songs, giving each a different mood and color. The poetry is about one’s lost love, and it is extremely complex and wrought with irony as a means to conceal emotions of pain. One song in particular stands out as particularly difficult to express correctly. “*Ich grolle nicht*” [“I bear no grudge”] is one of Schumann’s most difficult songs for an interpreter, because of the bitterness in the text. Wunderlich sounds effortless as he creates one long passionate sweep of emotion from beginning to end. His honeyed voice accents the nuances of the poetry so easily, that it is as if he were speaking the text rather than vocalizing it.

“Ich grolle nicht”

I bear no grudge, even when my heart is breaking,
eternally lost love! I bear no grudge.
Even though you shine in diamond splendor,
there falls no light into your heart's night,
that I've known for a long time.

I bear no grudge, even when my heart is breaking.
I saw you, truly, in my dreams,
and saw the night in your heart's space,
and saw the serpent that feeds on your heart,
I saw, my love, how very miserable you are.
I bear no grudge.

Audio Example A4.1: SOUND CLIP OF “Ich grolle nicht”

In 1966, Fritz Wunderlich's and Hubert Giesen's performance of *Dichterliebe* at Usher Hall in Edinburgh, Scotland was reviewed by Conrad Wilson for “The Scotsman”.
Normally, a lyric tenor is not expected to hit the gloominess of some of the despairing Dichterliebe songs. Yet, “Ich grolle nicht” suddenly revealed Wunderlich’s reserves of dark, dramatic timbre, of powerful emotional intensity. That seemed surprising, all the more as he had treated some of the earlier songs in a very soft and tender manner. From now on, the moving development of this musical composition was expounded in its coherence. This was a deeply experienced, carefully increased and singular interpretation where one did not only enjoy Wunderlich’s subtle sentiment in every song, but also had to admire his understanding of the secret relations in the succession of the songs...  

Die schöne Müllerin

Schumann's Dichterliebe was such a great success that Wunderlich and Giesen immediately began practicing Schubert’s great song cycle Die schöne Müllerin. [The Miller-Maid], His “teacher” of only three short years, Geisen, contemplated why Wunderlich’s performance made a lasting impression:

When Wunderlich sang, he - in his own way - ranked without competition among the great Lieder singers of his time. He had such a great comprehension of a song like "Die böse Farbe" (from Schubert's Müllerin cycle) that he was able to afford letting the song be effective just on its own. The listener will notice that he sang it nearly unadorned, but in such a clarity that not a single note could be lost. Nothing was elegantly passed over; he did not put in any false emotionalism or sentiment, and thus he made the greater - one could even say the noblest - impression. The audience received first-hand what was Schubert’s will when he composed the song. They were not confronted with the singer’s emotions, his coquetry, his love of bel canto, but solely with the song itself. There were years of work underlying, years of a growing knowledge of precision, one could even say work in the service of Lieder singing. Wunderlich had high notes that turned out well effortlessly, but he sang them without showing off, just as he sang all other notes that belonged to the song. This seemed to be severe and objective, but made a strange impression on the audience. Many years after his death, a lady told me: “…have heard

65 http://www.andreas-praecke.de/wunderlich/giesen_e.htm
“Die böse Farbe” sung by many singers” (and she named some really great ones), “but it was only Fritz Wunderlich who made me weep, because I did not hear the singer anymore, I heard only the song. It was as if I had understood for the first time what it expressed…”66

In Wunderlich’s performance of this cycle there are many examples how he uses all of his skills at the service of the poetry. “Ungeduld” [“Impatience”] and “Die böse Farbe” [“The Evil Color”] are two songs in which he makes particularly effective use of varied colors and clarity of tone to tell the tale of the young man who falls in love with the Müllerin (Miller-Maid).

In the song “Ungeduld,” the young man has seen the Müllerin and is falling deeper in love with her, even though he has had no affirmation from her that she cares for him at all. In this song how he tells how will let all the world know that his heart is hers.

I would carve it fondly in the bark of trees,
I would chisel it eagerly into each pebble,
I would like to sow it upon each fresh flower bed
With watercress seeds, which it would quickly disclose;
Upon each white piece of paper would I write:
Yours is my heart and so shall it remain forever.

I would like to raise a young starling,
Until he speaks to me in words pure and clear,
Until he speaks to me with my mouth's sound,
With my heart's full, warm urge;
Then he would sing brightly through her windowpanes:
Yours is my heart and so shall it remain forever!

I would like to breathe it into the morning breezes,
I would like to whisper it through the active grove;
Oh, if only it would shine from each flower-star!
Would it only carry the scent to her from near and far!

66 http://www.andreas-praefcke.de/wunderlich/giesen_e.htm
You waves, could you nothing but wheels drive?
Yours is my heart, and so shall it remain forever.

I thought, it must be visible in my eyes,
On my cheeks it must be seen that it burns;
It must be readable on my mute lips,
Every breath would make it loudly known to her,
And yet she notices nothing of all my yearning feelings.
Yours is my heart, and so shall it remain forever.

Audio Example A4.2: SOUND CLIP OF “Ungeduld”

Wunderlich allows the sheer joy in the heart of the young man to pour out in his singing. When he arrives at the phrase, “Dein is mein Herz, und soll es ewig bleiben,” [“Yours is my heart, and so shall it remain forever”] he sing the high A with sheer excitement. Each note of this phrase has meaning, and yet even when he sings the high A full of passion, there is a contained quality, as if the young man were afraid to say it out loud, but cannot help himself. The color Wunderlich gives this phrase displays all of these emotions, while maintaining the youthful quality of the young man.

Another interpretation that stands out is that of “Die böse Farbe.” In this song, the young man, who has associated the color of green with his beloved in the previous song, “Die liebe Farbe,” [“The beloved color”]. The hunter who was introduced earlier in the cycle as an adversary to the young man has continued to visit her and jealousy ensues. The young man goes from loving the color to hating the color.

I'd like to go out into the world,
Out into the wide world;
If only it weren't so green, so green,
Out there in the forest and field!

I would like to pluck all the green leaves
From every branch,
I would like to weep on all the grass
Until it is deathly pale.

Ah, Green, you hateful color, you,
Why do you always look at me,
So proud, so bold, so gloating,
And me only a poor, flour-covered man?

I would like to lay in front of her door,
In the storm and rain and snow.
And sing so softly by day and by night
One little word: farewell!

Hark, when in the forest a hunter's horn sounds -
Her window clicks!
And she looks out, but not for me;
Yet I can certainly look in.

O do unwind from your brow
That green, green ribbon;
Farewell, farewell! And give me
Your hand in parting!

**Audio Example A4.3: SOUND CLIP OF “Die Böse Farbe”**

Wunderlich sings with such clarity of tone that one can hear the bitterness in his voice as the song begins and continues to grow as the poem progresses. When he says, “Wenn’s nur so grün, so grün nicht wär,” [“If only it weren’t so green”] one can still hear the love he continues to have for the color green, which he associates with the love of the Millers-Maid. The tenderness and care with which he sings the opening sixteenth notes for the color green are exquisite. As the
song progresses the bitterness increases and Wunderlich changes his color to express this. The change is so gradual and smooth that one is drawn into the story and cannot help feeling for the young man.

Schubert’s and Schumann’s Lieder were not the only ones that Wunderlich recorded. The song “Adelaide,” composed by Beethoven in 1795, is generally acknowledged to be one of the finest love songs ever composed. It is even considered by some to be Beethoven’s greatest song. The text was written by Friedrich von Matthisson, to whom Beethoven dedicated this song:

Alone does your friend wander in the Spring garden,
mildly encircled by magic light
that quivers through swaying, blossoming boughs,
Adelaide!

In the mirroring stream, in the snow of the Alps,
in the dying day's golden clouds,
in the fields of stars, your image shines,
Adelaide!

Evening breezes whisper in the tender leaves,
silvery lilies-of-the-valley rustle in the grass,
waves murmur and nightingales pipe:
Adelaide!

One day, o wonder! upon my grave will bloom
a flower from the ashes of my heart;
and clearly on every purple leaf will gleam:
Adelaide!

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67 Friedrich von Matthisson (1761 1831) Wörlitz, Anhalt-Dessau, German poet whose verses were praised for their melancholy sweetness and pastoral descriptive passages.

There are two recordings of “Adelaide” that are widely regarded as iconic: one by the great Swedish tenor Jussi Björling [1911-1960] and the recording by Fritz Wunderlich. Interestingly enough they both possess similar traits while singing the song, yet each stays within his individual vocal timbre. For this author Wunderlich’s recording is slightly superior. His natural control over the language is exquisite. When Wunderlich sings, “Wellen rauschen und Nachtigalen flöten” (“waves murmur and nightingales pipe”) he paints such a vivid picture with his voice that one can actually hear the nightingales sing.

In an interview, Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón [b. 1972] spoke about both of these “Adelaide” recordings.

I was preparing my first recital for New York and I was deciding what to sing. Some Tosti, something else, and then I heard some of Jussi Bjorling’s concerts and I saw “Adelaide” and I am going to listen now. I said...absolutely I am going to sing this, this is beautiful, so I saw the score and wow it is beautiful I have to do it. So I was listening to it and I was like, “OK, that is good.” And then my friend said, “but I also have a recording with Wunderlich.” I said, “Please, please show it to me” ...then I listened to it and I said, “I’m not going to do it.” Because I would love to do it, this would be my idea to be as close as this, and to do that I need a lot of work, I need a lot of work. There is in no way that in these months I will achieve that. So I will wait to do that, because it was just … and I love Bjorling he is one of my favorite tenors, but the thing is that every word [in Wunderlich’s recording], there was music in every syllable, there was something happening in every syllable. It was so delicious it was such a big difference and I thought “No no.” THIS...to be close to this, not to reach that because I would never reach that, because I would never have that kind of diction and never say the German the way that he said it, but at least you have to search, you know, to go for the gold. And for me that was the gold. That interpretation was just ... wow.69

69 Fritz Wunderlich: Leben und Legende
Wunderlich’s goal was to be one of the most respected *Lieder* singers of his era. Through his polished vocal technique, his natural ability to color words, his impeccable diction and his dedication to mastering the art of *Lieder* singing, he accomplished his goal. He not only established himself as one of history’s greatest singers of *Lieder*, but he raised the bar and set a standard for what many singers try to attain when singing this repertoire.
CONCLUSION

In October of 1966, Germany’s leading lyric tenor, Fritz Wunderlich, was scheduled to make his Metropolitan Opera debut as Don Ottavio in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. A month before this debut, which would surely have propelled him into the international spotlight, he died as a result of an accident, nine days before his thirty-sixth birthday. It is rare in the history of classical music that a singer makes a significant and lasting impact on the world in such a brief time.

Wunderlich’s professional career lasted only slightly more than ten years, but his influence on the interpretation of many standard works in the tenor repertoire has been extensive. Many people consider his performances in opera of Mozart’s Tamino [*Die Zauberflöte*] and Belmonte [*Die Entführung aus dem Serail*] to be definitive. He was a regular member of the Staatsoper in Munich, Germany from 1960 until his death, and he expanded his repertoire in that company to include Alfredo [Verdi’s *La traviata*] and Lenski [Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*]. At the time of his death, he was beginning to expand his repertoire into heavier roles, had received offers to sing Rodolfo [Puccini’s *La bohème*] and was experimenting with Wagnerian roles.

Wunderlich achieved equal success in oratorio and *Lieder*. Critics, singers and lovers of singing revere his recordings and performances of the Evangelist and tenor soloist in Bach’s two great *Passions*, as well as his interpretation of the tenor solos in Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*. Although he began to sing recital repertoire relatively late in his career, his interpretations of Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin* and Schumann’s *Dichterliebe* have frequently been aspired to by subsequent performers.

Fritz Wunderlich’s legacy as one of the greatest tenors of the twentieth century is confirmed through the many audio recordings he made. Through these recordings, it is possible to experience what a special and unique voice he possessed, and to gain insight into his influence on the tenors who came after him.
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