

# Celebrating Hugo Distler: 100 Year Anniversary of the Birth of a Genius

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This article celebrates the 100th anniversary of Distler's birth year. It enhances understanding of Distler as a composer and examines performance aspects of his organ works. Relevant biographical information introduces us to Distler's socio-historical environment. The physical influences of Lübeck's organs and Distler's house organ explain Distler's compositional output in terms of compositional style and playing requirements. Information about playing Distler's organ music follows.

## "A heart ablaze, which in giving of itself, burns out."<sup>1</sup>

"I want to break away from contemporary confinements and venture into the realm of the supreme."<sup>2</sup> Here, Hugo Distler (1908–1942) expresses the typical dream of youth to change the world. "I feel an indescribable loneliness, a sense of being separated from everyone and everything."<sup>3</sup> This statement seems the sentiment of someone aged who failed to achieve anything. Distler's world was fraught with such dichotomies. He thought he lived a life of failure. One hundred years after his birth, we see it was full of successes.

As an organ composer, Distler broke ground and became the first to compose pieces in a modern style that suited the sound of a Baroque organ. Clarity in Distler's works is of utmost importance. This, above all else, dictates a performer's interpretive choices. Registration, tempi, and articulation must serve the composition's ideas. "His entire output is marked with an indispensable truth, clarity, and sincerity of expression."<sup>4</sup>

## Biography

### Nuremberg (1908–1927)

Distler's short life is divided into different periods according to the cities in which he lived. Hugo Distler was born out of wedlock in Nuremberg on June 24, 1908. Such an event was scandalous back then, and his mother never actually wanted to have him. In 1912, she married a German-American and moved to Chicago. Her abandonment affected him his entire life.<sup>5</sup>

He grew up with his maternal grandparents, who owned and operated a successful butcher shop and were relatively well off. They gave him a first-rate education at the Nuremberg Gymnasium and an early musical education at the Dupont Music School. After graduation from the Gymnasium in 1927, thrice he tried to gain admission to the local conservatory; thrice he was denied. They claimed he lacked talent, but Distler knew the real reason was his unusual home situation. The conservatory considered such familial backgrounds incapable of providing for regular and timely completion of courses of study.<sup>6</sup> Distler again felt rejected and unwanted, and his feelings of unworthiness escalated.

### Leipzig education (1927–1931)

Because he failed to gain admittance in Nuremberg, Distler chose to study at the world-famous Leipzig Conservatory. The city's variety of activities enriched Distler's education and artistic development. The best artists and pedagogues worked in Leipzig, and opportunities to attend concerts at the Thomaskirche, the Gewandhaus, and the famous Leipzig Opera House were plenty.

His teachers soon discovered his unusual gift for composition. They advised him to study composition and organ, and he entered Günther Ramin's organ studio. Dr. Hermann Grabner, counterpoint professor, influenced the young, hard-working Distler. Most importantly, he cared for the insecure young man in a very loving and fatherly way. He became a lifelong mentor and friend to Distler;

and Distler placed a lot of worth in his judgment and advice.

In 1930 Breitkopf & Härtel published two of his works. Everything went well for Distler until his step-grandfather, who financed Distler's education, died. Distler was forced to quit his studies because he could not afford them. At Ramin's advice, Distler applied as organist at St. Jakobi-Kirche in Lübeck. The church leaders debated over two applicants. In the end, they cast a lot, and it fell to Distler!

### Lübeck (1931–1937)

Thus, the famous *Hansestadt* Lübeck and its Mariners' church, St. Jakobi, where Dietrich Buxtehude once worked, became Hugo Distler's home. At first, he found circumstances agreeable. A young pastor supported musical activity within the parish, and Distler befriended Bruno Grusnick, the cantor at St. Jakobi. The Lübeck *Sing- und Spielkreis*,<sup>7</sup> under Grusnick's baton, premiered nearly all of Distler's choral compositions. Finally, the historical organs of St. Jakobi provided Distler with the inspiration for his first organ compositions. What began as a simple, half-time church music post soon became a fertile creative font.

Distler restored the Vesper series and brought its reputation back to the level when Buxtehude worked in Lübeck. After just four months, Distler also took over the cantor position at St. Jakobi. He became a sought-after virtuoso organist, and he created almost all his entire life's output here, including two large organ partitas (see Figures 1 and 2).

The organ position, merely half-time, paid only RM70 monthly.<sup>8</sup> But the Lübeck State Conservatory opened in 1932, and Distler assumed direction of the church music department. The organist position at St. Jakobi then became a full-time position, and the following year, Distler married Waltraut Thienhaus. He saw the birth of his first daughter, Barbara, in 1934.

Unfortunately, the good times did not last. Distler experienced a total nervous breakdown in 1934. Afterwards, his life and works became overshadowed by the ruling Hitler regime. Despite joining the NSDAP<sup>9</sup> in May of 1933,<sup>10</sup> things did not improve for Distler. In 1934, the state decreed that new church music must serve the Nazi cause. They forbade performances of Jewish artists and works by Jewish composers. Though he was not Jewish, they condemned Distler's second harpsichord concerto as Bolshevistic.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Nazis and *Hitlerjugend* limited Distler's own performances. All this became extremely difficult for him to endure, and he decided to leave Lübeck.

### Stuttgart (1937–1940)

He began work at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule in 1937 and found great support from his colleagues. The Stuttgart years were generally happy ones for Distler, and his professional career skyrocketed. He assumed direction of the Esslingen Singakademie, taught choral conducting courses, participated in various *Singwochen* and *Musiktagen*, and had an active concert career. In addition, he dedicated himself once again to the composition of sacred works, and his fame grew. Several works were performed in Berlin in October of 1937 at the *Fest der deutschen Kirchenmusik* (see Figure 2). In 1938, the state bestowed the title *Professor* upon Distler.

Unfortunately, he also soon experienced Nazi opposition here from a student group, *Die Fachschaft*. Attacks were directed against Distler's church ties and his clear intentions to foster church music. Alas, the overall political situation soon ruined Distler's good fortunes. The violent overtaking of Austria

Figure 1: Compositional/professional output, secular versus sacred<sup>40</sup>

	Leipzig	Lübeck	Stuttgart	Berlin	Unknown
Secular	4	21	5	8	5
Sacred	5	34	4	3	9

Figure 2: List of organ works, dates completed, premiere information

- Opus 8
- I. Partita on *Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland*; November 12, 1932; December 26, 1932 at 17th Vesper Concert in St. Jakobi
  - II. Partita on *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*; May 1935; October 13, 1935 at Kassel Music Festival
  - III. *Kleine Orgel-Choralbearbeitungen*  
*Das alte Jahr vergangen ist*; unknown; unknown  
*Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig*; unknown; October 13, 1935 at Kassel Music Festival  
*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*; unknown; February 16, 1936 at 33rd Vesper Concert in St. Jakobi  
*Christe, du Lamm Gottes*; unknown; May 8, 1936 at Hamburg Church Music Festival  
*Mit Freuden zart*; unknown; May 8, 1936 at Hamburg Church Music Festival  
*Christ, der du bist der helle Tag*; unknown; May 8, 1936 at Hamburg Church Music Festival  
*Jesus Christus, unser Heiland*; unknown; October 10, 1937 at Berlin Church Music Festival by Friedrich Högner
- Opus 18
- I. *Dreißig Spielstücke für die Kleinorgel oder andere Tasteninstrumente*; April 1938; unknown.
  - II. *Orgelsonate*; September 1938; June 21, 1939 at the Stuttgart Conservatory

### Distler's suicide letter to Waltraut

November 1, 1942  
*My dearly beloved Waltraut,*  
*I've only one request in the world: that you are not angry with me; who knows more than you, what fears have resided in me since I've been alive; everything that I ever created stood under this sign, even my latest plans for an oratorio.*  
*Let the children think kindly of me: the time will come, and it's not far away, when they, too, will understand my last step, as they today do not. My dearly beloved children, ah, if you only knew what pain I am in.*  
*Pray for me. I die a poor, sinful man and hope for the mercy of God . . .*  
*I want to be brought to rest in a small circle; let my mother and her relations know only after the fact.*  
*I leave to you everything I own and possess.*  
*Yours,*  
*Hugo<sup>39</sup>*

He spent his entire life fleeing from city to city in order to escape trouble. His deep world angst, continual inner unrest, ongoing feelings of worthlessness and rejection since childhood, and feelings of being overworked proved to be too much in the end. In a final state of total spiritual and physical exhaustion, he planned his escape with meticulous detail (see Distler's suicide letter).

Thus, Hugo Distler prematurely ended his life on All Saints Day, Sunday, November 1, 1942. Hugo Distler was laid to rest in the forest cemetery in Stahnsdorf. A favorite New Testament quote of Distler, one he used in a motet and that likewise stands as the motto for his life and death, was engraved upon the wooden cross: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."<sup>15</sup>

### Organs influence compositions

The *Orgelbewegung*, Distler's teachers, and the *Zeitgeist* of the early 20th century influenced Distler's compositional output. But nothing influenced Distler's organ music as prominently as the instruments themselves. Distler wrote his works for two main organs: a historical Stellwagen instrument in Lübeck's St. Jakobi-Kirche and his own house organ in Stuttgart, built by Paul Ott.

### Stellwagen organ

Armin Schoof claims Distler's fascination with historical organs was made so intense because of his job at St. Jakobi in Lübeck. There, Distler presided over the *kleine Orgel*. Although instantly taken by the sound of this organ, Distler was dissatisfied because of its limitations with the organ literature of Bach and later composers. In a report on the renovation of the St. Jakobi organs from 1935, Distler describes it as follows:

[B]y looking at the disposition, a characteristic sound of each manual, is very strongly heard. Above all stands the *Hauptwerk*, with its Renaissance-like, strict principal chorus. The noble Mixture and the (unfortunately dampened) Trommet unite to a plenum of celebratory, unapproachable splendor. The *Rückpositiv* has a powerful principal chorus of steely clarity, and it can also be used as a solo manual with its inimitably beautiful flute voices and the silky, tender Krummhorn. A Scharf and a clarinet-like Trechterregal provide the necessary, complementary, equalizing force to the *Hauptwerk*. Lastly, the *Brustwerk* possesses a plenum with an almost bawling ferocity—a deadly scream. Its elementary allure, first obvious to one only after he has freed himself from any ideal of sound, landed here in bacchanal self-sufficiency at the turn of the century.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3: Disposition of the *kleine Orgel* in St. Jakobi before 1935<sup>41</sup>**

The Hauptwerk and Pedal are partly from the 15th century; the Brustwerk and Rückpositiv originated around 1630. The prospect of the Haupt- and Pedalwerk is high Gothic; that of the Brustwerk and Rückpositiv is early Baroque.

<b>Hauptwerk</b>	
16'	Prinzpal (f)
8'	Oktave (f)
4'	Oktave (f)
2'	Oktave (f)
8'	Spielpfeife (mf)
8'	Flöte (p)
8'	Trommet (f)
	Mixtur (f)
<b>Rückpositiv</b>	
8'	Gedackt (p)
8'	Quintatön (p-mf)
4'	Hohlflöte (p)
4'	Prinzpal (mf)
2'	Oktave (p-mf)
	Scharf (mf-f)
8'	Trechterregal (mf-p)
8'	Krummhorn (p)
<b>Brustwerk</b>	
8'	Gedackt (p-pp)
4'	Quintatön (p-pp)
2'	Waldflöte (p-pp)
	Zimbel (mf-p)
8'	Schalmei (p-pp)
8'	Regal (p-pp)
<b>Pedal</b>	
16'	Subbaß (p)
8'	Spielpfeifenbaß (p)
4'	Spielpfeifenbaß (p)
16'	Posaune (mf)
8'	Trommet (mf-f)
4'	Trommet (mf-p)

Brustwerk enclosed  
Tremulant equipped on all manuals  
2 ventsils  
Keyboard range C-c''' (short octave in bass)  
Pedal range C-d' (short octave in bass)  
Slider chest  
Mechanical action

**Figure 4: Disposition of the *kleine Orgel* in St. Jakobi after renovations by Karl Kemper, 1935<sup>42</sup>**

Case: Hauptwerk Gothic, Brustwerk Renaissance, Rückpositiv early Baroque.

<b>Hauptwerk</b>	
16'	Prinzpal
8'	Oktave
8'	Spielpfeife
4'	Oktave
4'	Flöte
2'	Oktave
	Mixtur IV
8'	Trommet
<b>Rückpositiv</b>	
8'	Gedackt
8'	Quintatön
4'	Prinzpal
4'	Hohlflöte
2'	Oktave
	Scharf IV
8'	Trechterregal
8'	Krummhorn
<b>Brustwerk</b>	
8'	Gedackt
4'	Quintatön
2'	Waldflöte
	Zimbel II
8'	Regal
4'	Schalmei
<b>Pedal</b>	
16'	Subbaß
8'	Gedacktpommer
4'	Bordun
2'	Nachthorn
	Rauschpfeife IV
16'	Posaune
8'	Dulzian
4'	Trommet
2'	Regal

Tremulant  
Keyboard range C, F-c3  
Pedal range C-d1  
Slider chest  
Mechanical action and stops  
Coupling: Rückpositiv to Hauptwerk

**Figure 5: Disposition of the *kleine Orgel* in St. Jakobi since 1978<sup>43</sup>**

<b>Hauptwerk</b>	
16'	Prinzpal
8'	Oktave
8'	Spielpfeife
4'	Oktave
3'	Nasat
	Rauschpfeife II
	Mixtur IV
8'	Trompete
<b>Rückpositiv</b>	
8'	Gedackt
8'	Quintadena
4'	Prinzpal
4'	Hohlflöte
	Sesquialtera II
	Scharf III-IV
8'	Trechterregal
8'	Krummhorn
<b>Brustwerk</b>	
8'	Gedackt
4'	Quintadena
2'	Waldflöte
	Zimbel II
8'	Regal
4'	Schalmei
<b>Pedal</b>	
16'	Subbaß
8'	Prinzpal
8'	Spielpfeife
4'	Oktave
4'	Gedackt
2'	Flöte
	Rauschpfeife IV
16'	Posaune
8'	Trompete
4'	Trompete
2'	Regal

3 Tremulants  
Coupling: RP/HW, BW/HW, HW/Ped  
All pipes are made of metal again (lead)  
Pedal range C-d1  
Keyboard range C, D, E, F, G, A-c3  
Tuning: Whole tone higher than current standard using Werckmeister's First Temperament (Christoph Kaltschmidt had retuned the organ with equal temperament in 1786).

**Figure 6: Planned disposition of Distler's house organ<sup>44</sup>**

<b>Hauptwerk</b>	
8'	Liebl. Gedackt
4'	Prinzpal
2½'	Nasat
2'	Waldflöte
	Zimbel II-III
<b>Oberwerk</b>	
8'	Holzregal
4'	Gedacktlöte
2'	Prinzpal
1½'	Quinte
1'	Oktave
	Terz I
<b>Pedal</b>	
16'	Trichterdulzian
8'	Gedackt
4'	Rohrflöte
2', 2½'	Rauschpfeife

Oberwerk tremulant  
OW/HW, OW/P, HW/P  
Manual compass C-d'''  
Pedal compass C-f'  
Slider chests  
Mechanical key and stop action  
Electric wind supply, 45 mm wind pressure

**Figure 7: Disposition of Distler's house organ<sup>45</sup>**

<b>Unterwerk</b>	
8'	Liebl. Gedackt
4'	Prinzpal
2½'	Nasat
2'	Waldflöte
	Zimbel II-III
<b>Oberwerk</b>	
8'	Regal
4'	Gedacktlöte
2'	Prinzpal
1½'	Quinte
1'	Sifflöte
1½'	Terz
<b>Pedal</b>	
16'	Dulzian
8'	Pommer
4'	Rohrgedackt
2½', 2'	Rauschpfeife

Tremulant  
OW/UW, OW/P, UW/P  
Manual compass C-d'''  
Pedal compass C-f'  
Slider chests  
Mechanical key and stop action  
Electric wind supply, 45 mm wind pressure  
Dulzian and Oberwerk under expression

Due to these limitations, Distler intently studied music by early Baroque composers, became fascinated with the keyboard works of Samuel Scheidt and Dietrich Buxtehude, and began to write his own organ pieces with modern harmonies, but which were fit for this historical instrument. Thus, this organ inspired him to write his first large-scale organ composition, the partita on *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, Op. 8/1.<sup>17</sup>

In a foreword to Opus 8/I, Distler pays tribute to the *kleine Orgel* in St. Jakobi. He says that the partita's genesis, principles of design, and existence are due to his memorable years of experience with the organ. He also states that performers should strive to replicate the "old sound" when playing his works on modern instruments. While registrations of his performance of this work on the *kleine Orgel* are published in the partita, Distler maintains in the foreword that they should not be made into the standard, as the Jakobi organ was "far from being balanced in its specifications. Most of all, the weak pedal disallow[s] a suitable registration."<sup>18</sup>

In his second partita, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, Op. 8/II, he only gives general descriptions of the type of sound he wants because the organ was under renovation. However, after renovations were completed in 1935, he once again gives detailed stoplists and registrations in the *Kleine Orgelchoral-Bearbeitungen*, Op. 8/III. These reflect the changes made to the organ. They are noticeable in the comparison of the printed organ specifications (see Figures 3 and 4). Note how detailed Distler was in his original listing of the specifications. He even lists dynamics of each stop, so desirous was he to emphasize the type of sound he envisioned. Today, the Stellwagen organ is the only remaining organ in Lübeck from the 16th and 17th centuries; it is one of the oldest playable historical instruments altogether (see Figure 5).<sup>19</sup>

#### Ott house organ

The house organ built by Paul Ott in 1938 (or rather the idea of it) inspired Distler to compose the two works of Op. 18. As outlined in correspondence between Bornefeld and Distler, the

collection of *30 Pieces* (Op. 18/I) was originally conceived with the idea that they could be played on a small positive organ. Bornefeld offered to write the preface, and Distler was very much excited about the possibilities. For reasons unknown, this original plan was never realized, and the information published in the collection contrasts with this inside information. Furthermore, as the organ was not actually completed and delivered until after the publication of *30 Pieces*, it could only have been the idea of the house organ, rather than the actual instrument itself, which provided inspiration.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Distler's Op. 18 was written to be performed on small organs that call to mind an ideal, early Baroque sound.

The house organ concept originated because Distler accepted an instructor post at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule in 1937. The ever-increasing political difficulties forced Distler to shift his focus of composition from sacred to secular music;<sup>21</sup> but he greatly missed his precious instrument at St. Jakobi. Thus, he began to make plans for a house organ. The specifications and scalings (see Figure 6) were given to organ builder Paul Ott of Göttingen. In order to help finance the construction costs (a sum of 8,000 Marks),<sup>22</sup> Distler sold his harpsichord.<sup>23</sup>

Paul Ott, a pioneer in the field of Baroque organ construction principles and the first organ builder to assiduously work according to the precepts of the *Orgelbewegung*, completed his examination of Master in Organ Building and Cabinet Making in 1937, and he delivered Distler's organ in September 1938. Despite careful calculations, the instrument displayed flaws upon arrival. Low wind pressure and low-placed mouths of the pipes caused uneven voicing, and the pedal reeds were thin. However, all in all, the instrument was a successful union of Distler's style with Ott's concept of sound, as well as a successful realization of Distler's vision of the purpose of a small house organ.<sup>24</sup>

One oddity about the house organ, which is important for the performance of Distler's Opus 18: the width of the keys was narrower than normal. Each oc-

tave was only 161 mm. This width, three mm narrower than usual, may at first seem insignificant. It does, nevertheless, make a meaningful difference: it eases phrasing, namely making it cleaner.<sup>25</sup> This fact is worth emphasizing because it relates to Distler's overall compositional philosophy: transparency.

As noted above, the organ displayed certain problems upon arrival to Distler's home. He must have ordered some alterations to be made because in his epilogue to the *30 Pieces*, the specifications differ from those listed in Thienhaus (compare Figures 6 and 7).

The new house organ's influence, as well as that of the Nazi regime, upon Distler is evident in his statements within the epilogue to his *30 Pieces*. The works composed during the Stuttgart period were not written for a sacred purpose. *30 Pieces for House Organ or Other Small Keyboard Instruments* was composed to "encourage the re-institution of the organ as a household instrument. . . [and] to inspire joyful music-making at home."<sup>26</sup>

However, Distler's religious ties and biases are still more than present in other comments. For instance, he says the organ is particularly suited to helping make home music-making more "holy."<sup>27</sup> Also, despite the fact that the collection consists mainly of untitled works or of variations on secular tunes, Distler ends the collection with variations based on the chorale, "Wo Gott zu Haus nit gibt sein Gunst," which he had previously included in his choral collection, *Der Jahrkreis*, Op 5.<sup>27</sup>

#### Performance Aspects

##### Distler's own playing: written records

To understand the spirit of performance in Distler's works, I consulted reviews by contemporaries of Distler's playing. All accounts agree: Distler did not merely play his works, he brought them to life.

[Distler's] composition and playing were here fully 'in uno.' Since then, I have never heard such a oneness of interpretation of Distler's works; his playing was ap-

propriate for his works. They were of kindred spirits—which is not always the case with composers.<sup>28</sup>

Fred Hamel critiqued Distler's Bach playing on May 5, 1940 as follows:

How Distler frees these inner powers, how he seizes the polyphonic logic, the energy of movement, the rhythmical tension and the phrasing: this is a unique and likewise a conquering art . . . In this relentless, considerable, concentrated, fanatic, and shaping power, even the most famous of Bach's organ works become new.<sup>29</sup>

Erich Rhode wrote a review of the important concert Distler gave in Nuremberg in 1940:

Of Distler's own works, we experienced the partita on *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland*—the liveliness of the filigree technique in its interesting "Bicinium" won a special cachet—and the trio sonata, whose melodic sprightliness is unmistakable . . . Distler's technical ability on both the positive organ and the main organ elevated his congenial composer-personality. He showed his amazing ability equally on both. . . Prof. Distler is a virtuoso of passionate temperament and a Bach specialist of the highest caliber.<sup>30</sup>

The following philosophy of Distler is important to highlight: the technically demanding performances of Bach's and Distler's pieces should not serve to show off one's virtuosic technical capacity, as is the case with Reger *et al.* Rather, one's playing should strive to portray the spirit of the compositions, indeed, even the personalities of the composers. These things interested Distler, and he conveyed them in performances: precision, control, musicality, the spirit of the Baroque, clarity, and transparency.

### Distler's own playing: aural records

Lastly, the recording of Hugo Distler playing works by Praetorius, Frescobaldi, and Pachelbel on the historic organ in Kiedrich, Germany, provides an important primary source for understanding Distler's performance practice. No written record of registrations exist, but a disposition of the organ is available (see Figure 8).

Distler played works from the Renaissance and early Baroque on a restored Gothic organ. The first selection is an organ chorale by Michael Praetorius (1571–1621) on the hymn "O lux beator trinitas." The interpretation clearly intends for the listener to be able to hear all lines clearly and evenly, as it is quite simple, straightforward, and without agogic emphasis or exaggerated mannerisms. The sound heard in this recording is in keeping with the style of the registration given for the initial chorale statement in Distler's *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*. Each line is fairly neutral in color, the cantus firmus takes precedence, yet the other lines are transparent and obvious.

The second piece is one of Girolamo Frescobaldi's (1583–1643) many canzonas for organ. Once again, Distler wishes to convey clarity of line to the listener. Similarities to the registration indications in Distler's partita *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* are easy to hear.

The third piece on the recording is the *Fantasie in G-dur* for organ by Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706). The texture is similar to the opening toccata of his *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*.

Thus, it is most apparent that in Distler's compositions, one must strive for absolute clarity of line above all else, for this is what Distler brought to early Baroque organ music. His understanding of form, line, counterpoint, articulation, tempo, and registration of Baroque music is exactly the same as required in his own organ works.

### Regarding registration

The clarity and transparency of Distler's works are also present in his regis-

**Figure 8: Disposition and description of the organ in Kiedrich**

<b>Hauptwerk</b>	
16'	Großgedackt
8'	Prinzipal
4'	Oktav
4'	Flötgedackt
3'	Quint
2'	Superoktav
2'	Mixtur IV
½'	Zimbel II
<b>Positiv</b>	
8'	Gedackt
4'	Oktav
4'	Flöte
2'	Waldflöte
1½'	Quint
1'	Oktav
<b>Pedal</b>	
16'	Subbaß
8'	Prinzipal
6'	Doppelquint
4'	Oktav
3'	Quint
2'	Superoktav
16'	Violon

This meaningful and interesting instrument was built around 1500. Since then, it has undergone many changes. The original instrument was a one-manual organ, but a Rückpositiv was added in the 17th century; in the 18th century, the pedal division was extended to two Baroque pedal towers. In 1860, these changes were then reversed to return the organ to its original Gothic design; the Rückpositiv was newly encased and installed in the tower, and the pedal division was also rebuilt in the same place.

The pipe materials are non-homogeneous. The oldest pipes, dating from the 16th centuries, make up about 57% of the manuals. 18% of the manual pipes are from the Baroque and have round labia, and the rest of the pipes are either from the 1860 restoration or cannot be dated.<sup>46</sup>

tration technique. Distler details exactly which stops he uses in Op. 8/I and III. Schoof claims that Distler's works are not playable on every organ because they are meant to be performed on a Baroque style organ.<sup>31</sup> The general character of his given registrations, indeed,

is best realized on an early Baroque or neo-Baroque organ. However, Distler said that pre-Bach music adapts easily enough to a modern orchestral organ, as these pieces are characterized by their colorful solo voices with many contrasting sections. He further maintains that this effect can easily be achieved on the modern orchestral organs if one bears in mind the construction of the composition and tries to imitate the intended character of the piece.<sup>32</sup>

Because Distler's works are based on models of Baroque masters, it follows that Distler's own compositions should be adaptable to a modern orchestral organ. Distler even says that his registrations in *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* should not be made into the standard, as he imagined a much stronger pedal division.<sup>33</sup> Thus, it is obvious: Distler may have prescribed a certain registration, yet posterity only need adhere to the spirit of the listed specifications.

Op. 8/II, the partita on *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, contains no specific registration guidelines. At the time Distler composed this piece, the *kleine Stellwagen* organ was undergoing reconstruction. Thus, Distler writes only general guidelines to follow. In following these guidelines, however, one must keep in mind Distler's thoughts on the registration techniques of Bach's works. In one of his essays, Distler notes that the plenum should be strong and full, the individual manuals should sound as contrasting as possible, and usually they should be independent and uncoupled. The manual changes and compositional structure within the piece provide the necessary variety to hold the interest of the listener.

Deciding upon an appropriate registration for the works in Distler's Op. 18/I and II proves more problematic for organists in the U.S. today. Modern organists generally do not have contact with exemplars of small positive organs, which Distler had in mind when he wrote these pieces. Furthermore, the organ is now rarely used for home use or in chamber works. These pieces were neither intended for the concert halls, nor to be played in church. In the U.S., however, there are seldom other options. Thus, if Distler's chamber works are to be performed in the U.S., a compromise has to be made.

Helpful comments regarding registration on the compositions in Op. 18/I and II, *30 Pieces* and the *Orgelsonate*, are found in the epilogue to *30 Pieces* and in the performance notes to the *Orgelsonate*. These guidelines assist in preserving the spirit of Distler's intimate pieces. These pieces are akin to Baroque forms, and because they are to be performed on a small house instrument, the registration should be based on 4' instead of 8' tones, few voices (yet characteristic ones) should be employed, old positive-style registrations combined with mutations can be used in movements with arpeggios and unison writing, and reed stops should be used sparingly as solo voices or in the full chorus. Concerning the pedals, if they are available, they are to be used *ad libitum*.<sup>34</sup>

Above all else, when registering Distler's organ works, recall that Distler strove for clarity and transparency. This should dictate one's choice of registration in all his pieces, on all organs, and in all settings. Schoof's summary further emphasizes this point:

One idea unites all of Distler's compositions, his endeavor for clarity. This is made apparent even in his manuscripts, which are written in a thin, sensitive, and clear hand. This is all the more appropriate because, as a composer, he did not allow for foggy emotions. He composed in a style of "elective affinity for generations and centuries past:" strictly motivic, thematic, and contrapuntal.<sup>35</sup>

By following these guidelines, a performer may still in good conscience perform the smaller, intimate organ works of Distler in the venues available today. Distler strove to embody the spirit of his and Bach's works in performances. He did not refuse to perform Baroque works on orchestral instruments simply

because of registration problems. Rather, he chose from available stops and made the piece fit the room. Indeed, we should as well.

### Articulation instructions

The touch Distler used in his organ works is the same as that which he employed when playing works by Buxtehude, Scheidt, Bach, and others. In his essay on playing Bach's *Dorian Toccata and Fugue*, he says that articulation is to be *martellato*, not *legato*.

In many instances throughout Distler's pieces, he dictates a desired articulation. Often, he requests varying articulations simultaneously. The bicinium of variation one in *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* is a prime example. In certain instances, three different articulations must be played together, e.g., variation five of *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*. Here, the right hand on the *Hauptwerk* uses a *leggiero* touch, Distler suggests a *legato* touch with the slurs and phrase markings of the left hand on the *Brustwerk*, and the pedal is clearly separated by a sharp *marcato* (notated by markings typically found in brass music) to set apart the ascending quartal harmonies. Rolf Schönstedt maintains that Distler is the first composer since Bach to require this technically demanding aspect in the organ literature.<sup>36</sup>

Distler, furthermore, clearly states in the *Spielanweisung* to the *Orgelsonate* that the desired articulation is an easy-going *non legato* to *martellato*, excepting the *ben legato* of the peaceful middle movement. Thus, one should assume at least a clear *leggiero* in all of Distler's works, unless otherwise designated by Distler.

### Tempi, ornaments, etc.

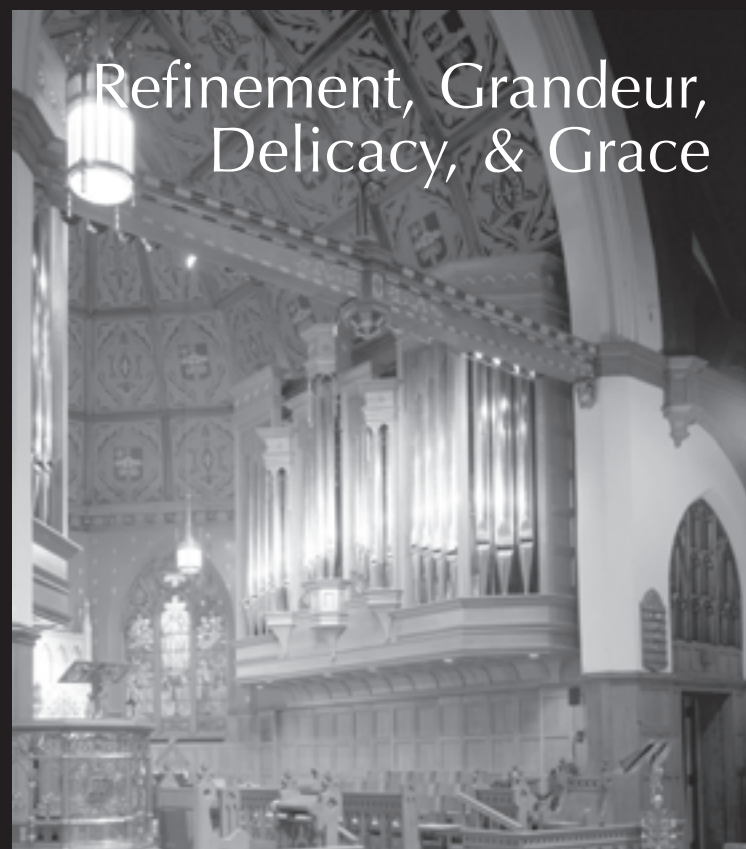
Distler gives specific metronome markings in each piece from Op. 8/I and II, and general tempo descriptions in the remaining organ works. One should realize, however, that Distler's metronome markings were determined as he composed at home. Jan Bender says Distler always performed his pieces slower than the metronome marking specified when in church because of the acoustics.<sup>37</sup> He also states that Distler strove for clarity, above all, which meant modifying tempi, registration, and articulation according to the requirements of the room.

Regarding ornamentation in the organ works of Distler, Bender maintains that Distler adopted the "Baroque manner" of executing ornaments as taught at the Leipzig Conservatory. They were played on the beat, excepting certain grace notes which required a pre-beat interpretation because of the musical context. The mordant was played main note, lower auxiliary, main note, and the *praller* was executed in the opposite manner. Trills usually began on the principal note rather than on the upper auxiliary, which is opposite from the current understanding of Baroque trill execution.

Bender, furthermore, gives certain miscellaneous details regarding the performance of Distler's organ works. For example, Distler played pedals almost exclusively with his toes, often crossing his feet. Also, Distler never played the second statement of the *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* toccata when performing the entire work, and he forbade his students to do so as well. He even regretted that it was so published. Furthermore, as has already been established, Distler did not consider his registration suggestions immutable. They merely represented his ideal: clarity of line. In the toccata of *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, Distler removed the 16' Posaune at the end of the pedal solo, even though this is not indicated in the score, in order to make the manual figurations more distinctly heard.

### Conclusions

The historical study of composers' biographies helps provide a degree of humanity to otherwise untouchable musical geniuses and their creations. At times, this study can be intriguing and perplexing. At other times, it is nothing more than routine and mundane. In the case of Hugo Distler, it is inspiring and disturbing, awing and dishearten-



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ing, exciting and depressing. In studying Distler, one discovers the life of a genius filled with a multitude of the lowest lows and the highest highs—a roller coaster of emotion and experiences.

While Distler's life experiences, dealings with the Nazi party, and death were dramatic, his musical accomplishments were no less noticeable. He successfully melded all the neoclassical elements of composition with old compositional practices and forms. During his short life, he achieved fame as a church musician, conductor, and virtuoso performer of Bach's works and of his own compositions. His contributions to the organ repertoire were the very first to use modern harmonies and alternative scales while being best suited for the unique sound of Baroque organs. His works, though seldom performed due to their technical difficulty, remain staples in modern organ repertoire, a mark of their significance.

The ideology of clarity in Distler's works is of utmost importance. It should be apparent that this dictates the performer's choices regarding how to interpret them. Registration, tempi, and articulation are servants to the composition, which strives for transparency of line and clarity of expression. In his closing statements, Bender emphasizes this aspect of clarity with the following advice for aspiring composers of organ music:

Write music that is absolutely clear and transparent, music in which every note can be explained theoretically. . . . "There is no such thing as music that is beautiful or ugly, just music that is correct or incorrect."<sup>38</sup>

The same can be said of a performance. If what one does is not clear, it is probably incorrect. However, if one realizes the spirit of Distler's works and makes choices guided by the simple principle of clarity, even on modern organs, then it is likely that Distler would approve.

It is my observation that Distler remains more popular in Germany and Europe than in the United States even today. I imagine this is due to the unwillingness of Americans to perform neoclassical works on modern instruments. It is my hope that the insights gained here will encourage and enable more American performers to program Distler's organ works in more venues. ■

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Ursula Herrmann, "Hugo Distler: Leben und Wirken," in *Komponisten in Bayern: Hugo Distler*, Vol. 20, ed. Alexander L. Suder (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1990), 13. Paul Brockhaus, one of Distler's friends, penned a poem in memory of Distler with this title. Unless otherwise stated, all biographical information comes from this source. I alone translated all German quotes.

2. Quoted in Herrmann, 14. I interpret this phrase as meaning Distler wanted to make his mark on society to thus become immortal. In a conversation, University of Florida Art History Professor Robin Poyner suggested a possible link with Russian Suprematism. I found no supporting documents to prove or disprove whether Distler was familiar with the art of Kasemir Malevich (1878–1935) et al.

3. Wolfgang Jenrich, *Hugo Distler* (Berlin: Union Verlag, 1970), 3.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 5.

6. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

7. A community organization of musicians, both instrumental and vocal.

8. RM stands for *Reichsmark*, RM4 = US\$1, RM1 = 1/2790 kg fine gold.

9. *National Sozialistische Demokratische Arbeiter Partei* = National Socialists, NS, or Nazis.

10. Hans-Dieter Grünefeld, "Schwieriger Nachweis, heikles Thema," *Neue Musik Zeitung*, <<http://www.nmz.de/nmz/nmz1998/nmz05/rezensionen/distler.shtml>>. Accessed on 8-2-08.

11. Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon*, <[http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/d/distler\\_h.shtml](http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/d/distler_h.shtml)>. Accessed on 8-2-08.

12. Herrmann, 26.

13. Meta Radig, *Ansprache zum 10. Todestag von Hugo Distler* am 4. November 1952. Quoted in Herrmann, 28.

14. Letter to Waltraut Distler from October, 1942. Quoted in Herrmann, 31.

15. St. John, chapter 16, verse 33, King James Version.

16. Hugo Distler and Erich Thienhaus, *Die beiden Orgeln in St. Jakobi zu Lübeck: Bericht über den Umbau 1935*, Lübeck 1935, 17–18.

17. Armin Schoof, "Hugo Distlers Registrierungspraxis: Beobachtungen an seinen Orgelwerken," in *Aspekte der Orgelbewegung*, im Auftrag der Gesellschaft der Orgelfreunde, ed. Alfred Reichling (Berlin: Merseburger) 1995, 455.

18. Hugo Distler, *Organ Partita on Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (Kassel: Bärenreiter Ausgabe 637, 1933), Vorwort.

19. Dietrich Wölfel, *Die Wunderbare Welt der Orgeln: Lübeck als Orgelstadt* (Lübeck: Verlag Schmidt-Römhild, 1980), 61.

20. Winfried Lüdemann, *Hugo Distler: eine musikalische Biographie* (Augsburg: Wilner-Verlag, 2002), 247.

21. Armin Schoof, liner notes to *Das Orgelwerk II: Hugo Distler*, Thorofon CTH 2294, Germany, 1996, CD. And, Arno Schönstedt, liner notes to *Hugo Distler: Sämtliche Orgelwerke*, Cantate C 57613, Kassel, 1994–95, CD.

22. "Einzigartig: Distlers Hausorgel," Z Ano 81d, Hugo Distler Archives, Stadtbibliothek Lübeck, Lübeck. The renovation costs from 1992/93 were around 70,000 Marks.

23. Dietrich Wölfel, "Ein Kleinod jüngerer Orgelbaugeschichte," in *Lübeckische Blätter*, 1993/3, 35.

24. Schönstedt, liner notes.

25. Erich Thienhaus, "Eine neue Hausorgel," in *Musik und Kirche* 11 (1939): 51.

26. Hugo Distler, *Dreissig Spielstücke für die Kleinorgel oder andere Tasteninstrumente* (Kassel: Bärenreiter Ausgabe 1288, 1938), "Nachwort."

27. Though not mentioned in any literature, I suggest that Distler included this final chorale in his secular organ collection as a political statement against the SS. The words are characteristic of a prophet's vociferations of doom to a sinful nation. The text of the chorale is as follows: *The house whereupon God does not bestow his grace, there everyone works for nothing. The city o'er which God does not watch, there is the watchman's guard no good.*

28. Letter to Herrmann from September 6, 1968. Quoted in Herrmann, 19–20.

29. Quoted in Herrmann, 19.

30. Erich Rhode, "Orgelkonzert Hugo Distlers in der Lorenzkirche," *Nürnberger Zeitung*, Abschrift, Konzert Hugo Distler am 23. Mai 1940, Document Z: Rho1a, Hugo Distler Archive, Stadtbibliothek Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany.

31. Schoof, *Registrierungspraxis*, 456.

32. Hugo Distler, "Gedanken zum Problem der Registrierung alter, speziell bachscher Orgelmusik," *Musik und Kirche* 11 (1939): 101–106.

33. Hugo Distler, *Partita Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (Kassel: Bärenreiter Ausgabe 637, 1933), "Disposition der alten St. Jakoborgel zu Lübeck."

34. Distler, *Dreissig Spielstücke*.

35. Schoof, *Registrierungspraxis*, 461.

36. Schönstedt, private lesson comments during the author's Fulbright study in Herford, Germany, 2003–2004.

37. William Bates, "Hugo Distler and His Organ Music: An Interview with Jan Bender," *The American Organist* 16 (1982): 42–43. Jan Bender, probably the most famous student of Distler, relates invaluable information regarding certain performance aspects of his organ works in his interview with William Bates.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Letter to Waltraut Distler from November 1, 1942. Quoted in Herrmann, 31–32.

40. Numbers include all known compositions, theoretical writings, and fragments of compositions, published and unpublished. I categorized them by the city in which Distler lived when he completed each work.

41. Distler, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, Vorwort.

42. Distler and Thienhaus, *Die beiden Orgeln*, 21.

43. Armin Schoof, liner notes to *Das Orgelwerk I: Hugo Distler*, Thorofon CTH 2293, Germany, 1995, CD.

44. Thienhaus, *Hausorgel*, 51.

45. Hugo Distler, *Dreissig Spielstücke*.

46. Uwe Pape, liner notes to *Hugo Distler: an der Orgel in Kiedrich*, contained in *Hugo Distler: Sämtliche Orgelwerke*, artist: Arno Schönstedt, TELDEC Schallplatten GmbH, Hamburg, Pape Verlag, Berlin, 1978, LP.

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