



GREAT SINGERS • FERRIER

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MAHLER

**Das Lied
von der Erde**

**Three
Rückert Lieder**

**Kathleen Ferrier, Contralto
Julius Patzak, Tenor
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
Bruno Walter**

Historical Recordings 1952

Great Singers: Kathleen Ferrier: Das Lied von der Erde • Three Rückert Lieder

The song settings on this disc date from two of the deepest crises in Gustav Mahler's life, and it is one of the mysteries of his genius that he managed to make them by turns serene, resigned and happy, with barely a tinge of bitterness.

By common consent, Chinese poetry reached its zenith in the T'ang Dynasty, and many poems have come down to us from such characters as Li Po (701-762), the wandering Taoist bard who never held down a job, sponged off relatives for much of the time and spent a good deal of his life drunk. Others, such as the painter-poet Wang Wei (699-759) were more decorous, but Wang's friend Mêng Haojan (689-740) had a few scrapes with officialdom – and Li Po seems to have got on well with him. In a good translation these men's works leap off the page, so it is little wonder that in the early years of the twentieth century they attracted the attention of the Berlin-based poet Hans Bethge (1876-1946). Although he knew no Eastern or Middle Eastern languages, Bethge was fascinated by Oriental literature and from 1898 he published anthologies of poems based on translations of texts from various countries. In 1907 it was the turn of China. Bethge's collection *Die chinesische Flöte* (The Chinese Flute), derived in good part from French versions of Chinese poems and apparent imitations of a supposed Chinese style of writing, attracted a good deal of attention even before its official publication that October, and one of those who obtained advance copies was Hofrat Dr Theobald Pollak, a civil servant who had long been a friend of Alma Mahler's family. He sent her the book as a present in the late summer of 1907 and it proved the inspiration for perhaps the finest masterpiece by her husband.

Mahler was at a low ebb. The elder of his two little daughters, Maria Anna, had died and he himself had been given a very gloomy diagnosis of the heart condition which would kill him within a few years. Like most busy executant musicians, he was essentially a summer and Sunday composer, and the

summer of 1907 had been barren so far. Taking rooms at Schluderbach in the Tyrol for a month, he mullied over the 'Chinese' poems during walks in the woods and made the first sketches for what became *Das Lied von der Erde*. The work was effectively written the following year and was finished in 1909, but had still not been performed when Mahler died in May 1911. It was left to his acolyte Bruno Walter to give the first performance, in Munich on 20th November that year.

In all essentials, *Das Lied von der Erde* is a symphony; but Mahler balked at the idea of calling it his *Ninth*, partly through superstition (Beethoven and Schubert had both reached only nine symphonies). Sure enough, when he did essay a *Ninth Symphony*, it proved to be his last completed work and once again, Walter had to give the posthumous première. In adapting Bethge's verses, Mahler was quite free, sometimes rewriting the words to fit his musical ideas. He even ran two poems into one for the massive final movement, *Abschied*, which was quite apposite as the poets, Wang Wei and Mêng Haojan, were good friends. He used three poems attributed by Bethge to Li Po but it appears that *Von der Jugend* is actually by another hand. *Der Einsame im Herbst* is by the court poet Chang Chi, who was rather a thorn in Li Po's side. Mahler injected a certain amount of chinoiserie into *Abschied* and throughout the cycle used his mastery of orchestral colour to create an atmosphere of exoticism. By the time the words had been filtered through Bethge's and Mahler's late romantic sensibilities, the elegant detachment of the originals had been rather lost, and the composer compounded this metamorphosis by writing his own somewhat roseate ending to *Abschied*. Yet who will complain when the result is so moving?

The songs to texts by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) date from the summer of 1901, when Mahler had suffered his first serious health crisis through overwork – three of the *Kindertotenlieder*, also to texts by Rückert, date from the same time. Eventually Mahler

collected five Rückert Lieder, along with two settings of poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, to make the cycle *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit*, but they are rarely performed as such and the Rückert settings are usually kept together as a miniature cycle. Of the three here, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* is in Mahler's most serene vein – he re-used its melody in the *Adagietto* of his *Fifth Symphony*. *Ich atmet' einen linden Duft* is among his more lyrical outpourings, and the eerie *Um Mitternacht* is remarkable for its scoring, which eschews strings in favour of wind instruments (including the plangent oboe d'amore), brass, harp, piano and timpani.

The recordings here, which originally appeared on a Decca double-LP set, are among the most celebrated in the Mahler discography. Bruno Walter (1876-1962) was perhaps the composer's most assiduous champion, using his reputation as one of the world's leading conductors to promote performances and recordings of the *First, Second, Fourth, Fifth and Ninth Symphonies*. The result is that we have two or more recordings of his warm interpretations of all those works. *Das Lied von der Erde* held a special place in Walter's affections and he left us three official recordings, the first of which was taken down at a 1936 concert in Vienna along with *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (Naxos 8.110850), as well as a number of unofficial ones. This studio recording from May 1952 is generally held to sum up the best features of Walter's interpretation.

Apart from anything else, it preserves his collaboration with one of his favourite artists, the English contralto Kathleen Ferrier (1912-53). This much-loved singer made a late start to her career – it was as a pianist that she entered the competition which initially made her reputation, putting her name down for the vocal category as an afterthought. The Second World War delayed her progress and she did not fully start her career until 1943. She had a good teacher and mentor, however, in the baritone Roy Henderson, and when her big chance came, in 1947, she was ready. It was a performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* with

Walter and the Vienna Philharmonic, at the first Edinburgh Festival, and it launched her on a brief but glorious international career. During the May 1952 sessions in Vienna, held in parallel with a public performance of *Das Lied*, Ferrier got through on sheer force of personality and Northern grit. The last of the Rückert Lieder, *Um Mitternacht*, was an all-or-nothing effort, with Walter in tears and the soloist in excruciating pain. Within seventeen months she was dead, having had to receive the Royal Philharmonic Society gold medal in hospital. The Ferrier voice was a real contralto and, as Benjamin Britten pointed out, the fact that she had a relatively 'short' upper register lent a wholly beneficial tension to her vocalism at the top of her range. Her singing always had 'face' and more often than not, that face was smiling.

Nevertheless we should not overlook the two Viennese components of this great performance of *Das Lied*. The orchestra which Mahler himself conducted so often has not always gone out of its way to play his works, but when it has done so, it has brought a special quality to the music. On each rehearing, the playing in *Das Lied* impresses with its commitment, freshness and beauty of sound. Then there is that wonderful singer Julius Patzak (1898-1974), the only one of the legendary Viennese tenors who was born and bred in the city. Virtually self-taught as a singer, he originally intended to become a conductor and studied composition with Eusebius Mandyczewski and Franz Schmidt, but his fine voice led him to opera houses in Czechoslovakia and in 1928 he joined the company in Munich, remaining there (with guest excursions elsewhere) until 1947. He did not become a favourite at the Vienna State Opera until 1945 but soon made up for lost time. Patzak excelled in Mozart, operetta, Viennese songs and the serious Lieder repertoire. His skill in declamation made him a moving Florestan in *Fidelio* and a memorable oratorio singer. His contribution to this recording has a unique flavour.

Tully Potter

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.



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MAHLER

Julius Patzak, Tenor†

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra • Bruno Walter

Kathleen Ferrier (1912-1953)

Playing Time 75:30

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Three Rückert-Lieder		14:43
1	Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen	5:28
2	Ich atmet' einen linden Duft	2:45
3	Um Mitternacht	6:21
Recorded 20th May, 1952 in the Grosser Saal, Musikverein, Vienna.		
Das Lied von der Erde		60:47
4	Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde†	8:37
5	Der Einsame im Herbst	9:15
6	Von der Jugend†	3:00
7	Von der Schönheit	6:45
8	Der Trunkene im Frühling†	4:22
9	Der Abschied	28:23

Recorded 15th and 16th May, 1952 in
the Grosser Saal, Musikverein, Vienna.

First issued as Decca LXT 2721 and 2722

The present release features Mahler's greatest champion, Bruno Walter, in collaboration with one of his favourite artists, the English contralto Kathleen Ferrier, singing the work which launched her brief but glorious international career. The legendary Julius Patzak, one of the most stylish and eloquent of Viennese tenors, lends a special quality to what are among the most celebrated recordings in the Mahler discography.

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CANADA



Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
Cover image: Kathleen Ferrier (Lebrecht Collection)



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