

# Rediscovering Hugo Distler: Playing Distler's Organ Music with Understanding and Musicality

Dr. Kristina Langlois, *presenter*

## General Stylistic Characteristics

- Distler is rooted in the German Baroque and in the Reformation; nurtured by the Lutheran chorales and folksongs, influenced by 16th-century masters of counterpoint.
- Influenced by the music of Schütz for its *Affektionslehre*, text painting, and text rhythms; and by the music of Hindemith for its contemporary rhythmic and harmonic language. Distler studied their music of these two composers in great detail and was inspired by them.
- Contrapuntal and polyphonic texture, rather than homophonic. Frequent stepwise motion in the individual lines.
- Motivic techniques: motives treated and developed through repetition, imitation, diminution, canon (often at the 4th or 5th), stretto, imitation, and sequences drive the music forward and develop it.
- Use of early music forms: chaconne, fugue, bicinium, partita, toccata; improvisational sections alternating with contrapuntal sections.
- Much of his music is composed music for small forces, chamber ensembles.
- Music has a tonal center, but is neither major nor minor. Free use of the 12 tones around a center.
- Harmonies are heavily based on 4ths and 5ths. Pentatonic influences, too.
- Meter is blurred. Sometimes non-metrical; cross-rhythms.
- Motoric rhythmic patterns reflect industrialization and mechanization of society.
- Music often has a nervous character, due to motorism, motivic and rhythmic repetition. A unique characteristic is the gradual paring down to 2 notes within a larger motive that are repeated over and over. Gives music a great sense of energy and rhythmic drive.

## Registration

(see Handout of St. Jakobi Small Organ specifications)

- thin reeds, bright mixtures, transparent flutes, bright principals
- low wind pressure
- transparent, clarity of individual lines
- adaptability; practicality
- terraced dynamics—no expressive division or *crescendo* pedal

## Examination of Organ Works

- Orgelpartita “Nun komm, der heiden Heiland” Op. 8/1 (1932)
  1. Toccata (Distler did not want this movement to be played alone)
  2. Chorale & 7 Variations (this section may be played as an independent whole, but one should play all 7 variations together; or, a singular variation may be used singularly)
  3. Chaconne (may be played as an independent whole. the work may end here rather than with the toccata)
  4. Toccata (optional)

Performance Examples: Handout Ex. 1, 2, 3

- Orgelpartita “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme” Op. 8/II (1934/1935)

1. Toccata
2. Bicinium
3. Fugue

Performance Examples: Handout Ex. 4, 5, 6

- Kleine Orgelchoral-Bearbeitungen Op. 8/III (1935/1938)

1. 5 chorale preludes, each consisting of at least 1-3 short preludes plus a chorale accompaniment setting.
2. 2 small partitas, each consisting of 3 movements set in old forms plus an accompaniment setting

Performance Examples:

Christe, Du Lamm Gottes (O Christ, Thou Lamb of God): Handout Ex. 7, 8

Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern (How Lovely Shines the Morning Star) Handout Ex. 9

### **Performance Practice Concepts**

- Motoric rhythmic patterns require clean and precise playing. (Ex. 2—Nun komm)
- Ornamentation starts on the upper note, usually, according to German baroque performance practice, although occasionally they start on the main note, if inside a passage of fast notes. Begin an inverted mordent on the upper note, if you have time to execute it cleanly. Otherwise, start it on the main note. (from personal interview with Jan Bender, July 1985)
- Clearly articulated beats 1 & 3 (from Bender interview, July 1985)

### **Suggestions for Practicing Distler’s Music**

- (1) read the text of the chorale associate with the piece. Distler is intentional about text painting.
- (2) Use a metronome frequently to keep you honest/precise about the length of each specific beat. Practice with attention to the subdivisions within each beat to be sure the 16ths and 32nd rhythms are happening precisely. (3) Practice without the ties so you hear exactly how long the tie should be. Execution can’t be precise enough. Clearly articulated beats 1 & 3 (from Jan Bender interview, July 1985)
- Distler tended to push tempo indications. Don’t take them too literally. Internal energy of the music should be the guide. (from Grusnick interview, July 1985)
- (4) Take the slurs, phrase marks, and comma “lifts” seriously and honor them, including the pedal line. Incorporate them from the very beginning of your learning process, because their frequency affects coordination between hands and feet. Distler was very precise about minute phrasing and articulation, with his choral music as well as his organ music (it’s the harpsichodist and perfectionist in him). He insisted on minute precision with his choirs and students. (Ex. 4: Wachet auf partita—Toccata)
- (5) Practice with a staccato technique to encourage precisely synchronized attacks.

### **Accessible music**

Organists of limited ability can play some movements of the partitas as well as all the collection of short chorale preludes.

*Partita on "Nun komm der Heiden Heiland"*

Resinarius arrangement of the chorale (easy-medium)  
Variations 1-7 (easy to medium)

*Partita on "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme"*

Bicinium

*Kleine Choral Bearbeitungen (Short Chorale Arrangements)*

---

### **Distler's Published Organ Music**

- *Orgelpartita "Nun komm, der heiden Heiland"* Op. 8/I Bärenreiter 637 (1932) (I. Toccata II. Chorale & 7 Variations III. Chaconne IV. Toccata)
- *Orgelpartita "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme"* Op. 8/II Bärenreiter 883 (I. Toccata II. Bicinium III. Fugue) (1934/1935)
- *Dreissig Spielstücke* (für die Kleinorgel oder andere Tasteninstrumente) Op. 18/I Bärenreiter 1288 (1938)
- *Orgelsonate (Trio)* Op. 18/II Bärenreiter 1308 (1938/1939)
- *Kleine Orgelchoral-Bearbeitungen* Op. 8/III Bärenreiter 1222 (1935/1938) (5 chorale preludes, each consisting of at least 1-3 short prelude plus a chorale accompaniment setting. 2 partitas, each consisting of 3 movements set in old forms plus an accompaniment setting)

Distler's organ works can be purchased at:

- Organ Historical Society: Box 26811, Richmond VA 23261  
phone 804-353-9226  
e-mail: [catalog@organsociety.org](mailto:catalog@organsociety.org)  
website: [www.organsociety.org](http://www.organsociety.org)  
[catalog@organsociety.org](mailto:catalog@organsociety.org)
- Bärenreiter Verlag: [www.baerenreiter.com](http://www.baerenreiter.com) (The customer may navigate the site in several languages, including English. Very user-friendly)
- Sheet Music Plus (website): [www.sheetmusicplus.com](http://www.sheetmusicplus.com)

### **Bibliography**

Bender, Jan. "Hugo Distler and His Organ Music," *The American Organist* (Dec 1982): 42-43.

Herrmann, Ursula. *Hugo Distler: Rufer und Mahner*. English translation by Kristina Langlois, *Hugo Distler: Herald and Admonisher*. Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, May 1986. 160 p.

Langlois, Kristina. *Hugo Distler: Herald and Innovator for a New Practical Church Music*. Doctoral Lecture-Recital, Northwestern University, Feb 1986. 22 p.

Palmer, Larry. *Hugo Distler and His Church Music*. St. Louis, Concordia, 1967.

----- "Hugo Distler SIXTY Years Later," *Diapason* (Nov 2002): 22.

----- "Hugo Distler: Some Influences on His Musical Style," *The American Organist* (Nov 1992): 50-51.