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

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This article celebrates the 100th anniversary of Hugo Distler, a lifelong mentor and friend to Distler; and Distler placed a lot of worth in his judgments and advice. In 1930 Brehm & Hartel published two of his works. Everything went well until 1934 when Distler, who financed Distler’s education, decided to stop funding him because he could not afford them. At Ramn’s advice, Distler applied as organist of the St. Jakobi-Kirche in Lübeck. Church leaders debated over two applicants. In the end, they cast a lot and it fell to Distler!

Lübeck (1931–1937)

Thus, the famous Hausmeister Lübeck and its Marner’s church, St. Jakobs, where Distichert 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’s house organ supported him to study composition and organ, and the Grossmik’s Daton, presented the 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 study of half-time 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 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 concertos (see Figures 1 and 2). The organ position, merely half-time, paid only RM 300 monthly. But the Lübeck school board was pleased, 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 Thomsen, who saw the birth of his first daughter, Barbara, in 1934.

Unfortunately, the good times did not last. Distler experienced a total nervous collapse in 1934. His work and works became overshadowed by the ruling Hitler regime. Despite joining the Nazi party in May of 1933, his work did not improve for Distler. In 1934, the state decreed that new church work must serve the Nazi cause. They demanded of Distler’s musical output. Furthermore, 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 Musikhoehschule in 1937 and found great support from his colleagues. The Stuttgart years were generally happy ones for Distler; and his professional career skyrocketed. He composed works for two main organs: a historical organ and a solo manual with its inimitably beautiful sound. The latter was a solo manual with its inimitably beautiful sound. 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)

The final chapter of Distler’s life in the capital city of Berlin began in 1937. During these years, Distler experienced further advancements in his career. He was installed as full professor of Berlin, one of only a few, at the state-supported Conservatory for Music in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Distler quickly became acclimated to his new job, and he pursued his passion for choral conducting with verve. In addition to his duties with the Conservatory, Distler also oversaw the large Conservatory Chor. Even though Distler was already overburdened with duties at the conservatory, he accepted the position of Director of the Berlin Staatstheater and the Berliner Chor 1918. On April 1, 1937 and remained his highest goal in life.

Reviews of his concerts were always favorable. For example, in a performance of St. John’s Passion, it appeared as if Distler “had to endure the pain and death of the Savior himself. His rendering of this work was completely convincing.”13

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 Stadlhofen. A favorite New Testament quote of Distler, he used in a motto and that lie- wise stands as the motto for his life and death, was engraved upon the wooden cross: “In the world we have tribulation, but he of perfect cheer; I have over- come the world.”15

Organs influence compositions

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

Stellwagen organ

Armstrong claims Distler’s fascination with historical organs was made so intense because of his job at St. Ja- kobi 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 of the renova- tion of the St. Jakobi organs from 1935, Distler describes it as follows: [By looking at the disposition, a charac- teristic 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 (undoubtedly diminished) superius and the Membranum of the organ is unapproachable, unsuppliable.”]

He spent his entire life fleeing from city to city in order to escape trouble. His deep world angel, continuance of intense on- going feelings of worthlessness and rejec- tion; his childhood, and feelings of being overworked proved to be too much in the end. In a final state of total spiri- tual and physical exhaustion, he ended his escape with meticulous detail (see Distler’s suicide letter to Waltraut).

Distler’s suicide letter to Waltraut

November 1, 1942

Closely亲爱的 Distler,

For only one request in the world: that you don’t let me die. I am much more than you, what fears have read in us since I’ve been alive; everything that I ever craved stood under this sign, even my latest plans for an oratorio.

Thus, Hugo Distler prematurely end- ed his life on All Saints Day, Sunday, No- vember 1, 1942. Hugo Distler was laid to rest in the forest cemetery in Stadlhofen. A favorite New Testament quote of Distler, he used in a motto and that lie-wise stands as the motto for his life and death, was engraved upon the wooden cross: “In the world we have tribulation, but he of perfect cheer; I have over- come the world.”15

This, above all else, dictates a perform- ance of the St. Jakobi organs from 1935, its Renaissance-like, strict principal chorus. The noble Mixture and the (undoubtedly diminished) superius and the Membranum of the organ is unapproachable, unsuppliable.”]...
Due to these limitations, Distler intensely studied music by early Baroque composers, because they understood 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 composition, the partita on Torn kom, der Heiden Heiland, Op. 8/I-4. In a foreword to Opus 8/I, Distler pays tribute to the kleine Orgel of St. Jakobi, and he says that the partita’s genesis, principles of design, and existence are due to his intimate and personal experience with the organ. He also states that performers should study the prints of the “old sound” when playing his works on modern instruments. While registrations of his performances of the kleine Orgel are published in the partita, Distler maintained 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 dissolution is a suitable registration.”

In his second partita, Wochen auf, räum die Stimmre, Op. 8/II, he only gives general indications 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 strophists and registrations in the Kleine Orgelbuch-Bearbeitungen, an indication that the instrument had been made to the organ. They are noticeable in the context of the printed organ specifications (see Figures 3 and 4). Note how detailed Distler was in his original listening to the specifications. He even lists dynamics of each stop, so desirous he was to emphasize the type of sound he envisioned for the mechanism of the Melchior organ is the only remaining organ in Lübeck from the Middle Ages, it is one of the oldest playable historical instruments altogether (see Figure 5).

Ott house organ
The house organ, built by Paul Ott in 1933 (or rather the idea it inspired) Distler to compose the two works of Op. 18. As the tool for the transitions between Bornfeld and Distler, the collection of 30 Pieces (Op. 18/I) was originally conceived with the idea that 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. Nevertheless, Distler’s Op. 18 was written to be performed on a small organ that call to mind an ideal, early Baroque sound. The house organ concept originated because Distler accepted an instructor post at the Stuttgart Musikakademie in 1930 and increasing political difficulties forced Distler to shift his focus of inspiration to the polyphonic logic, the ensemble shaping power, even the most famous of organ composers. FRED HAMIL "A critical study of Distler’s Bach playing in the 1930s." In Distler and the Bach tradition: Studies in honour of Tolbert J. Gilchrist (1975), pp. 187-207.

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

How Distler feels these inner powers, how he seizes the polyphonic logic, the ensemble shaping power, even the most famous of organ composers. FRED HAMIL "A critical study of Distler’s Bach playing in the 1930s." In Distler and the Bach tradition: Studies in honour of Tolbert J. Gilchrist (1975), pp. 187-207.

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 fughetta themes and the chromatic tonalities and the phraseing: this is a unique and likewise a conquering art... In this relentless, considerable, concentrated, fanatic, and shaping power, it is the most famous of Bach’s organ works. Benjamin Britten

The following philosophy of Distler is important to highlight the technically demanding performances of Bach’s and Distler’s organ. Bach should not serve to show off one’s virtuosic technical capacity, as is the case with Reger et al. Rather, one’s playing should serve 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, and understanding of the spirit of the Baroque, clarity, and transparency.
Regarding registration

The clarity and transparency of Distler's works are also present in his registration technique. Distler details exactly which stops he uses in Op. 8/I and III. 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 the registrations are characterized by their colorful solo voices with many contrasting articulations. He further maintains that this effect can easily be achieved on the modern orchestral organs if one bears in mind the construction of the compass stops, and tries to imitate the intended character of the piece.

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 registration in Nun kom, der heiden heiland should not be made into the standard, as he needed a much stronger pedal registration. Thus, it is obvious that Distler may have prescribed a certain registration in Nun kom, der heiden heiland, yet postpone just need adhere to the spirit of the listed specifications.

In Op. 8/1, the partita on Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, contains no specific registration guidelines. At the time Distler composed this piece, the klein Stilwagen organ was undergoing reconstruction. Thus, Distler writes only general guidelines to follow. In following these guidelines, however, one must remember that Distler's thought about the registration techniques of Bach's works, as well as the rest of his essays, Distler underlined that the plenum should be strong and full, the individual manuals should sound as ornamented as possible, and usually the pedal should be independent and uncolored. These manual changes and compass stops with the pedal to keep in mind the necessity to hold the interest of the listener.

Deciding upon an appropriate registration for the works in Distler's Op. 8/1 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, and Distler had in mind when he wrote pieces. Furthermore, the organ is now rarely used for home use or in smaller works. These pieces were not intended for the concert hall, 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. 81 and II, 3 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 intentions without constricting. These pieces are akin to Baroque organ music because they are to be performed on a small house instrument, the registration should be based on 4′ instead of 2′. If too many voices (yet characteristic ones) should be employed, old positive-style registrations combined with registrations can be used in movements with arpeggios and unison writing and reed stops should be used sparingly as solo voices or in the full chorum. Concerning the manuals, if they are available, they are to be used ad libitum. 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. School's summary further emphasizes this point.

One idea unites all of Distler's compositions, his endeavor for clarity. This is made evident, even in his manuscripts, which are written in a thin, sensitive, and clear hand. This is the more appropriate because, as a composer, he did not allow foggy emotions. He composed in a style of "affinity for generations and past—strictly motive, thematic, and content." Due to these principles, Distler maintained a very even playing style. The passage of time, especially in the case of Hugo Distler, it is inspiring to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity to otherwise untouchable humanity.
The same can be said of a performance. If what one does is not clear, it is prob-
ably 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 re-
mains more popular in Germany and
Europe than in the United States even
today. I imagine this is due to the unwill-
ingness of Americans to perform neoclas-
sical works on modern instruments. It is
my hope that the insights gained here
will encourage and enable more Ameri-
can performers to program Distler’s or-
gan works in more venues.

Notes
1 Quoted in Ursula Herrmann, “Hugo Distler: Leben und Werk,” in Komponisten in Bayern, Hugo Distler, Vol. 20, ed. Alexan-
dor Schrade, Studien zur Musikgeschichte, 1990, 11.
2 Paul Brockhaus, one of Distler’s friends, in Distler: Leben und Wirken, “Nachwort.”
5 Hugo Distler, “Dreißig Spielstücke für Orgel” (Kassel: Bärenreiter 1288, 1938).
10 Erich Thienhaus, “Nachwort.”
13. Meta Radig, Ausgabe zum 10. Tod-
15. John, chapter 16, verse 33, King James Version.
17. Armin Schoof, “Hugo Distlers Regis-
trierungspraxis: Beobachtungen an seinen Orgelnverkäufen,” in Aspekte der Orgelliebe im Auftrag der Gesellschaft der Orgel-
freunde, ed. Alfred Reichling (Berlin: Mei-
werder) 1991, 455.
18. Hugo Distler, Organ Partita on Nun,
19. Wolfgang Jennrich, Hugo Distler: Eine neu-
liche Ausgabe Orgelwerke im Auftrag des 
Organistenverbandes Deutschland e.
V., ed. Alexan-
dor Schrade, Studien zur Musikgeschichte, 1990, 11.
20. Winfried Lüdemann, Hugo Distler: Eine

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