

Christa Ludwig – A Personal Tribute

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A few weeks ago, the world of classical music lost one of its greatest singers, the German mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig. She was 93 and had enjoyed half a century of universal acclaim in opera, oratorio and German song. My homage with musical recommendations today is dedicated to Dorothy Horns, a serious Ludwig fan, who encouraged me to write it. (Sorry I haven't been able to provide texts and translations, but here's a link to a good source for the songs: <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1121>.)

Born in Berlin in 1928 to two opera singers, closely associated with the Vienna State Opera from 1955, Christa Ludwig made her American stage debut in 1959 at the Chicago Lyric and New York Met and remained a frequent visitor to these shores in opera and recital. (Sadly, inexplicably, she never graced the Schubert Club's International Artist Series.)

My own introduction to Ludwig's artistry was an LP of lieder with pianist Gerald Moore. On the recommendation of a college friend, I immediately added it to my then still small record collection. Here's a video sampling from that period of her career singing that repertoire, a BBC mini-recital from 1961 featuring Ludwig and Moore in lieder by Brahms, Mahler and Strauss: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok78gc6F6FQ&ab_channel=AnalogonEdizioni

Eventually I was able to witness Ludwig's artistry in person. I remember a wonderful 1971 lieder recital in the intimate hall named for Brahms in Vienna's Musikverein. That venue seemed fitting, as the dark velvet of her voice was especially well suited to Brahms. In 1972 she sang a recital devoted entirely to that composer in Tel Aviv (I wasn't at that one). At the piano was Leonard Bernstein, who was by then one of her favorite musical partners and a close friend.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poxdfIFxTjE&ab_channel=Primalamusica

Ludwig initiated the partnership with a letter to Bernstein and later admitted that she found her first rehearsal with the dynamic and far from humble maestro "very astonishing". They were "coming from two sides" — he from the massive orchestral, she from the intimate lieder. Gradually, however, they began to share "the same waves, the same pulse."

Ludwig's plush mezzo was also ideal for Mahler, and in Bernstein's volatility she had a perfect foil to her own composure and total vocal control. In the late 1960s, they performed and recorded the *Knaben Wunderhorn* songs with the New York Philharmonic and Ludwig's then husband, the Austrian bass-baritone Walter Berry.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOMu1oKAouE&ab_channel=AndreiU.AndreiU.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPD1DmSNqYU&ab_channel=fritz5114

In 1972, with Bernstein conducting the Israel Philharmonic and tenor René Kollo, she recorded *Das Lied von der Erde*, a work with which she was already closely associated through the celebrated 1967 recording under Otto Klemperer. I heard her sing Mahler's masterpiece once live, at the 1972 Edinburgh Festival, where she was accompanied by another of her favorite collaborators, Herbert von Karajan, with the Berlin Philharmonic and, again, René Kollo. They recorded it in Berlin that year.

Today it's the Israel Philharmonic *Das Lied* I'm offering you, because that performance was filmed. And the cameras also captured an early rehearsal in which Ludwig and Bernstein engage in a revealing dispute over a notoriously tricky passage in the fourth movement. The bone of contention: whether it matters if she can articulate the text intelligibly at his breakneck tempo? The meticulous mezzo firmly believes it does; the impulsive maestro casually says it doesn't. Click on the YouTube insert halfway down the page to watch them (politely) go at it:

<https://www.classicfm.com/composers/bernstein-l/christa-ludwig-tempo-mahler-das-lied-rehearsal/>

Here's the superb concert performance in its entirety. (You can check in around 27:00 to hear who "won" the argument.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUZLLmUpaTk&ab_channel=MichaelLi

I actually experienced the Ludwig-Bernstein partnership only once in person, performing Mahler's Third Symphony at a Vienna Philharmonic concert in April 1972, also filmed. You obviously won't be able to see me in the first row of the balcony of the Musikverein's gilded hall (the Vienna Philharmonic's season is generally sold out in advance to regular subscribers, but I managed to procure a seat).

Movements 4 and 5 with Ludwig singing the alto solos (and the Vienna Boys Choir featured in the fifth movement) begin around the hour mark on this video, though the whole performance is worth watching:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOYXgJskwIQ&ab_channel=Cantus5

With her flawless vocal technique, Ludwig could also take on some soprano parts. The one that really launched her career was the "trousers role" of Octavian, the young lover in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, which she sings in the unsurpassed 1956 recording under Karajan. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf sings the Marschallin, a role Ludwig gradually moved into as she matured: she first sang "the older woman in 1968" in Vienna with Bernstein conducting. They recorded it for CBS in 1971, and that year she sang Octavian for the last time. I was lucky to be in the audience for that historic performance at the Vienna State Opera and marveled that in those years Ludwig could keep those two long, complex, contrasting and intertwined roles in her head at the same time.

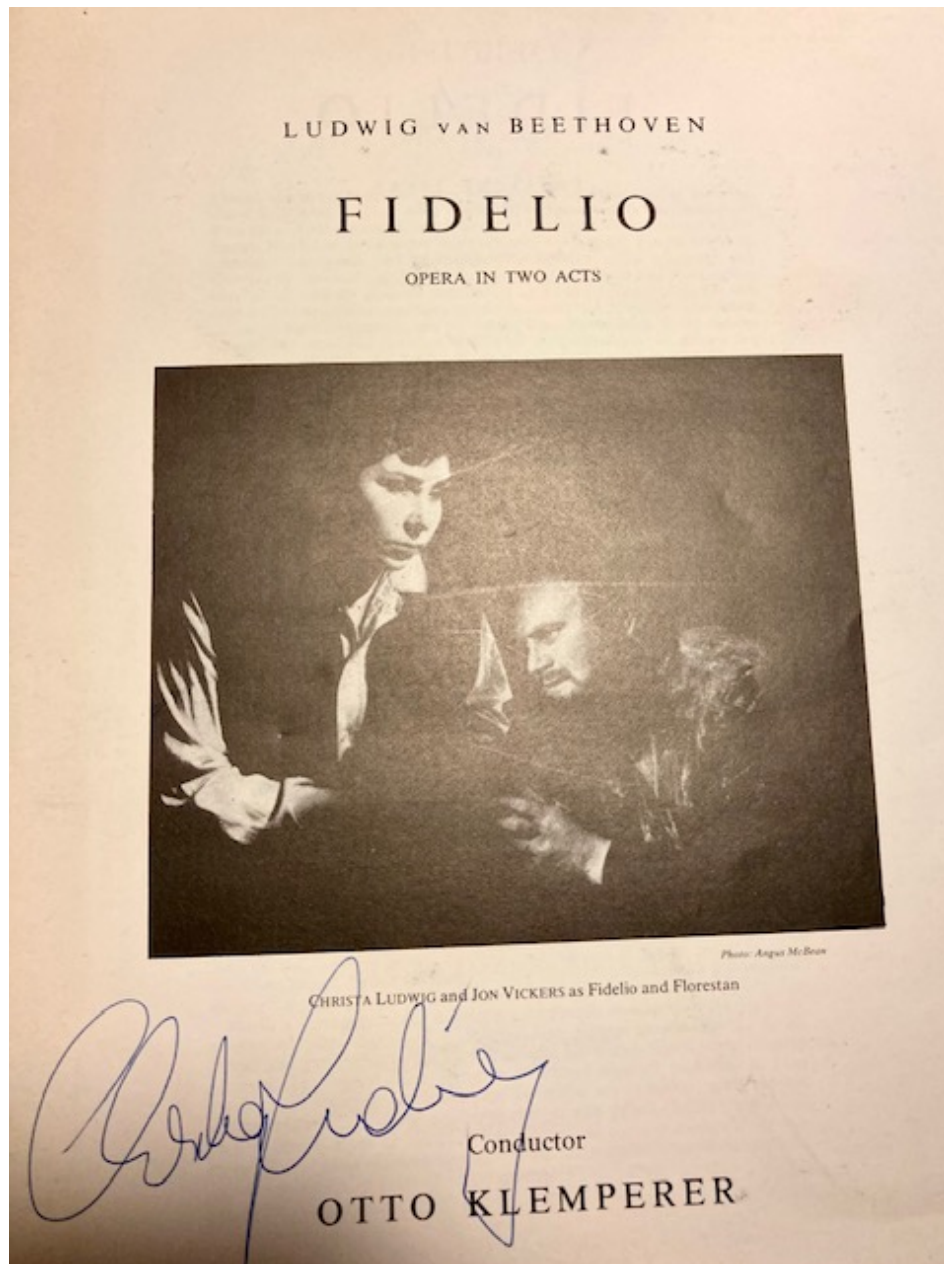


As Octavian

Here's a snippet, audio only, from Act I of the legendary Karajan recording of *Der Rosenkavalier*. It's the opera's pivotal moment: Octavian reaffirms "his" love for the Marschallin, but she insists that one day he will leave her for a younger woman:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CizmzV8xoc&ab_channel=HerbertvonKarajan-Topic

Yet it was another soprano role that I consider Christa Ludwig's supreme achievement, Leonore, the heroine of Beethoven's *Fidelio* who succeeds against all odds in rescuing her husband Florestan from political imprisonment and probable execution. Ludwig's complete 1962 *Fidelio* with Jon Vickers as Florestan and Otto Klemperer conducting is, in my opinion, both the opera's and her finest recording.



My autographed copy of the LP booklet

Shortly after she made that recording in London, Ludwig sang Leonore on stage in Berlin. Here's a complete video of one of the performances (sorry, no subtitles).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_LnyzRLJsk&ab_channel=Thewisemonkey9

Christa Ludwig was also remarkable for her versatility. Here she is in some brief but telling recorded excerpts from her other major roles.

As Dorabella in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*:



with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (l.) as Fiordiligi – Chicago Lyric Opera, 1959

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE5E7I5cWyg&ab_channel=ChristaLudwig-Topic

As Adalgisa in Bellini's *Norma* (with Maria Callas):



Recording *Norma* with Callas in Milan, 1960

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3efAgtDrRy4&ab_channel=MariaCallas-Topic

As the alto soloist in Verdi's Requiem (which I heard her perform live with the Scala Orchestra and Chorus under Claudio Abbado):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkdvK_5QpRM&ab_channel=Operazaileo-perazaileo

You may be surprised to hear which role I saw her sing twice on stage, in Vienna and later in London: as Bizet's *Carmen*, one of her favorite parts, she was remarkably sultry and fiery.



As Carmen

Here she is singing the “Habanera” in a 1966 Vienna performance conducted by Lorin Maazel:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9EsmLVPAcA&ab_channel=liederoperagr eatsoftheworld

Skipping ahead to London in December 1989, when Leonard Bernstein, for the first and last time – it was only months before his death – performed his 1956 operetta *Candide* and recorded it for Deutsche Grammophon (my wife Adele was in the Barbican concert audience and at the Abbey Road sessions, serving as language coach for the recording). It was only natural that for the role of the Old Lady he would engage his old friend Christa Ludwig, who had surprised him the year before by singing the Old Lady’s famous number “I Am Easily Assimilated” at Lenny’s 70th birthday concert with the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood. Here she is singing it in the London performance of *Candide*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLnLYfCJbik&ab_channel=LeonardBernst ein

I could happily end this survey of Christa Ludwig’s career with this charming display of her humor, versatility and friendship with Bernstein. But I must include an unforgettable occasion from 1994, her very last appearance: the recital she dedicated to her adopted home, Vienna, in which Ludwig, still in great voice at 66, sings a choice program of her favorite lieder. I think you’ll enjoy it:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTK6ffHQucs&ab_channel=EuroArtsChannel