"Entartete" Music—
Hugo Distler and the Harpsichord

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Entartete—"degenerate"—was a derogatory term used in Nazi Germany to characterize art works deemed to be "un-German" or "impure." The word itself originated as a biological term to describe a plant or animal that has changed so much that it no longer belongs to its species.

In 1937 a large exhibition of *entartete* paintings and graphic arts was mounted in Munich, birthplace of the National Socialist movement. Works by Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Oskar Kokoschka, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde and many others were displayed to show the degradation of modern art by artists unacceptable to the regime: Nazi-denounced "Jews, Bolsheviks, persons of color, and perverts."

As contrast, directly across the plaza, there was another exhibition, many of its pieces chosen by Adolph Hitler himself. This show demonstrated "true German art"—realistic representations of heroic blond Aryan figures by the Führer's favorite sculptor Arno Breker, and his "court painter" Adolf Ziegler.

That music, too, could be degenerate was a concept put forward as justification for denying performances of works by such contemporary masters as Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, and Kurt Weill. For the most part, the creators of these works were forced to flee Hitler's oppressive totalitarian regime or face incarceration in concentration camps. To find a score by Distler among those deemed modernist and unfit for German ears seems unimaginable to present-day auditors, but such a travesty did occur.

During October of that same year, 1937, a week-long Festival of German Church Music took place in Berlin. Among a plethora of new music, several of Hugo Distler's compositions were heard. In addition to the choral and organ music that had secured his reputation as one of the most talented composers of his generation, Distler's secular *magnum opus*, the *Concerto for Harpsichord and Strings*, opus 14, was given a prominent place in a Sunday concert at the Philharmonic Concert Hall, with the composer's Lübeck colleague, Marienorganist Walter Kraft, as soloist. The conductor was none other than Dr. Peter Raabe, president of the Nazi music regulatory board (the *Reichsmusikkammer*), so one might have expected that the official press would use only superlatives to praise the concert.

Not so! Here is an excerpt from one of the more scathing reviews:

> . . . there was the general aggravation of Hugo Distler's *Concerto for Harpsichord*, an "in-your-face" example of degenerate art. The delicate domestic harpsichord was utilized in an unnatural way—like a piano. At the *Finale* the young composer seemed to be driven by the devil! This motoric noisy music chattered endlessly on . . . Listeners could only laugh. Perhaps it would have been better had they whistled and pondered the biblical quotation: He mocked only himself . . .[1]

An earlier description of the *Concerto*'s 1936 premiere in Hamburg, read:

> Stuttering rhythms, fractured mood and brutal background sounds fulfill the intellectual aspect of the formal side . . . only to a very limited extent. It appears to be difficult for some people to break loose from the idolatry of an outgrown, stereotypical [Kurt] Weill era. Distler must—in our opinion—change a great deal at the human level in order to properly exploit his considerable abilities.[2]

Distler's music degenerate, brutal, diabolic? Possibly, perhaps, to ears deafened by militaristic brass bands or the loud general cacophony of the government propaganda, but otherwise, unlikely.

Hugo Distler (1908–1942) at his harpsichord

How did church composer Hugo Distler come to write a major composition for harpsichord, a far from ubiquitous keyboard instrument in the 1930s? As Wanda Landowska remarked (about J. S. Bach), to understand the greatness of a master composer, one needs to place it in the context of music by his contemporaries.

Urged by Leipzig professor Hermann Grabner to base his composition studies on music of the past, specifically that of the Baroque, and influenced further by his organ teacher, Günther Ramin, one of Germany's pioneering harpsichordists during the 1920s,[3] Distler was evidently drawn to the instrument. In addition to Ramin's public performances, there was new music for harpsichord being created during Distler's student days. In 1927 Carl Orff (who was to become a household name ten years later with his wildly successful choral/orchestral work *Carmina Burana*) composed a *Kleines Konzert nach Lautensätzen* for winds, harpsichord, and percussion. Based on lute pieces by Vincentio (Vincenzo) Galilei and Jean-Baptiste Besard, the work is a 13-minute precursor to a similar work by Francis Poulenc, the *Suite Française* (1935), also based on Renaissance dance music (by Claude Gervaise), and scored for the same instrumental forces.

Forced by economic necessity to leave the conservatory course before completing his degree, Distler auditioned for and won the position of organist at the Jakobikirche in the north German city of Lübeck, a position he assumed on January 1, 1931. There he began a brilliant career as composer of choral and organ music, with the smaller of the church's two baroque instruments as his special muse and guide.[4] Somehow, despite a meager salary, Distler managed to acquire a two-manual Neupert concert harpsichord in November of that same year[5] and used it on November 29 for the first performance of his *Kleine Adventsmusik*, opus 4.[6] Through the succeeding years of his tenure at St. Jakobi, Distler frequently employed his harpsichord for a series of vesper concerts, as well as for chamber music in other Lübeck venues.

Distler actually began writing an extended harpsichord concerto during the early 1930s, a fact that went unnoticed until I discovered fair-copy segments of it in a trunk of musical manuscripts recently found and sent from Lübeck, then stored beneath the guest bed at Frau Distler's post-war home in Bavaria.[7] The physical remnants of this work explained a seeming time discrepancy in his letter to Hermann Grabner (dated 17 April 1931): "Work on my harpsichord concerto, which would have soon been finished, was unfortunately interrupted by another task [a *Luther Cantata* for a Lübeck Reformation Festival] . . ."

In another communication dated 17 August, this one to Gerhard Schwarz, the young composer wrote, "I have also completed a *Concerto for Harpsichord and Eleven Solo Instruments* that I have given to Professor Ramin to look over; so far as I can tell, he would like to perform it this winter, perhaps even in Berlin. In addition, Frau Mann-Weiss wants to do it in Hamburg for the New Music series, also this winter."[8]

However, it was more than additional commissions that prevented the first performance, expected in March of 1933. The presumptive dedicatee and soloist of the *Chamber Concerto for Harpsichord and Eleven Solo Instruments*, Günther Ramin, did not like the score as it was presented to him, and asked for extensive revisions. In a letter to his fiancée, Waltraut Thienhaus, Distler expressed anger at his former teacher's request. The work, missing many pages by the time of its rediscovery in 1968, was not performed until 1998. Although it is now available in a performing edition by Michael Töpel, I find it a flawed and unpleasant work.[9] Score one for Professor Ramin!

Further annoyance for the young composer may have been triggered by the fact that Ramin DID play a *Chamber Concerto for Harpsichord and String Orchestra* in the spring of 1933, but it was a work by Distler's exact contemporary Kurt Hessenberg,[10] later to be associated in Frankfurt with another Leipzig fellow student, the blind German organist Helmut Walcha. Although I have not seen a score of Hessenberg's *Concerto*, if it holds as much musical charm as several of the *Zehn Kleine Präludien für Klavier oder Clavichord*, opus 35 (published by Schott in 1949), it may be a work worth searching for.

Hessenberg, too, endured the political idiocy of the 1930s. He recounted,

> My *Second String Quartet* . . . has a special "history": its premiere by the Lenzewski Quartet was on the program of a concert [sponsored by] the Reichsmusikkammer in Berlin [1937]. However, because I was still very much unknown, the piece was performed before a board from the aforementioned institution in my absence for approval, and provoked the displeasure of that body. So the piece, which in spite of its adherence to tonality reveals the influence of Hindemith, perhaps also of Bartòk, was dropped from the program. This decision was criticized at that time in a music journal, as a result of which more attention was directed toward me than probably would have been the case if a public performance had taken place. The *Quartet* was premiered soon after in Frankfurt by the Lenzewski Quartet, excellently, and with success, and not much later in an independent concert of this ensemble in Berlin as well.[11]

Hessenberg apparently had a more sanguine outlook than Distler (whom, he wrote, he had met only twice, despite the fact that both were students at the same time in the same city). Balanced and genial in character as in music, Hessenberg adapted well to pre- and post-war necessities, living until 1984.

Other harpsichord offerings from the Germany of the 1930s include *Music for 2 Violins and Cembalo* 1932 by Heinrich Kaminski (1886–1946), composed in post-Regerian thick texture by a favorite composer of Thomaskantor Karl Straube, and the appropriately spare 1934 *Spinettmusik* by Rudolf Wagner-Régeny (1903–1969), composer, pianist and clavichordist of Romanian origin, perhaps historically shunned because he was one of two approved surrogates who wrote pure "Aryan" alternative music to replace the banned *Midsummer Night's Dream* music of Felix Mendelssohn (for performance at the 1935 Reichstagung of the Nazi Kulturgemeinde in Düsseldorf).[12]

Wagner-Régeny's seven short pieces compare favorably with Distler's *Dreissig Spielstücke* of 1938,[13] and since Distler, too, joined the Nazi party on May 1, 1933, perhaps one need no longer cast neither aspersions nor stones at either composer for such ancient political miscalculations. At least in Distler's case, it is evident that he became increasingly unsympathetic with the government authorities, and finally committed the ultimate act of civil disobedience by removing himself from earthly existence altogether.

Unquestionably the compositional high point encountered thus far among examples of Third Reich harpsichord music is Distler's *(Second) Harpsichord Concerto*, with its vivacious Stravinskian first movement; hauntingly lovely, lyrical second movement featuring arching solo violin lines above percussive, insistent rhythmic figures from the harpsichord; and culminating with a rollicking third movement based on Samuel Scheidt's four-part harmonization of the folk song *Ei, du feiner Reiter*. Distler's variations on this sturdy German tune certainly display wit and good humor, especially in a solo harpsichord parody of the mechanistic technique-building keyboard exercises of Carl Czerny. Two further keyboard solo variations (six and twelve) show an idiomatic variety of texture. The note C held over by the second violin serves as a breathtaking common tone modulation for the A-flat major return of the theme, set as a phrase by phrase dialog between strings and harpsichord, concluding with a whimsical employment of ever-longer periods of silence, à la Haydn, from which the final expected answer by the harpsichord never occurs at all. This lengthy silence is ended when the exasperated strings plunge, pall-mall, into a repetition of the wildly motoric tenth variation to provide a vigorous finale. Quirky, or even sarcastic, yes, but scarcely degenerate!

At the first performance of this *Concerto* the work had an additional movement, *Allegro spirituoso e scherzando*, expanding by more than six minutes a work that already clocked in at more than half an hour! Several critics suggested pruning the composition by deleting this extra movement, and the composer took their advice. Subsequent performances utilized only the three movements described above, and the printed score presents this three-move-

Hugo and Waltraut

ment version. The additional movement works as a stand-alone piece with strings, the manner in which I played its modern premiere during the 1980 American Guild of Organists national convention in Minneapolis.[14]

That the composer found the harpsichord to his liking was shown in one further extended work, until recently known only as a reference citation, the *Schauspielmusik zu Ritter Blaubart* [*Theatre Music for Knight Bluebeard*]. Parts for this incidental music assembled for a cancelled Berlin production of Ludwig Tieck's play were among manuscripts turned over to the Bärenreiter-Verlag by Waltraut Distler, a few years after the end of the war. Since there were other items both complete and more marketable to bring into print, the stage music was basically overlooked. Reassembled and organized by Michael Töpel, the score was published, at last, at the turn of the new millennium, and given a first performance in 2002. Now there is a recording (Musicaphon M 56860), issued early in 2008.

Distler recycled quite a lot of his *Harpsichord Concerto* for this incidental music, with very interesting additions of wind instruments to the original strings. Three short, newly composed vocal insertions have secco harpsichord accompaniments. One movement [*War Music*] is an orchestral version of two pieces from Distler's *Eleven Piano Pieces*, opus 15 [*Fanfare; With Drums and Pipes*]. Most appealing is the sarabande-like *Overture to the Second Act* (arranged for harpsichord and strings from the second movement of *String Quartet in A minor*, opus 20/I), truly one of the loveliest of Distler's instrumental works. (The recorded performance, however, has the harpsichord consistently anticipating the strings!) A welcome bonus of the recent disc is the digital remastering of the first recording of the opus 14 *Concerto*, made in 1964 by the superbly musical French harpsichordist Huguette Dreyfus and the Deutsche Bach Solistin, conducted by Martin Stephani.

Concerning his *Concerto* Distler wrote to a pupil: "It is an angry piece . . . If it is so 'modern', then it is not because I wanted to appear really 'modern' for once, but because I am such a dislocated puppet."[15] As his last sacred motets demonstrate, he was willing to disregard the government's strictures against writing new church music. Published after the war as part of his cycle of *Sacred Choral Music*, opus 12, the two motets conceived as opening and closing choruses for a planned *St. John Passion*, never to be completed, showed the composer's increased mastery of form and expanded use of chromatics. (The fugue subject of the last motet, *Fürwahr er trug unsere Krankheit* [*Surely He hath borne our griefs*], contains ten of the twelve pitches found in the chromatic scale.)

Five years after the *Concerto* performance so stigmatized by the Nazi press, the composer's mounting dread of military conscription fueled his descent into depression, and led him to turn on the gas in the Berlin apartment where he ended his life on November 1, 1942. Ironically, only a few days later his name appeared on the *Führerliste*—a register of those individuals permanently exempted from the military draft, persons deemed to be more important at home than in the armed forces.

Hitler's much-vaunted "thousand year Reich" survived Distler by only three years, falling 988 years short of its self-proclaimed longevity. But as we celebrate the composer's centenary, his music continues increasingly to move and beautify our musical life. Political movements are transient; artistic worth endures. ■

Notes

1. Erich Roeder: "Neue Musik—ohne und mit Bedenken," in *Der Angriff* 238, Berlin Edition, 11 October 1937, p. 4 [Cited in Lüdemann, *Hugo Distler*, 179].

2. Heinz Fuhrmann, "Musikfeste und Tagungen, Hamburg" in *Zeitschrift für Musik* 103 (1936), p. 748. Translated by Janet & Michael Berridge in *Notes* to Thorofon CTH 2403.

3. See Martin Elste: *Meilensteine der Bach Interpretation 1750–2000*. Stuttgart & Weimar: J. B. Metzler and Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 2000, a major study of Bach performance styles and historical recordings of Bach works. The accompanying compact disc includes a 1928 recording of the first movement (*Siciliano*) from Bach's *Sonata in C Minor for Violin and Cembalo*, with Licco Amar, violin, and Professor Ramin, harpsichord (track 5).

4. Preface to *Orgelpartita: Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, opus 8/I. Bärenreiter 637.

5. Letter from J. C. Neupert to Distler Archiv, 30 September 1975. See Lüdemann, p. 52, note 8.

6. See the listing of the Vesper program with the notation "am Cembalo" in Palmer: *Hugo Distler and his Church Music*, p. 168. A practical reason for using harpsichord might be simply a logistical one: the small organ in a swallow's nest gallery allowed little room for singers or instrumentalists; thus the organ would be far distant from the ensemble.

7. See Palmer, "Hugo Distler's Harpsichord Concerto," in THE DIAPASON, May 1969, 12–13.

8. Quoted in Ursula Herrmann, "Forty Years of the Berlin Church Music School, Spandau" in program booklet (1968). Translated by Larry Palmer and quoted in the article cited above. Frau Mann-Weiss is usually referred to as Edith Weiss-Mann. In addition to being one of the foremost German harpsichordists of her generation, she was mother to the eminent musicologist and choral director Alfred Mann. It had puzzled me that Distler should mention a *Harpsichord Concerto* in 1931 when the published work with that title was dated 1936.

9. Recorded by Martin Haselböck (Thorofon CTH 2403).

10. Information from Hessenberg's autobiography (Kleine Selbstbiographie from *Kurt Hessenberg: Beiträge zu Leben und Werk* (Peter Cahn, editor), B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1990). The *Chamber Concerto* is his opus 3. See <www.cassandrarecords.com/en/artists/KHessenberg/autobiography.htm>. The English translation is credited to Leland Sun and Barbara Schultz-Verdon.

11. From the Cassandra website, cited above.

12. Nicholas Slonimsky: *Music Since 1900*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1994, p. 375.

13. Three of Distler's 30 short movements (numbers 1, 2 and 4) were published in the collection *Neue Cembalomusik*, Bk 1: Bärenreiter 3804 (1962), edited by Franzpeter Goebels (together with music by Günther Bialas, Johannes Driessler, Hessenberg, Karl Marx, and Karl Schäfer). Wagner-Régeny's *Spinettmusik* was published by Verlag für Musik, Leipzig, 1975. The first publication was by Universal Edition, Vienna, 1935.

14. See works list for publication details.

15. Letter to Frau Dr. Wex, 14 May 1936, quoted in Ursula Herrmann: *Hugo Distler—Rufer und Mahner*. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1970, p. 95. Cited in *Notes* to Thorofon CTH 2403.

Hugo Distler's compositions for (or with) harpsichord

Opus 4. ***Kleine Adventsmusik*** [*A Little Advent Music*], Breitkopf und Härtel 4967. First performed 28 November 1931, using harpsichord as the keyboard instrument. English edition (Concordia Publishing House).

Opus 6/I. ***Christ, der du bist der helle Tag*** [*Christ Who Alone Art Light of Day*], Bärenreiter 636. First performed 26 Februrary 1933, with harpsichord. English edition (Concordia).

Opus 9/I. ***An die Natur*** (1933). First performed 16 August 1933 at the Nationalsozialistischen Musikfest in Bad Pyrmont. Bärenreiter 683.

Opus 11/I. ***Choralkantate Wo Gott zuhaus nit gibt sein Gunst***, harpsichord or organ. Composed 1933, published 1935. Bärenreiter 758.

Opus 14. ***Konzert für Cembalo und Streichorchester*** (1935–1936). First performed 29 April 1936, Hamburger Musikhalle, Hugo Distler, harpsichordist, Dr. Hans Hoffmann, conductor. Published October 1936; Bärenreiter 7393. An additional movement, deleted from the original published edition ***Allegro spirituoso e scherzando*** is now available as Bärenreiter 7393, edited by Michael Töpfel.

Opus 17. ***Geistliche Konzerte für eine hohe Singstimme*** [*Three Sacred Concertos for High Voice and Keyboard: Organ, Harpsichord, or Piano*]. Composed in 1937, published 1938. Bärenreiter 1231. English edition (Concordia).

Opus 18/I. ***Dreissig Spielstücke für die Kleinorgel oder andere Tasteninstrumente***. 1938. Published June 1938. Bärenreiter 1288.

Opus 21/II. ***Kleine Sing- und Spielmusik: Variations on "Wo soll ich mich hinkehren?"*** (Piano or harpsichord). Composed 1941 (doubtful according to Lüdemann), published 1952. Bärenreiter 2046.

Without opus number

Kammerkonzert für Cembalo und elf Soloinstrumente (1932). Mss incomplete. First performed 28 November 1988, Martin Haselböck, harpsichordist and conductor. Published 1988. Bärenreiter 7687.

Ritter Blaubart (1940)—Theatre music for Ludwig Tieck's play. Chamber orchestra includes harpsichord (prominently). First performed 29 September 2002. Bärenreiter 7711, published 2001.

Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her. Kleines Konzert and Choral. *Neue Weihnachtsmusik für Klavier, Orgel, und andere Tasteninstrumente*. Bärenreiter Collection (1935), edited by Reinhard Baum.

A basic bibliography

Books

Larry Palmer: *Hugo Distler and his Church Music*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967. (Out of print; often available through Amazon.com or Alibris.com).

The most comprehensive (and recent) book on Distler is available only in German, Winfried Lüdemann: *Hugo Distler—Eine musikalische Biographie*. Augsburg: Wissner-Verlag, 2002 [ISBN 3-89639-353-7]. An exhaustive biography based on all available letters and archival holdings. Complete listing of Distler's works, analysis of the music; many photographs and musical examples.

Periodical literature in English

Jan Bender: "Hugo Distler and his Organ Music" [An interview conducted by William Bates], *The American Organist*, December 1982, 42–43.

Mark Bergass: "Hugo Distler's First Vespers at St. Jakobi in Lübeck," *The American Organist*, April 1982, 174–177.

Larry Palmer: "Hugo Distler's Harpsichord Concerto," THE DIAPASON, May 1969, 12–13. "Hugo Distler: Some Influences on His Musical Style," *The American Organist*, November 2002, 50–51. "Hugo Distler: 60 Years Later," THE DIAPASON, November 2002, 22.

Discography

The most satisfactory way to "know" Hugo Distler is through his music. The following compact disc recordings are recommended:

Organ works

Complete Organ Works (two discs, also included are works by Bach, Buxtehude, and Scheidt). John Brock plays two Brombaugh organs. Calcante Recordings, Ltd CD022 (1998).

Of historic interest (primarily for the instruments—Distler's house organ and the Jakobi instruments, all of which have been changed since Distler played them): *Complete Organ Works* played by Armin Schoof. Thorofon CTH2293 and CTH2294.

Also of "historic" interest: Larry Palmer plays the large partitas and several smaller chorale works: Musical Heritage Society LP 3943 (out of print). Robert Sipe organ of Zumbro Lutheran Congregation, Rochester, MN (1978).

Choral works

Liturgische Sätze (selections from opus 13, opus 5, opus 11, and opus 6/2). Thorofon CTH 2420.

Choralpassion, opus 7. Kammerchor der Universität Dortmund, conducted by Willi Gundlach. Thorofon CTH2185.

Totentanz, opus 12/2 (same choir and conductor), plus *Motet* and *Organ Partita on Wachet auf*. Thorofon CTH 2215.

Die Weihnachtsgeschichte, opus 10. Thomanerchor Leipzig, Hans-Joachim Rotzsch. Berlin Classics 0092462BC.

Totentanz and *Mottetten*, opus 12 (including the opening and closing choruses for the never-completed *St. John Passion*). Berliner Vokalensemble, conducted by Bernd Stegmann. Cantate C 58007.

Instrumental works

Harpsichord Concerto, opus 14, and *Incidental Music to the Play Ritter Blaubart*. Musicaphon M 56860 (issued 2008).

Harpsichord Concertos, Martin Haselböck, harpsichord and conductor, with the Wiener Akademie. Both early and late concerti, plus the deleted movement from opus 14. Thorofon CTH 2403.

Special appreciation to my former organ student Simon Menges (Berlin) for sending the Musicaphon compact disc before it became available in the United States.

Larry Palmer's first article for THE DIAPASON in November 1962 was "Hugo Distler: 20 Years Later." Appointed Harpsichord Editor in 1969, he continues to write, record, play, and teach: since 1970 as Professor of Harpsichord and Organ in the Meadows School of the Arts,