

Hugo Distler's Celestial Choir:
the church musician's vocal approach to the organ

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Hugo Distler's Choral and Organ compositions. As a supporter of the Lutheran Revival, Orgelbewegung and Singbewegung, Distler composed a large body of sacred music which was primarily vocal but also contained an excellent collection of organ works. In his choral music, Distler continued the tradition of Heinrich Schütz writing music that expressively proclaimed the Word as well as fitting comfortably in the voice. I believe Distler approached his organ music in the same manner as his choral music.

The Orgelbewegung was a liturgical movement whose goal was to return the old German organ art to its height in the time of the North German School (17th to early 18th centuries). Based on the writings of musicians and theologians in this time, the organ had a sacred purpose and a connection to vocal music, unlike the late romantic organ which draws influence from orchestral music. Distler's writings on the organ express his belief in the liturgical tradition he supported.

The first part of this paper presents the educational experiences and cultural influences on Distler's work and its relationship to the goals of the Orgelbewegung. It also presents the difficulties Distler experienced trying to fulfill his passion for composing sacred music. In the second part, evidence from musical analyses illustrates how Distler's choral and organ styles overlap.

Résumé

Cet article examine la relation entre les compositions pour chœur et orgue de Hugo Distler. En tant que partisan de la Renaissance luthérienne, Orgelbewegung et Singbewegung, Distler a composé un vaste corpus de musique sacrée, principalement vocale, mais contenant également une belle collection d'œuvres pour orgues. Dans sa musique chorale, Distler poursuit la tradition d'écriture de la musique par Heinrich Schütz, qui proclamait expressément la Parole et s'adaptait parfaitement à la voix. Je crois que Distler a abordé sa musique pour orgue de la même manière que sa musique chorale.

L'Orgelbewegung était un mouvement liturgique dont le but était de redonner à l'art allemand de l'orgue ses lettres de noblesse à l'époque de l'école nord-allemande (17ème au début du 18ème siècle). Basé sur les écrits de musiciens et de théologiens de l'époque, l'orgue avait un but sacré et un lien avec la musique vocale, contrairement à l'orgue romantique qui tire son influence de la musique orchestrale. Les écrits de Distler sur l'orgue expriment sa conviction de la tradition liturgique qu'il a soutenue.

La première partie de cet article présente les expériences éducatives et les influences culturelles sur le travail de Distler et sa relation avec les objectifs de l'Orgelbewegung. Il présente également les difficultés rencontrées par Distler pour s'acquitter de sa passion pour la composition de musique sacrée. Dans la deuxième partie, les analyses musicales illustrent le chevauchement des styles de chœur et d'orgue de Distler.

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Foreword

My first introduction to the music of Hugo Distler was in 2014 at the University of Notre Dame during an Organ Literature class in which we sang Distler's setting of *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*. The Hamburg organ school had always been an interest to me; I was very familiar with the styles of Scheidemann, Praetorius and Weckmann, especially their organ works' connection to choral pieces. I had not played any Distler on the organ until I entered doctoral studies at McGill University. While I was working on the organ partita on *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, I noticed that there were similarities with Matthias Weckmann's *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*. The observation that led me to this conclusion was that both the fugue of *Wachet auf* and the sixth verse of *Es ist das Heil* had un-idiomatic keyboard writing concerning voices crossing. This writing, however, is not un-idiomatic for a choir. Knowing Weckmann's association with choral music and Distler's recognition as a primarily choral composer, I began to examine whether there was overlap in Distler's choral and organ works and was pleased to find a relationship.

In October 2018, I went to Germany to research the Distler archives, to play the Stellwagen organ, upon which Distler composed almost all his organ works, and to meet with the leading scholar on Distler's music, Armin Schoof. I also met with the archive curator Arndt Schnoor who asks Distler researchers what their interests are to determine what materials to locate for them. I asked him if others had worked in this area of Distler scholarship; his response was not to his knowledge. Mr. Schnoor graciously provided me with materials that he thought would be of assistance. I also found in the archive binders, several articles written by

Distler explaining his ideas on the organ as a sacred instrument. It was clear that Distler felt that the organ was of a higher sacred level than other instruments; he was writing about the organ as though it were a choir. I met with Herr Schoof to discuss my ideas. He, too, was unaware of any similar research, thought that my ideas were unique and showed an interest in following my research. I have shared my lecture, recital, and transcriptions with him since my visit.

This project has been meaningful for two reasons: an appreciation for Distler's life and the reemergence of sacred music and strong church musicians in pre-war Germany. Distler struggled with the disruptions brought by political changes in Nazi Germany, culminating in a series of events that pushed him to suicide at age 34. During his short and painful life, he relied greatly on sacred music to help him through taxing times. The Nazis viewed sacred music and church musicians with disdain which caused Distler much distress. Distler was musically active during the Third Reich, but most of his ideas came from the Weimar Republic and before. His composition during the Third Reich caused some performers to overlook his music claiming that they did not want to play Nazi music.

Distler's music is not Nazi propaganda music; it is an art greater than himself. Organists often perform his works angularly and harshly. Since the organs of the Orgelbewegung are often severe, there is a tendency to play his music harshly matching the sounds of these organs. I believe this is an incorrect interpretation of Distler's music: first, he wrote his music for the historic, vocally inspired organ of St Jacobi in Lübeck, and second, his choral music would not be performed this way. Since Distler writes about the organ in the same manner he writes about the choir, I believe his organ works should have a performance interpretation consistent with his choral works, bringing new sound and meaning to this music.

This project is meaningful, secondly, for bringing light to the importance of sacred music. As a modern church musician and composer of sacred vocal music whose position in modern society seems to be diminishing, I feel some of the concern that Distler felt. By championing the ideas of Distler, I hope that the importance of sacred music written for the "Infinite" will return.

Part I: Distler's Background in Vocal and Organ Music

1. Introduction and Hypothesis

In his article "The Organ of Our Time," composer Hugo Distler provides insight into his view of the instrument.

"The Instrument seems to be filled with a mystic life of its own; the wind, the living breath, the rhythm of nature fills her ... body. Hardly perceptible mechanisms lead the living breath into the labyrinth [of] the many thousand pipes."

The symbolism in his writing relates to a time when the organ was viewed as a sacred instrument whose mission was to work within the service to proclaim the Word of God. Distler's philosophy of the organ as a preacher of the Word is not far removed from Martin Luther's idea of the organ as a sacred instrument and of the goal of sacred music. Luther wrote that good music should be a "preacher in sound, whose duty is to proclaim the Word" (Loewe 72). Luther also said that other sources besides the human voice might proclaim the Word. "Wherever it may be helpful and beneficial, I should gladly have [the Word] rung out from bells and played on all organ pipes and proclaimed by everything that makes a sound" (Luther 22). Distler, primarily a choral composer, was drawn to the idea of the organ as a sacred polyphonic instrument whose mission was to proclaim the Word and enhance the Liturgy,

In Distler's writings, he considers the organ to have both human and mystical attributes. Phrases like the "living breath" and the "body" present a strong image of something human; however, his desire for the placement of the organ high in the gallery with its stoic presence creates something mystical and ethereal. For Distler, the sounds come from the holy architecture of the church; the organist is not visible. In the tradition of Lutheran ideas, music was a gift from

God and the congregational singing was humanity's method of praising God. What then was the organ? The organ was the sounds of the heavens and of the cosmos praising God, and when the voices and the organ joined in the chorale, "all that had breath was praising God" (Psalm 150).

The expanded practice of *alternatum* in Lutheran chorales demonstrates all the different sources to praise God: the verse by the choir, the verse by the organ, and the verse by the congregation and the organ combined. In Hamburg, during the mid-1500s, only one choir rotated through the different churches. When the choir was not performing at a particular church, the organ would substitute for the choir with motet intabulations (organ arrangements of motets) (Porter 2).

Distler stated, in the preface to his large partitas, that he wanted to write music that was not for this time, but rather music that belonged to the infinite. A performer should interpret Distler's music from a viewpoint based in the ecclesial Medieval and pre-Baroque perceptions in which the organ developed into a sacred instrument as well as a substitute for the human voice.

Hypothesis: It is my strong belief that Distler wrote for the organ in a manner similar to that of his choral music to show his theological ideas regarding the organ's sacred mission. With this choral perspective, it is possible to bring out a new interpretation that elevates his music to a higher sacred level.

2. Distler's Educational Background

Hugo Distler experienced a difficult life. After his mother abandoned him at an early age, he was sent to live with his grandparents. He applied for a scholarship to study music in Nuremberg but was rejected. In 1927, after a year at a prep school, he was accepted with honors to study at the Leipzig Conservatory. While in Leipzig, Distler developed a love for choral music

primarily from the Renaissance and Medieval periods. At this time, there was an increased interest in early music within academia, and Distler had access to new editions of old music. He was involved in the environment that would result in Heinrich Besseler's study on early music compositional technique, *Die Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Music from the Medieval and Renaissance) (1931). Distler would later quote from the Besseler text in his book *Funktionelle Harmonielehre* (1941). When Distler first entered the conservatory, his primary study was choral conducting with a minor in piano. Distler revealed in a 1928 letter to his Nuremberg friend Inge Heinsen, that when he entered the Leipzig Conservatory, he was writing in a late Wagnerian style which his teacher Hermann Grabner (1886-1969) found "unacceptable and frivolous" (Bergaas 8). Since Grabner profoundly influenced his students' stylistic values, Distler abandoned his former style.

"Grabner rejects the modern trend altogether, modern in the sense of the emancipation of the harmonic. He recognizes as most modern the return to the aesthetic art of the pre-Bach period. My way of thinking and writing was musically frivolous, like the general spirit in which we grew up." (Distler Letter to Heinsen)

After Grabner observed Distler's talent for understanding polyphony and counterpoint, he strongly urged Distler to switch to organ and composition. In another letter to Heinsen, Distler wrote:

"I worked on a passacaglia for two pianos, which pleased Grabner very well; so much so that he advises me to give up the conducting profession in order to become a composer. Because Grabner predicts a great future for the organ and for compositional techniques reclusively polyphonic techniques suitable for it, he advises me to take the organ as a second major. I naturally assented with joy. I will give up the piano as a major, but not the conducting." (Bergaas 4)

His organ teacher was Günther Ramin (1898-1956), who also served as organist at the Thomaskirche during Distler's time in Leipzig. Ramin was a leading figure in the early stages of

the Orgelbewegung and was an advocate for a return to the North German Schnitger tradition. He was involved with the restoration of the organ at St Jacobi in Hamburg and concertized there, promoting the North German style of music. Distler's ideas on sacred music and its purpose in the liturgy were influenced by Ramin's position at St. Thomas. This connection allowed Distler to observe the strong choral program run by its cantor Karl Straube (1873-1950), another major figure in the Orgelbewegung and Liturgischebewegung. While attending services, Distler was exposed to music primarily from the Reformation as well as works by J.S. Bach (1685-1750); and Neo-classical composers such as Kurt Thomas (1904-1973) and Arnold Mendelssohn (1855-1933). Distler would use the services and repertoire performed at St. Thomas as inspiration for his vesper services in Lübeck.

Distler's grandparents helped support Distler financially while he was a student at the conservatory. However, his grandfather died while Distler was in Leipzig resulting in financial trouble, which prevented Distler from finishing his studies. With recommendations from his teachers, he was accepted for a position as organist at St. Jacobi in Lübeck.

Distler's beliefs of participation in the divine art reflect the difference between Distler's experience in Leipzig and Lübeck.

“music arose at one time from humanity's yearning to lift itself, out of the frailty of the creature to a higher and also deeper macrocosmic logic. At the same time, it tries to document its knowledge of the workings of a mysterious universal order and not only the knowledge of it, but beyond that, the proud and joyful consciousness of participation in the art of this creative power” (Bergaas 32)

In Leipzig, the use of early models as a guide for composition was purely aesthetical. In Lübeck, these old models were directly connected to the religious culture and history of the medieval city, and these connections awakened a spark within Distler that resulted in an inseparable theological

connection to early music, especially sacred music and, even more so, to music based on choral tunes.

3. Influence from Medieval and Renaissance Music

The organ, since its inclusion in the Roman Liturgy in the Middle Ages, has always had an association with voice. Since the original purpose of the medieval organ was to accompany vocalists singing the ordinary, propers and hymns during the service, western polyphony was likely born out of the organ. However, Byzantine organs were the first to play multiple notes, and it is of this tradition, that English writer Johannes Cottonius states: “This manner of singing commonly called organum, because the human voice, singing in two parts, shows similarity to the instrument which is called the organ.” (Apel 212). As vocal polyphony developed, the organ developed alongside it, accompanying vocal motets and playing polyphonic instrumental works written specifically for the organ and inspired by vocal motets. In the early 12th century Abbott Baudry of Bourgueil reported on the “sweet melody of an organ which combined the tenor and the treble by continuous doubling giving the impression of a chorus singing in concert” (Bowles 20). As both polyphony of the organ and the choir developed, the organ became a substitute for the human voice in alternatum playing. The choice of the word substitute is important: the choir would sing a passage of chant, then the organ would play the next passage. This would repeat until the completion of the chant. It is important to note that the choir does not sing all the words; the organ takes over. Since alternatum would occur in important texts such as the Kyrie, Gloria and Credo, the organ was viewed as an acceptable substitute for the words. Catholic theologian Honorius of Autun (1080-1154?) considered the “organ alone as the instrument to praise God” (Bowles 16). The organ, therefore, must be sacred enough to replace the human voice. The

passages in which the organ would substitute were composed or improvised in a polyphonic manner similar to the preceding choral passages, again, replacing the voice. At times, the organ would also substitute for the choir for an entire chant, resulting in more polyphonic compositions starting to appear in different codices.

The genre of *inavolutura* developed as a small motet to be played on the organ. These pieces were either original compositions or arrangements of existing vocal pieces. The *inavolutura* would later evolve into the motet intabulations of the Hamburg organ school.

While the organ was an essential part of the High Mass, it was played most frequently during the Vespers service and the Te Deum chant. There is evidence of this in the 14th century Book of Customs of Neustadt (Bowles 27). While the organ's inclusion served a practical support purpose, its applications within the church gained recognition, and it developed a ritualistic character of its own. The organ's important role in the liturgy, shown by its replacement of the human voice for the sacred texts in the Mass, and its substantial role in the Vesper services established the organ's development into a sacred instrument as well as a substitute for the human voice. The development of polyphony alongside the organ, particularly in the Notre Dame School, which was made up of composers like Léonin and Pérotin working in Paris from 1160-1250, provides more proof. The long notes within the compositions of Pérotin (1160-1200) were either designed to mimic the organ or the organ accompaniment; this vocal technique, or organ point, became a staple in organ composition.

The organ's origin as a sacred instrument, therefore, was connected to the voice. This association would continue to be present in the Church during the Renaissance and the Early Baroque.

4. Distler on Early Music

As a choral composer, Distler was deeply inspired by the polyphonic music from the Renaissance and Baroque. Distler's opinion of the organ as a polyphonic instrument is similar to his approach to the choir. In "The Organ of Our Time" Distler wrote what he believed the true nature of the organ was. "With the Organ as a tool of objectivity in the depiction of the polyphonic structure...like no other instrument; its world of sound is of a high, sacral dignity." A polyphonic structure also held deep philosophical ideas for Distler. For example, in his discussion from his article "Early Vocal Polyphonic Music," Distler wrote:

"Every voice, be it the highest or the deepest or the middle voice, has equal rights and are equally responsible. Of course, the upper part is naturally most likely to emerge from the polyphonic texture; yet each of the lower voices is always able to take over the office of the first, as a result of the independence of its melodic and rhythmic leadership."

Distler's descriptions of polyphonic choral music are pertinent to the organ since he believed that the organ was primarily a polyphonic instrument. In this article, Distler wrote more about early vocal polyphony:

"What could in a deeper sense be an expression of our collectivist zeitgeist, which in turn demands the Lutheran idea of freedom of every Christian in the church? Yes, self-responsibility of the individual, but in the service, for and from a higher community! Nothing in the wide range of expressions of the entire art corresponds to this community will more than the linear style principle in the music."

While this discussion of polyphonic music revealed how Distler viewed choral music, he also referred to instrumental music. "This type of community music is most clearly found in choral music, which naturally leads ... to the rule of the polyphonic idea. In fact, it is in the music of the time of the 17th century. As far as the music of this time is instrumental, it certainly moves within the limits of amateur music."

Distler was suggesting that choral music was the highest form of polyphonic music and that its influence could be felt in the instrumental music of the time albeit at a lower level. His idea of instrumental does not apply to the organ; instead, he views the organ in the same way as the higher sacred level of choral music. This logical connection comes from Distler's writings on the organ. His statement that the instrument had the capabilities of playing polyphonic music like no other positioned the organ on a level with the choir.

“Sacred music watches over the pre-Bach period in a comprehensive manner, often in one-sided, exclusive practice. Their language [old music] is short, austere, crowded but never insignificant, the means of representation undemanding, yet it protects the greatest possible concentration from flatness or temperance.” (Distler “The Reawakening of the 16th and 17th Centuries in the Music of Our Time”)

This belief is present in Distler’s work, the organ partita *Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme*. The “crowded” texture of short ideas in *Wachet auf* at the entrance of the chorale in measures 60-76 illustrates it. All of the phasing voices may appear crowded, but this is not frivolous or insignificant as it adds strength and importance to the choral tune which remains steady and austere.

14

allegro R.P.

*) Siehe Bem. Seite 13, Takt 22.

Ped. +

verzögern

Im Hauptzeitmaß

B.W. 44

Fig. 1 “Crowded but not insignificant.” *Wachet auf Fugue*, m.58-84. BA9231

To Distler, the organ appeared to be the predestined sound tool for depicting free-floating rhythms. About this and the unique polyphonic characteristics of the organ, Distler stated they: “are not to be repudiated, one does not want to deny the conditions of the instrument, its suitability to polyphonic representation, to which the independence, even opposition of the various voices clearly indicates” (Distler, “Organ of Our Time”). He continued that organ composition’s “manner of presentation must endeavor to do justice to this suitability (polyphonic tendencies), i.e., all harmonic-tonal elements of the organ composition must subordinate themselves to the effort to reproduce the polyphonic event as clearly as possible.” He is suggesting that the polyphonic interactions of the independent voices create the music, not the harmony and tonal ideas. This is the same way he feels about choral music.

5. Influence from the Lutheran Church

Luther was a Catholic and did not desire to leave the church completely; thus, several theological ideas carry over into Luther’s Reformed Church. Luther did not remove the Latin texts and plainchant from the service as he did not want to alienate the educated. In a university town such as Leipzig, this practice was demonstrated most often. The Latin motets and plainchant were saved for the high liturgy, where their inclusion preserved the mystical ideas they held in the Catholic liturgy. Luther loved music and particularly liked polyphony, as polyphony was a creative symbol of God. Bach and his predecessors held similar beliefs. (Grew 78)

Luther’s theological foundation was in the importance of the Word of God, and the way that music could convey it. It is clear that the setting of the texts with voice proclaims the Word

most efficiently. However, Luther also believed in the power of all music including instrumental music.

Luther believed that the message of truth could be transferred through the music of every nation and age: “music and theology have been most closely yoked together, and so the truth is told through psalms and songs” (Loewe 70). Luther thought that the psalmist had been the first to understand the importance of music to convey God’s grace and mercy. In 1530 he wrote in a letter to composer Ludwig Senfl (1486-1542?): “they attached their theology not to geometry, nor arithmetic, nor to astronomy, but to music, speaking the truth through psalms and hymns” (Loewe 70). Luther also believed that the Word could be spread best through music, and that music, like grace, was a gift from God received by all. Luther emphasized music’s power by encouraging all to learn music at an early age and to participate in congregational singing. During hymn singing of Lutheran chorales, similar to the earlier *alternatum* chants, the organ would take a verse, the choir would sing a polyphonic arrangement, and then the rest would be in congregational unison.

“Human beings are given voice and reason, so that they may be able to praise God through combining song and words; with clear, resounding preaching and praising of God’s Mercy and Grace, whenever beautiful words and delightful music are combined and heard together” (Loewe 72).

Distler agreed that music in the church should proclaim and instruct the congregation in the message of the Word. The use of the chorale was the most effective way of communicating the message through instrumental music because the chorale had an innate power to communicate to laymen.

6. The Stellwagen Organ

The small Stellwagen organ at St. Jacobi in Lübeck was pivotal in shaping Distler's view of the liturgical role new music could have on a historic organ. This historic organ was built in 1467 and was one of the significant surviving organs from the Renaissance and Baroque. Friederich Stellwagen (1603-1660), a Lübeck organ builder, enlarged the organ in 1636 by adding the Ruckpositive and the Brustwerk; the Hauptwerk remained from the original instrument.

Distler considered himself fortunate to be the caretaker of the Stellwagen organ because this ancient instrument greatly influenced his organ composition. Distler wrote most of his sacred music, including all his organ works except Op. 18, at St. Jacobi.



Fig. 2 Stellwagen Organ, St. Jacobi. Photo by J. Embry, 2018.

The Stellwagen inspired Distler's sacred aim of organ composition and strengthened his views on the theological importance of the organ. As Distler stated in his preface to the Partita on *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland* Op.8 No.1, his goal for writing the partita was to have new sacred music that would be playable on historic organs. Distler claimed in a letter to Grabner in 1932 that the Partita on *Nun komm* was the first sizeable modern organ piece written to be

performed explicitly on a historic instrument. Indeed, a partial purpose of the Partita on *Nun komm* was to advocate for the Stellwagen organ. In the preface, there is an extended introduction discussing the organ and its stops, including a picture of the instrument, which is unusual for a score publication. About old organs, Distler elaborated in the preface to *Nun komm*: "In my opinion, an old organ can only fulfill its mission, which it undoubtedly owes our time, when it still proves itself to be potent enough to lead the contemporary production to new goals and to decisively influence it."

He continued in the Preface: "The present chorale partitas owe their creation, law and principal of design, and the right to exist to the years of experience that fortunate circumstances have allowed me to collect as the steward of the old St. Jacobi organ in Lübeck." About playing on a new organ, Distler stated in the *Nun komm* preface: "the organist should strive for the most sensible imitation of the ancient tonal image."

Distler's compositions for the organ have the tonal design of the Stellwagen in mind since the registrations for all the organ works written in Lübeck have specific registrations for the Stellwagen. The only exception is the large partita on *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, which was not premiered on the Stellwagen because the instrument was undergoing restoration. However, playing *Wachet auf* on the Stellwagen convinces one that Distler had the small instrument in mind when he composed the work, from the range of the piece, using the highest and lowest notes on its smaller compass, to its Werk Prinzept registration scheme. The current tuning of the Stellwagen has been modified from the well-tempered tuning of Distler's time. It is quite remarkable that the organ pieces of Distler still work exceptionally well on the instrument's new modified meantone tuning. It is remarkable that the later Orgelpartita on *Wachet auf* takes into account quarter-comma meantone as there are no D flats, G flats, A flats, or A sharps. All of

the organ works written at St. Jacobi also take into account the instrument's short octave keyboard. The sounds of the Stellwagen are round and delicate; Distler himself referred to these sounds as being feminine. Shortly after Distler arrived in Lubeck, he wrote about the difficulties that he had trying to play modern music on the Stellwagen organ. Even a work by Grabner in the old style was impossible to play on the historic organ. Distler believed that the work would require an organ from the 19th century (Bergaas 54). He would later use his experience attempting to play Grabner's piece on the Stellwagen when he wrote his organ music to be playable on a historic instrument. The advantage of having a historic instrument available gave his compositions a practical application of old forms. Other composers were trying to write historically with romantic instrument experience which caused problems with the wind, temperament, compass, registration, and performance.

Proponents of the Orgelbewegung named Ernst Pepping (1901-1981), Johann David (1895-1977) and Distler the top composers of the time in a shift away from Max Reger (1873-1916) (Johns 49). These three composers believed that one should allow the organ to inform composition and interpretation of old music. A difference between the organ music of Distler and that of his contemporaries was the influence of his church position in a town that had a strong tradition of sacred music. Ernst Pepping, in Spandau, and Johann David, in Leipzig, were primarily academics with limited practical church experience. David wrote several orchestral pieces, whose influence can be found in his organ works. David did not have the reputation as an organist that Distler had. An academic, David used the works of Bach as a model, evident in his writing style which resembles the instrumentally influenced Leipzig chorales of Bach rather than the earlier vocally influenced works of the North German School. Ernst Pepping's organ works

are similar to David's, using the works of Bach as an aesthetic guide. From my inspection, Pepping's choral pieces appear to show a romantic influence.

In his articles on old instruments, Distler wrote of the vocal influences that were lost to the later generations. Of early music he believed that "the sound served the idea," any "endeavor of instrumentation was virtually impossible at a time when music was still primarily word-bound," that there was an "intimate relation to the vowel" and a "perfect unity of the purely linguistic-lyrical and musical leadership." In other words, the music comes from the sound of the text. The vocal sounds of the Stellwagen demonstrate this belief of a vowel connection to the sounds of the music. While playing the Stellwagen organ, it is difficult not to notice and bring out its singing quality. By using slow releases, an effect that sounds like the vocal release of a singer can be achieved.

After experiencing this instrument, I believe that Distler was referring to the Stellwagen when he wrote about playing the Dorian Fugue of Bach, a stile antico fugue reminiscent of the vocal music of Giovanni Palestrina (1525-1594). In his article "Johann Sebastian Bach's Doric Toccata and Fugue," Distler wrote: "The attack was not legato, but for the old music commonly valid, especially on the organ rhythm-determining martellato. (Just like in the old a cappella music!) The "Orgellegato" is an invention of the 19th century with its organ." In the same article, Distler wrote about the organs of Bach:

"As for the organ of Bach's time, or better again: the organ available to Bach, it is to say that it does not quite correspond to his work in a perfect way; even more the works that clearly emerge from the spirit of his time (*C major Toccata*, *E flat major Prelude*, etc.); however, works such as the Dorian Fugue demand an organ sound that is unfocused in its innermost, choral, organistic sound, which is generally not inherent in the surviving organs of the Bach period."

An important element of this quote is the “choral, organistic sound” meaning that the organ and choral sound can be equivalent. It is no surprise that Distler, a highly respected choral conductor and choral composer, would recognize and resonate with the influence of the vocal style of this fugue.

The Stellwagen organ is one of the instruments that did survive with this choral sound intact. The description of Bach’s Dorian fugue is one of the keys to interpreting Distler’s works. It is perhaps not too presumptuous to interpret his music, which has influences from his choral works, in the same way he interpreted Bach’s.

Distler premiered his organ pieces during Vesper services that he arranged along with Pastor Kühl (1893-1944) of St. Jacobi and church musician/Buxtehude scholar Bruno Grusnick (1900-1992). As a liturgical continuation of the Abendmusiken (Evening Music) series that Lübeck organist and composer Franz Tunder (1614-1667) organized in 1646, the three men at St. Jacobi felt that the sacred music should be within the context of a service. The change to Vesper services altered the context of the music: instead of sacred music used for a concert, the music was now used in a service. Vesper services music would take on a more significant role than the spoken word. This change added an elevated dimension to Distler’s works because their role was not pieces for a concert audience but pieces to serve God. In thirty-eight Vespers, Distler offered high-quality performances of choral and organ works by Renaissance composers as well as new works by himself and other composers of modern sacred music like Pepping and Walter Kraft (1905-1977). The series of Vesper services at St. Jacobi closely followed Luther’s thoughts on music:

“In opposition to a music based entirely upon cultural aims (a music for music’s sake) we find a German (church) music which recognizes its innermost being by preaching the

Word of God; then the Word gains a new and higher vitality, then there is an urge to follow the leadership of the Word” (FitzGibbon 125).



Fig. 3 Hugo Distler at the Stellwagen. Hugo Distler Archiv, Stadtbibliothek, Lübeck

7. Influence of German Cultural Movements Pre - WWII

Hugo Distler grew up in post-World War I Germany. He was ten at the end of World War I and 31 at the start of World War II. Cultural movements in Germany between the wars greatly influenced his philosophy and work. Three cultural reform movements that shaped Distler’s musical philosophy the most were the Singbewegung, Orgelbewegung and the Liturgischebewegung (Lutheran church renewal). These movements grew from the effects of the war loss on German morale, self-reflection and rediscovery of German identity. Distler was able to take ideas from all three movements and meld them into a philosophy on sacred music that would be the foundation for all of his organ compositions. A deep interest in returning to the old ways of the Lutheran church followed a hurt sense of pride, and a boost to German identity turned out to be the German chorale because German choral music resonated with all Germans (Harper 34). The Singbewegung and Orgelbewegung emerged from the rediscovery of the

importance of the role of music in the liturgy, and both movements felt the renewed Lutheran church should have the same high-quality liturgy and music that was available when Luther first reformed the church. The leaders of these movements rallied around the music of composer Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672), as he was able to proclaim the Word through his music. Distler was a deeply religious man; therefore, it is no surprise that he was a passionate advocate for the renewed Lutheran church. Except for *Dreißig Spielstücke für die Kleinorgel* and the *Orgelsonate (Trio)*, Distler's output for the organ is entirely designed for church use. As stated earlier, the German chorale, as well as the accompanying text, had a significant association with national identity. Some in the movement described the chorale as present within every German. Distler also wrote about the importance of the chorale and sacred music:

“The spirit of the Lutheran chorale, which in the sixteenth century began to weld the community together into a self-conscious whole to an extent to which no secular power might have been capable, awakes to a new strong life. Thus, community and church became and become again the hidden means, the womb, out of which music will be reborn” (Distler, “Spirit of the New Church Music”)

Since the Orgelbewegung emerged from this renewed interest in the role of church music, it was not just a movement for the return of old organs, but rather a liturgical movement that focused on the role of the organ in the liturgy. As the focus changed from concert to church music, the idea of the virtuoso also changed. The Orgelbewegung reacted to the organ music of the late romantic period that had glorified the virtuoso and tried to make the organ sound like an orchestra.

Distler's ideas of the organ came from the Zeitgeist of the Orgelbewegung, which re-examined the role of the organ in the liturgy and tried to rediscover the true nature of the organ. A common misconception about the interpretation of organ music from the Orgelbewegung is

that it should sound sharp and angular like the new organs that were built with the intent to carry on older organ building traditions. The performance practice informed by these organs does not work in the case of Distler since the instrument that he had access to was a historic instrument. Instruments of the Baroque and Renaissance had a rounder quality that is very different from the sharp instruments built by Hans Henny Jahnn and others during the Orgelbewegung.

The Orgelbewegung strived to return the organ to its original role and purpose in the liturgy, part of which was to return to a mystic rather than a secular idea of the organ. Proponents of the movement believed that the late romantic organ was not a true organ since it was trying to mimic an orchestra and that the highly virtuosic music glorified the performer instead of glorifying God, the organ's sacred mission. This lens of liturgical purpose formed Distler's view of the organ.

Some of the tenets of the 1926 Freiburg conference of the Orgelbewegung movement's ideas with which Distler agreed were:

- The organ is primarily a polyphonic instrument.
- The organ is a sensitive and responsive keyboard instrument; the performer must have direct control of the key mechanism.
- The "Werk Prinzip" as developed in the North German or Schnitger school is to be used as a guide for the architectural appearance and for a tonal design meeting the requirements of the traditional polyphonic literature. (Johns 49-50)

In "The Organ of Our Time," Distler writes of the organ as an unchanging entity. The organ is a mystical instrument with a non-visible player; therefore, the idea of the virtuoso was diminished. The Orgelbewegung changed the emphasis of flashy earthly music and replaced it with music that served the church and the Word. In agreement with the tenets of the Orgelbewegung, Distler believed that the sacred dignity of the organ had degenerated into a playground for coloristic effects, and the stops that were orchestral "imitators" helped cause this

decay. He wrote that there is certainly very extensive literature that comes from ages whose artistic, religious and ethical demands no longer corresponded to the [true] nature of the organ. Those ages artificially used the organ with its musical and spiritual principle; the result was the decay of the instrument. He claimed that: "violent interventions to the nature of the instrument" caused the "frightening decline of the one once responsible for the entire leadership of the musical culture and responsible church musicianship." Distler used Beethoven, whom he considered the greatest creative musician of his time as an example. Since Beethoven did not write for the organ, it was clear to Distler that the organ's once great place in music was gone. The young Beethoven was considered a great organist while he was court organist to the Elector of Cologne, yet he never wrote any major solo works for the organ (Thayer 100). It followed logically that the organ was not viewed as a great musical medium since a promising organist did not write major works for it.

In his "The Organ of Our Time," Distler wrote about the necessity of the organ that "music today needs a common language that is also accessible to the 'common man,' (Luther's word). The development of new organ building will reach all of its goals as long as the new music, and not just new organ music, becomes constantly aware of the demands of the day." The demands of the day are the spiritual demands reflected in the Liturgischebewegung. As stated before, The Orgelbewegung strived to return church music to the heights it had reached when Martin Luther reformed the church. Distler and the Orgelbewegung strongly held that the nature of the organ should not be a substitute orchestra, but instead have its own austere and unsentimental personality reflecting the ideas of the Singbewegung and Liturgischebewegung concerning vocal polyphony.

The Singbewegung, another movement that came out of the Lutheran revival, was aimed at returning church music, in this case, the vocal music, to a height it reached during the period of Schütz. Since Distler was primarily a choral composer, this movement inspired him. Lutheran theologian/musicologist Oskar Söhnngen (1900-1983) stated that Distler and other composers of his generation brought an end to the undisputed reign of instrumental music through the rediscovery of the human voice, the ideal tool for the expression of God's Word (Pierson 14). This idea gave Distler's text settings lucidity and depth of feeling. One of the essential features of Distler's choral compositional style was his ability to grasp the meaning behind the words and then enhance them. Additionally, because Distler saw choral music as the most effective way to express the message of the Gospel, his music was governed by the text. Distler claimed that: "the foundation for the new German musical life would be based on choral music" (Harper, 14).

Finally, the Jugendbewegung advocated a return to the folkloric aspects of German culture. Community and unification of the German people were two ideas that were present in the Jugendbewegung which appeared during the Weimar Republic. The leaders of the youth movement idolized and romanticized medieval Germany (Gay 78). The youth movement also perceived an incompleteness in society. Distler believed that the German chorale and new sacred music rooted in medieval German aesthetics could help fill the gap left by the confusion and stress of the times.

Distler wrote of the folk quality of early music: "we admire the lapidary expressiveness of the old music, which is deeply rooted in the folkloric, native and national. Their originality, authenticity, simplicity and clarity has been lost to later generations." This is in line with the Jugendbewegung's desire for a return to nature and a simpler way of life after the tragedies of World War I and the collapsing economic climate in Germany. All these qualities appear in

Distler's choral and organ works. The clarity of Distler's writing, the simplicity of his ideas, the inclusion of the modal writing and pentatonic scales of the folk tradition manifest themselves in his sacred works, and his authenticity and originality create his unique language. *Funktionelle Harmonielehre*, Distler's textbook on harmony, discusses four possible uses of the parallel fifth in modern music. The usage that Distler implements the most is the second: choir fifths. In the text, Distler defines choir fifths as the following:

“The earliest polyphonic music of the Middle Ages, drew forth the prime intervals, perfect octave and perfect fifth (as well as their inversions, unison and perfect fourth) (Notre Dame School, the organum of Léonin (1135- 1201) and Pérotin in the 13th century)... New music, above all recent German choral music, prefers once again to use the pure intervals, above all the fifth, also in parallel motion, as the expression of the most genuine, rigorous consonance wholly in the sense of and with the intended effect of archaic restraint as it is characteristic of early Medieval music.”

This passage illustrates Distler's choral connection to the fifth in parallel motion as well as the *Jugendbewegung*'s romanticizing of the Medieval period.

Distler's friend Bruno Grusnick describes their shared experience in the *Jugendbewegung*: “We, who as singing youth found our way into music through the experience of folk song in the *Jugendbewegung*, desperately longed to transcend the decaying and secular bourgeois experience ... In early music, we discovered the most perfect realizations of that which we sought for ourselves and for our time” (FitzGibbon 124). The experience of early music by Schütz, composer Leonhard Lechner (1553-1606), and the masters of Luther's time was an inspiration for the young musicians of the 1920's. The common goals of composers, like Distler, whose experience of early music influenced their compositions decided the direction of the music movement.

Proponents of the Lutheran renewal movement reevaluated both the importance of liturgical organ performance and the exegetical significance of sacred text-settings for choral ensembles. Distler and other church music composers who looked back to the time of the Reformation and Martin Luther for liturgical direction and Heinrich Schütz for compositional inspiration influenced this change (Harper 41).

8. Influence of the North German School

Distler's music fits into a long tradition of German composers who wrote both for the organ and the choir. Organ pieces from the 16th century, particularly in Hamburg, show a strong influence of vocal styles on composers, such as Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) and Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654), who wrote both choral and organ music. Distler's music follows in this tradition not because he was trying to emulate the old style of music in his organ compositions, but because his organ works reflect his choral music.

As stated above, hymns in the Lutheran service were a balance between choir, organ and congregation. Organ compositions of the North German School provide evidence of this. There are two types of choral based works: ones that are intended for liturgical purposes containing only a few verses for the service, and major chorale cycles intended for the Vespers services. For example, in the works of Heinrich Scheidemann (1595-1663), we find chorale settings with only two or three verses for a hymn that has five or six. These settings were possibly intended for the alternate singing of the choir, congregation and organ during the performance of the hymn. Scheidemann's larger Magnificat cycles, which are both longer and more virtuosic, were performed during the Vespers services. These works continued the practices established in the early church, and like the Medieval works, the pieces of Scheidemann and others from the North

German School, are vested in vocal polyphony. Many verses are choral *ricercars*, which resemble a vocal motet. As with the intabulations from the Medieval period, the motet intabulation was a replacement for the choir.

In Hamburg, there was only one choir that rotated through the five principal churches. Since the *Stadtkantore* was not singing every week, the organists were required to play motets as a substitution for the choir. This was an important duty for the organist as shown by its inclusion in the audition requirements at St. Jacobi, Hamburg when Matthias Weckmann (1616-1674) applied for a position. It is believed that intabulations were improvised; however, Scheidemann had produced a large selection of intabulations on motets by Orlande de Lassus (1532-1594) and Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612). The inclusion of these composers is not surprising because Luther himself was fond of Latin polyphony (Grew 78).

The Scheidemann intabulations give an insight into how vocal motets and organ composition relate. Intabulations consist of a modified version of the original motet with an embellished line above the texture.



Fig. 4 Scheidemann. Motet Intabulation, using Hans Leo Hassler's Motet *Alleluja, Laudem Dicte Deo Nostro*, m.1-5. Breitkopf 8455.

This creates the effect of a zink playing above the choir. This texture is also the same as the choral fantasia, which appears in both the Magnificat and Chorale verses. This similarity and

the work's function to be a substitute for a choir adds strength to the association of the organ and voice. Like the early church, this practical implementation of the organ became ritualistic. In the preface of Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum*, he suggests that the earthly musicians may join with "heavenly singers and most perfect musicians, holy angels and archangels, to stand before the lamb and hold eternal chorus with them in our praise, singing together with the cherubim and seraphim at this most solemn and precious concert." This volume of Praetorius is not vocal music; it is music for instruments especially the organ (Porter 2).

The Orgelbewegung's influence on Distler was similar to the idea of the organ at the time of Matthias Weckmann, "the organ as preacher." Matthias Weckmann was a Hamburg organist and composer who had a similar aesthetic and theological belief to Distler. Weckmann's work was the pinnacle of the North German School in terms of composition and attention to proclaiming the Word. Weckmann studied with organ composer Jacob Praetorius (1586-1651) and choral composer Schütz, a giant figure and model for the ideal of church music in the Orgelbewegung and Singbewegung. Weckmann was able to create in his major choral cycles Luther's "sermon in sound," especially in *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*.

The sixth verse of *Es ist das Heil* is a chorale fantasia similar to the intabulations that were performed in the absence of a choir in Hamburg. However, this original work of Weckmann contains elements of mysticism and complexity that are not present in the motet intabulations; this piece creates a true celestial choir of the divine. Weckmann's *Es ist das Heil* follows the philosophy of a sermon in sound and portraying the Word without having to set text. While *Es ist das Heil* is composed in the North German tradition of Scheidemann and Praetorius, it is not like the verse settings or the Magnificat cycles. Like the earlier medieval practice of

having the organ replace the entire text of a chant or hymn and the North German motet intabulations, this massive work covers all the text for the hymn.

It is reasonable to conclude that this organ work's connection to the Word came from Weckmann's time with Schütz. There is no evidence that Distler himself played this specific piece; however, he was steeped in the tradition that helped form *Es ist das Heil*, and through this lens, we can see a similar aesthetic appear in the works of Distler. To establish the organ as a preacher, Distler incorporated vocal ideas from the Renaissance and Medieval periods in his organ works, to create a "sermon in sound." Both Weckmann and Distler drew on vocal poetics to create in their organ pieces the same goals as pieces that have text.

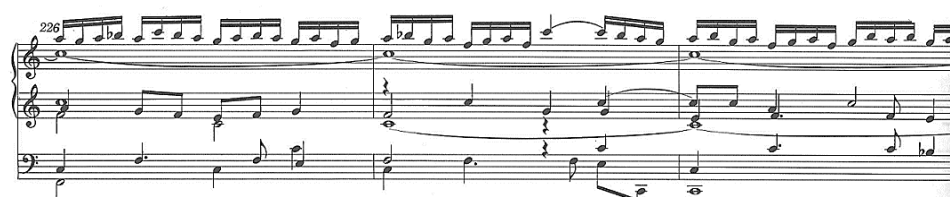


Fig. 5 Ending. Weckmann. *Es ist das Heil* Verse 6, m.226-228. BA 6211.

9. National Socialist Political Movement

The Singbewegung and Orgelbewegung both had a positive impact on Distler's development and personal outlook. It was the National Socialist political movement that would test his devotion to his sacred calling. Initially, Distler believed that the National Socialist movement and the music movements shared a common goal: the mission of a "renewal" of German culture, musically as well as politically. However, the National Socialists took advantage of the search for collective identity and used it for their purposes. Distler found himself caught between the initial good intentions of the Singbewegung, Orgelbewegung and the Liturgischebewegung and the Nazi party's politicization and usurpation of the ideas in these

movements. The Nazi party started to appropriate various features from the Lutheran Church in their general meetings: they used the format of the liturgical worship service; party officials wore vestments; the organ became a symbol of power and they used familiar music from the Lutheran tradition to help instill an ideological fervor. Often, they altered the text of traditional chorales in order to blend nationalism with the original Lutheranism (Harper 34). The original purpose of the chorales was to spread the Word, but the imitations by the Nazis only spread a corrupted word.

The publication *Kirchenmusik im dritten Reich* (Church music in the Third Reich) was introduced to compete with the existing publication *Musik und Kirche*. This new journal condemned modern church music as reactionary and strongly recommended that composers should look to classical and romantic periods for inspiration instead of the works from the Reformation and Baroque periods. At first, the criticism had little effect, but the result of these ideas would be felt later.

The German church divided into two factions: the German Christians created by the Nazi party and led by Prussian Army chaplain Ludwig Müller (1883-1945) and the Confessing Church led by Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) who opposed Nazi ideology. The leaders of the Confessing Church promoted and supported church musicians who were involved in the various liturgical reform movements. In May 1933, Oskar Söhngen and thirty-eight other church musicians, including Hugo Distler wrote a declaration to the Nazis that described their goals for sacred music and rejected “a German Evangelical Church music which is not indigenous, which is born of a cosmo-political spirit.” The Nazi-aligned *Zeitschrift für Musik* published the declaration. The Confessing Church “objected to the way in which the German Christians had treated sacred music . . . [and] wished to restore the original liturgical quality of sacred music to

a state of purity ... as had existed in the post-Reformation times of Schütz, Telemann, and Bach” (FitzGibbon 153).

In May 1934 a general synod in Barmen declared the Confessing Church to be the true Lutheran church in Germany, and in November 1934 the Gestapo responded by arresting 700 Confessing Church pastors. Pastor Kühl of the Jakobikirche was one of the leaders of the Confessing Church, and the cantor Bruno Grusnick was a member of the council. In February 1937 Pastor Kühl was exiled and forbidden from entering Lübeck, while Bruno Grusnick was forced to serve short-term military obligations in Hamburg. When Kühl and Grusnick were forced to leave Lübeck, Distler refused to play in solidarity, but he had lost his most important professional colleagues and had no other friends or confidants in the city. The end of this period in Lübeck would mark the end of Distler’s happiest and most productive time immersed in sacred music. He would never have another period of confidence in his abilities or prolific composition after leaving Lübeck. He left St. Jacobi and the Stellwagen organ and took a position at the Württemberg Musikhochschule (Musical Institute) in Stuttgart. Distler resigned himself to this move, though, because he felt he would have an excellent choir to conduct.

In Stuttgart, Distler faced some of the hardest challenges to his philosophy. He had encountered problems with the Nazis before Stuttgart, but it was here that the problems began to affect his work. The Nazi party initially embraced the Lutheran liturgy and ideas, but over time had shifted to appropriating the imagery and rituals to support their propaganda machine. The Nazi party did not look favorably on the composition of sacred music or performance of sacred music that did not promote the Party’s propaganda. Distler was actively discouraged from writing sacred music, which is the reason his catalog has no music for the church during this period. In an interview, Distler’s widow told researcher Larry Palmer that Distler’s position

included the teaching of form and analysis, composition, and choral conducting, and he conducted two school choirs. “At first his position in Stuttgart was complicated by the fact that the Nazi-oriented students boycotted his efforts because he was a 'church musician.' As his work became better known, some of this anti-Distler feeling disappeared, but his relationship to the student body in Stuttgart was never a completely free and easy one” (FitzGibbon 119).

Die Fachschaft, a National Socialist student organization, labeled Distler’s music un-German and degenerate, and their newspaper, *Arbeit und Volk*, published less than favorable writings about him and his music. The chief complaint was his deep love of sacred music, and the attacks on Distler were so strong that he did temporarily stop all sacred composition. In June of 1937 Distler threatened to resign from the Musikhochschule due to the harassment. In addition to this harassment, many of Distler’s concerts were shut down. One such case was a performance of Bach’s *St John’s Passion*. Distler’s choir, the Esslinger Singakademie set up a concert to perform the work without permission from the authorities. In retaliation, two conflicting concerts of secular music were planned to hurt the performance of Distler’s group. The resulting failure of the performance forced the Singakademie to break up.

In 1937 the Nazi party appointed Distler as a regional examiner for the city of Stuttgart with the Reich Music Chamber (RMK). The RMK was a part of the Reich Culture Chamber (RKK), which established regional music examining boards to “protect the German people against the influence of undesirable and deleterious music, such as phonograph records by Jews and Negroes, or non-Aryan printed music” (Harper 9). Music examiners visited all private music teachers and determined whether they were teaching in a manner approved by the Nazi party. Many teachers were declared undesirable and lost their only means of livelihood.

The effect of Nazi disapproval of sacred music led Distler to write the secular pieces: *Dreißig Spielstücke für die Kleinorgel* and the *Orgelsonate (Trio)*. These works were written to be played on a house organ, unlike the organ partitas and chorale preludes Distler wrote explicitly for the Stollwagen organ. Even though these works were thought secular by the Party, Distler still viewed them as sacred works. His viewpoint will be discussed in more detail in Part II with the musical analysis of the *Orgelsonate*.

In 1939 Germany was at war which caused the student population to decrease rapidly, and Distler also received his first draft notice. Many of his colleagues offered statements against his summons, though, and he was ultimately excused. Later, Distler moved from Stuttgart to Berlin. He was appointed the director of the Berlin Staats und Domchor which served the Berlin Cathedral. This position, however, would be a target for the Nazi party. He would continue to struggle with the Nazi party disrupting his performances and the Hitler Youth sabotaging his Cathedral choir by scheduling meetings for the choirboys during rehearsal times. Distler complained to the Ministry of Education where he received the unsurprising answer: “either do secular music with the boys or continue his sacred music without them.” The Hitler regime eventually proclaimed that the Staats und Domchor was a propaganda machine of the church (FitzGibbon 12).

With all of these hardships and the receipt of a new draft notice, Distler felt he could no longer serve both God and the party. He used a gas oven to end his life on October 31, 1942. A photo of his family, a note to his wife, a Bible, and a cross were discovered with his body (Palmer 72).



Fig. 6 Distler Memorial Plaque at St. Jacobi, Lübeck. Photo by J. Embry, 2018.

Part II Compositional Evidence of Vocal Influence within Distler's Organ Music

To show evidence of choral influence within the music, I will present similarities between the organ and choral works. The choral works are *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* from *Die Weihnachtsgeschichte* Op. 10, motets from *Geistliche Chormusik* Op. 12 and *Der Jahrkreis* Op. 5, all written in Lübeck at the same time as the organ works. I will also show how strikingly different the organ music is from the *Harpsichord Concerto* Op. 14 which was written to be purely secular and the only published work of Distler that has an orchestra. I will also analyze Distler's writing for the piano to identify if, in his works, he distinguishes these two secular instruments from the sacred organ

10. The Style of Piano/ Harpsichord Works vs. Choral/ Organ Works

Distler's *Harpsichord Concerto* (1935) contrasts with his organ works. According to one critic, the *Harpsichord Concerto* is written in a brutal, motor-like way. "This motoristic, noisy music chattered endlessly on." "The delicate domestic harpsichord was utilized in an unnatural way, like a piano" (Roeder 4). Another critic wrote the piece contained, "stuttering rhythms, fractured mood, and brutal background sounds" (Fuhrmann 748). The terms brutal and motor-like are definitely not applicable to his organ and choral works but do describe the majority of his piano works. There is a clear distinction in the manner Distler wrote for the piano and harpsichord and how he wrote for choir and organ, thus implying that Distler's stylistic overlap

in the choral and organ works is not an instance of the composer writing in only one style, but a deliberate intention to connect the organ to the choir.



Fig. 7 *Harpsichord Concerto* Op.14 Mvt. IV Variation 1, m.1-5. BA 7687-72

Distler published only one chorale-based piano piece: *Von Himmel Hoch, da komm ich her*. It was published in 1935 as part of a collection of contemporary piano music suitable for playing in the home during Christmas and Advent. *Neue Weihnachtsmusik* contains works by other contemporary composers. Distler did not seem particularly inspired by the piano, since his *Dreissig Spielstücke* is aimed at a house organ, not the piano.

Distler wrote that the modern piano is departing from classical forms, e.g. sonata form, in favor of nationalistic folksongs and dances, e.g. Bartok's works. He mentioned that the inclusion of exotic and jazz influences was a positive contribution, and he expressed his great respect for French composer Francis Poulenc (1899-1963). What is telling about Distler's writing on the piano is that he calls it a secular instrument. The inclusion of jazz and exotic elements would not be acceptable to Distler in organ composition. He was never complimentary regarding modern French organ music because it emphasized the virtuoso and the "playground of color."

In 1942, after Distler's death, Bärenreiter published Opus 15b *Elf Kleine Klavierstücke für die Jugend*. However, the date of publication is not the date the piece was written. In a list of published and unpublished Distler works, printed in 1935, Grusnick described *Elf Kleine Klavierstücke* as a book of piano music for young people (Bergaas 91). The dating is important as it shows that this work was written during Distler's time in Lübeck when he was writing

sacred organ music. I conclude the stylistic differences of these piano works from the organ and choral works is a direct result of the different instruments.

The pieces in this collection are all associated with secular genres, similar to the ones Distler wrote about in his article on the modern piano. Titles include: “Alte Spieluhr” (Old Music Box), “Walzer” (Waltz), “Trommeln und Pfeifen” (Drums and Fifes) and “Pankraz, der Schmoller” (Pankraz the sulker).

These pieces are essential in understanding Distler’s view of the different roles for the piano and organ. “Pankraz der Schmoller” is the only piece in Distler’s works that has a clear influence of jazz, shown through its bass line which resembles many jazz works that came from the United States. The use of the waltz in “Waltzer” demonstrates his belief that the piano should have dances. “Trommeln und Pfeifen” would be unacceptable on the organ, as it is trying to imitate a military march. The “Alte Spieluhr” (Old Music Box) is in direct conflict with his belief on the true nature of the organ. In the “Organ of our Time,” Distler complained about the organ’s degeneration to a music box playing frivolous music.

Another secular piano piece is Op. 20 *Konzertstück für zwei Klaviere*. This piece is peculiar because it is almost identical to a string quartet that Distler wrote in Stuttgart. The arrangement of a string quart for the piano contrasts with his ideas that the organ must have music that is specifically written for it, not arrangements of string or orchestral pieces. Distler does feel that choral pieces are acceptable to be played on the organ as shown through his use of Balthasar Resinarius’s choral setting as the theme for the *Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland* variations. From the writing in these piano pieces, it is evident that Distler does not dislike composing for the piano, but finds that the organ has a higher theological and sacred purpose than the piano.

11. Musical Analysis of Major Organ Works

Nun komm der Heiden Heiland (1932)

The first work I will look at is the Orgelpartita on *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland* which was Distler's first published organ work. It premiered during the Vespers at St. Jacobi. In keeping with his belief that choral composition should avoid the "tyranny of the bar line," the work is un-measured. *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, unlike his other works, is inspired more directly by past models, especially the Chorale Variations which resemble several Baroque partitas familiar to Distler. Distler's Chorale Variations are similar to Bach's *Sei gegrüßet* BWV 768, in that both use similar variation techniques such as a chorale harmonization, bicinium as the second movement, and chorale fantasia (*Sei gegrüßet* BWV 768, variation 11).

The contrapuntal and rhythmic language, however, is very much in accordance with his mature style in later organ works. Distler first performed *Nun komm* during the Vespers at St. Jacobi in 1932. He played it often in concerts and Vesper services and taught it to students. When he played *Nun komm* in a concert of sacred and secular music, he specified the partita as a "sacred work."

Nun komm is more a suite than a chorale partita in the Baroque sense. The four movements Toccata, Choral Variations, Chaconne, and Toccata refer to the form of the *Nun komm* chorale tune ABCA.

In an interview, Jan Bender (1909-1994), a former Distler student, states that Distler changed his mind about ending *Nun komm* with an exact repetition of the Toccata. (Bates 1) With the Toccata removed, the piece is more closely related to Op 8. No 2 *Wachet auf Ruft uns die Stimme* (1935), which has three movements.

The opening Toccata has a unique element of medieval vocal composition: Organum.

The passage with the parallel fourths in the soprano and alto is comparable to a passage in *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* which was written while Distler was in Lübeck.



Fig. 8 Organum *Nun komm*, Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck. (above)
Organum *Singet dem Herrn*, m.51-55. BA 6483. (below)

Both works feature the inclusion of organum, parallel fourths or its inversion, parallel fifths, in a melisma fashion. These parallels are reminiscent of the works of Pérotin and other early composers that were included in Besseler's book *Die Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (1931). I believe there is an otherworldly quality in this writing. Distler wrote in his book on harmony *Funktionelle Harmonielehre*, written in 1941 and published in 1964, that the inclusion of organum creates an affect of antiquity as discussed in the section on the Jugendbewegung in Part I, Chapter 7.

The theme of the Chorale Variations (Fig. 9) is a direct transcription of a four-part vocal piece by Balthasar Resinarius (1483-1544). This vocal piece was performed in its choral version during the Vespers before *Nun komm* was premiered. The inclusion of such an early vocal work strengthens the ancient aesthetic the work is trying to emulate. This four-part harmonization

would later influence Distler's own harmonization of chorales for the organ from his miscellaneous chorale works.



Fig. 9 Distler Transcription for Organ. Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck. (above)
Original Resinarius Choral Work, m.1-15. *New German Sacred Songs for the Schools*. Breitkopf 1908. (below)

The first variation is a bicinium. According to the Harvard Dictionary of Music, a bicinium is terminology, originating in the 16th century, for a composition in two parts. In the Renaissance and Baroque, bicinia were used to teach singing and counterpoint. Yale scholar Mark Bergaas compared the bicinium from Op. 18 No.1 “Elselein, liebste Elselein” to a two voiced madrigal of the 14th century by composer Giovanni da Cascia. Bessler used the da Cascia piece as an example in his text’s madrigal and organum section. All Distler’s bicinia can be categorized as madrigals.

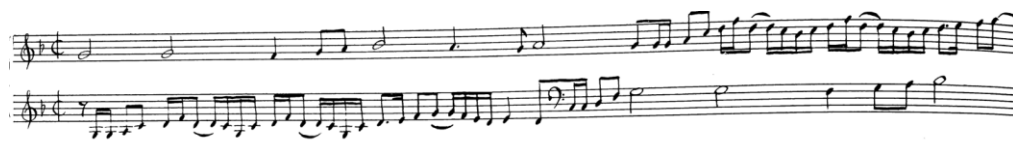


Fig. 10 *Nun komm* Variation 1 (Bicinium). Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck.

In the bicinium, there is usually one voice that uses regular note values while the other fluctuates. This is Bessler's definition of a descant (Bergaas 155). Distler plays with these expectations in the bicinium as the steady voice changes with the cantus firmus alternating between the two voices.

Variation two is a trio with two voices above the cantus in the tenor. The descending figurations are very similar to the ones in *Singet dem Herrn*.

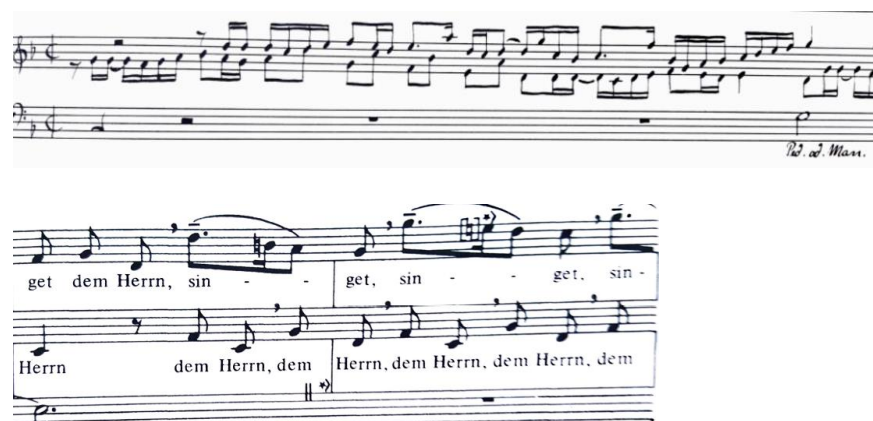


Fig. 11 *Nun komm* Variation 2. Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck. (above)
Singet dem Herrn. m.6-7. BA 6483 (below)

The fourth variation is a demonstration of a hocket. The Oxford Dictionary defines a hocket as “an interruption of a voice-part (usually of two or more parts alternately) by rests, so as to produce a broken or spasmodic effect; used as a contrapuntal device.” The hocket, then, is a single melody line that is broken up by multiple voices. This was a technique used predominately by medieval composers of the 13th century Notre Dame School.





Fig. 12 Hockets in *Nun komm* Variation 4. Facsimile. Distler Archiv, Lübeck (above)
Hockets between the top two voices of Machaut. *Sanctus Messe de*
Notre Dame. m.76-78. (below)

The hocket in Variation four is a setting for four voices. The lowest voice is the cantus firmus; the second voice is the upper notes in the lower staff. The third voice is the lower part in the upper staff and the fourth is the upper part of the upper staff.

Variation six is a four-part texture with two voices floating above the cantus in canon in the tenor and bass. The use of free motivic voices above an augmented lower voice in canon is similar to Guillaume Dufay's *Nuper Rosarum Flores*. The works of Dufay were rediscovered and promoted during Distler's time in the conservatory and were featured prominently in Bessler's research from 1931. With renewed interest in Dufay and Distler's fascination with music from the medieval period, it is very possible that *Nuper Rosarum* served as an inspiration for variation six.



The image displays two systems of a musical score for 'Nun komm Variation 6'. Each system consists of five staves. The top staff (I) is a vocal line with lyrics: '- a Cru - ci - a - tus et me -'. The second staff (II) is another vocal line with lyrics: 'tu - a - Cru - ci - a - tus et'. The third staff (T.) is a vocal line with lyrics: '- ta be - ne - fi - ci - a'. The fourth staff (B.) is a vocal line with lyrics: 'be - ne - fi - ci - a'. The bottom staff (B.) is a bass line with lyrics: 'ri - bi - lis' and 'est'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

Fig. 13 *Nun komm* Variation 6. Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck. (above)
 Dufay. *Nuper Rosarum Flores*. m.129-132. (below)

The third, fifth, and seventh variations are connected to the motet intabulations and chorale fantasias of the North German School. These variations feature a solo voice above a multi-voice choral harmonization of the tune.

The image displays two systems of a musical score for 'Nun komm Variation 3'. Each system consists of three staves. The top staff is a solo voice line. The middle and bottom staves are a choral harmonization. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines. The second system includes a slur over the choral part and the word 'zügern' above the solo part.

Fig. 14 Solo over choral setting, *Nun komm* Variation 3. Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck. (above)
 Solo over choral setting showing slurring, *Nun komm* Variation 3. BA 9231 (below)



Fig. 15 Solo over choral setting, *Nun komm* Variation 5. Facsimile.
Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck.



Fig. 16 Solo over choral setting, *Nun komm* Variation 7. Facsimile.
Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck.

The overlapping voices in variations three and five suggest that Distler is thinking of the independent voices and not a keyboard texture, similar to the overlapping in *Es ist das Heil*. The use of slurring in variation 3 is an example of Distler using different meters within the texture. (Fig 14. below)

Variation 7 is most similar to the motet intabulations with a line above the choral setting which resembles a zink. As previously stated, a zink was used to compliment voices in vocal motets and had a vocal quality of its own.

The lower choral parts can be set to texts. Below is an example of the text of the English version. Distler has repeated notes to create the declamatory effect that appears in his works and the and vocal polyphonic works by Palestrina, De Lassus and Schütz.

The image shows a musical score for three voices: Soprano, Alto, and Bass. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "By - the Spi - rit - of our God." for Soprano and Alto, and "By the Spi-rit of our God." for Bass. The Soprano part begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, Bb4, and C5. The Alto part begins with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, Bb3, and C4. The Bass part begins with a half note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, Bb2, and C3. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span multiple notes.

Fig. 17 English text set to *Nun komm* Variation 5. Text set by J. Embry.

As in these three variations, Distler also has solo voice lines above a choral harmonization of a tune in his choral works. The best example of this technique is demonstrated in the third variation of *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*, from Op.10 which has a poetic reason for the voice above the choir. The *Weihnachtsgeschichte* is the telling of the Christmas story through solo plainchant and choral responses which are variations on *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*. At the third variation's point in the work, the Angel Gabriel is telling Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God, and Mary responds with the Magnificat. After a few measures of Mary singing alone, Distler sets the Magnificat above a four-part choral texture resembling variations three, five and seven in *Nun komm*, especially variation five, whose solo part starts before the choir joins in a natural manner.

The image shows a musical score for a choral and solo setting. The top part features a piano introduction with the lyrics: "Geist freut sich, freut sich Got - tes, mei - nes Hei - lands, denn er hat". Below this is a choral section for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, with the tempo marking "Chor: ♩=100" and the instruction "Choral, stets sehr zurückhaltend" and "ruhig". The lyrics for the chorus are: "Wir bit - ten dich von Her - zen, du ed - le Kö - ni - gin, durch dei - nes Soh - nes". The bottom part of the score shows a solo line with the lyrics: "die Nie - drig - keit sei - ner Magd an - ge - hen, Sie he, von nun an". The solo line is written in modern notation with slurs and ornaments, and the lyrics continue: "die Nie - drig - keit sei - ner Magd an - ge - hen, Sie he, von nun an".

Fig. 18 Solo over choral setting. *Es ist ein Ros* Variation 3. m.5-15. BA 690.

The third variation of *Es ist ein Ros* provides insight into how to perform Distler's organ music, especially works with ornamented solos. The solo part is written in modern notation with modern plainchant notation above to create the free-flowing rhythm. The use of slurs is also revealing as, in his modern notation pieces, the slurs only cover single syllables that are in melismas or single words that are broken up. The practice of performing these slurs in plainchant is not legato as the notes would become heavy and unclear. They would be performed in a *leggiero*, or graceful articulation. The realization that the solo lines should be performed as plainchant adds new insight into the interpretation of the solo lines in the organ works. The ideal touch for these lines should be one that results in a similar attack that a singer would have when

performing chant; flowing and light. When these variations are viewed as a soloist above a choir, one can draw new insights into interpretation. In the Magnificat variation, the solo is not more important than the rest of the choir: they blend as well as interact; this approach can be applied to all of the variations in *Nun komm*. To summarize the performance approach to the ornamented solos in *Nun komm*: organists should strive for a flowing solo with articulation on the notes without slurs and a leggiero touch within the slurs. The same touch applies to the lower choir parts, with the added challenge of creating perfect independence of the voices as though they were individual sections of a choir. While his movements are reminiscent of the chorale fantasias of the North German School, Distler demonstrated the influence of his choral writing with more intricate lower voices, especially with respect to free rhythm and a free modal counterpoint.

The Chaconne also has vocal characteristics. While studying composition in Leipzig, Distler wrote a four- part chaconne. In a 1928 letter to his friend Inge Hensen, he discussed the freedom in the piece.

“I have been extremely free: there are scales of fifths, fourths, sevenths, and seconds, and no voice concerns itself especially much with the others. It is approximately as though a pair of friends were to walk around the Nuremberg Ring, one to the left and the other over the Plaürrer. After a certain time they do meet, according as the other walks faster or slower. Naturally there are often delightful rendezvous” (Bergaas 7).

His description of how the voices interact with each other would be a philosophy that he would carry with him the rest of his life. The individual voices carry out their own mission, but interact and pass each other ultimately coming together in a cadence. This personal perspective is present in all of Distler’s organ and choral works.

The Chaconne in *Nun komm* demonstrates this viewpoint. The opening figure is very vocal and lyrical, similar to Distler’s pentatonic plainchants from *Weihnachtsgeschichte*. The declamatory repeated notes and motifs passing through the voices in variations eight and nine are

reminiscent of the choral work *Das ist wahr*, and is a common technique used by Distler in his choral works.



Fig. 19 Opening Figure. *Nun komm* Chaconne. Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck. (above)
Solo from *Weihnachtsgeschichte*. BA 690. (below)

Variation 12 is an interesting example of the chorale fantasia texture. The choral texture of the upper three voices is paired with a solo in the bass in the style of the solos in the motet intabulations and chorale fantasias. In the North German chorale fantasias there are examples of a running bass as the solo. Examples of this are present in Scheidemann's *Magnificat on the VI tone*, Second Verset and part of Weckmann's *Es ist das Heil's* Sixth Verse. In these earlier examples, the bass is in the hand, while Distler's bass is in the pedal.



Fig. 20 Chorale Fantasia Texture. *Nun komm* Variation 12. Facsimile. Hugo Distler Archiv, Lübeck.

As is typical in many of Distler's choral works, the end of the chaconne has a section of overlapping ostinatos to increase the energy of the passage before entering the cadence.



Fig. 21 Ending. *Nun komm Chaconne*. BA 9231.

This Chaconne was one of Distler's favorite works, for good reason. Unlike the Chorale Variations which were more connected to their past models, the Chaconne marks the merger of past models and Distler's unique voice to create music that would last beyond "the merely modern into the realm of eternity" (Distler Preface to *Wachet auf* Op.8 No. 2).

***Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (1935)**

Distler's voice is especially clear in the second of the two large organ partitas, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*. This work contains three movements that can be played separately or as a cycle.

The first movement marked Toccata is, in fact, a multi-sectioned motet. The rising figures in canon is an example of a vocal technique expanded upon to create an otherworldly effect.



Fig. 22 Rising Figures. *Wachet auf*. m.1-2. BA 9231.

The figuration is reminiscent of plainchant, to which Distler's vocal music is indebted. The following usage of interlocking cells is also a characteristic that is prevalent in Distler's choral music, but infrequent in the piano works.



Fig. 23 Interlocking Motifs. *Wachet auf*. m. 9-10. BA9231.

The inclusion of two hymn-like sections with ornamentation is also a technique that is used within some of the motets from Op. 12. The inclusion of these choral harmonizations reinforces Distler's idea that the future of German music is in the Chorale.

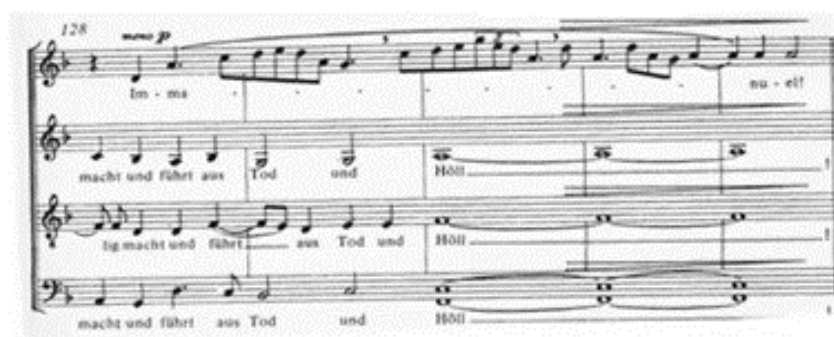


Fig. 24 Hymn-like setting with ornamentation. *Wachet auf*. m.49-51. BA9231. (above)
Hymn *Singet frisch und Wohlgemut*. m. 128-132. BA 6483. (below)

Between the sections, there is a passage where the bass and the tenor sing in octaves. This passage is used identically to a similar passage in *Singet dem Herrn*. The use of parallel octaves

is one of the intervals that Distler discusses as part of the important elements of the Notre Dame Polyphony school.



Fig. 25 Bass and Tenor in Octaves. *Wachet auf*. m.34-39. BA 9231. (above)
Excerpt. *Singet dem Herrn*. m.1-3. BA 6483. (below)

Unlike *Nun komm* this work has bar lines. Performers had difficulties with *Nun komm*, so Distler added bar lines to help with organization. These bar lines should be used to organize the motifs and cells, not necessarily to highlight the strong beats. Many of the motivic cells cross over the bar lines as though they were not there. A common element of Distler's style is that each voice has its own meter since he believed that the voices should be completely independent as he described in the analogy of people walking and crossing paths. The motifs crossing over the bar line is a sign that the voice is completely independent. This is especially clear in the Bicinium and Fugue.

The Bicinium of *Wachet auf* is more complex rhythmically, displaying Distler's own creativity, than the bicinium of *Nun komm* which closely resembles models from the Renaissance and Baroque. As mentioned in the section on *Nun komm*, Distler uses bicinia often within his choral works. In *Singet frisch und wohlgemut*, Distler has a bicinium as the second part of the motet. In the second part of his motet on *Wachet auf*, he has a bicinium with two soloists set

above a choral setting. The Bicinium is an opportunity for Distler to use highly complicated rhythms and meter changes since there are only two voices to be concerned about.

42
glei - chem Mund, mit glei - chem Mund und hof -
chem, mit glei - chem, mit glei - chem

46
Etwas verzögern Ruhiger (♩ = 112 - 116)
fen frei, daß ihm un - ser Dienst ein Wohl -
Mund und hof - fen frei, daß ihm un - ser Dienst, un - ser

Fig. 26 Bicinium. *Wachet auf*. m. 5-7. BA 9231. (above)
Bicinium. *Singet Frisch*. m. 42-49. BA 6483. (below)

The Fugue of *Wachet auf* is also a vocal motet with multiple points of imitation. The Fugue is unique in its treatment of the cantus firmus.

56
alles RP
Ped. -

68
Im Hauptzeitmaß BW 2
mf

76
Im Hauptzeitmaß BW 2
mf

Fig. 27 Cantus Firmus and Interlocking Motifs. *Wachet auf*. m.68-84. BA 9231.

This piece has highly complicated interlocking motifs that find order in the cantus firmus of the tune in a manner similar to the chorus opening movements of Bach's cantatas such as *Schmücke dich* BWV 180 and the opening of *St Matthew's Passion* with which Distler was very familiar.

The Fugue of *Wachet auf* is uncomfortable to play in several places due to voice crossing. I believe that Distler intentionally wrote in a manner unidiomatic for the organ in order to have complete independence of the voices which was often found in early vocal polyphony. There are frequent voice crossings and collisions (e.g., measures 90 through 109, Fig. 28) that require creative fingerings to maintain the independent nature of the lines. The collisions often result in turning an eighth-note into two sixteenth-notes creating an unnatural sensation in playing but effective in the audible result when executed correctly. This type of writing is better suited for choral music as there are individual sections performing the lines, not a single hand. This method is not unique to Distler; Weckmann utilizes collisions and crossings throughout *Es ist das Heil* for the same purpose of creating truly independent voices.



Fig. 28 Collisions and Voice Crossings. *Wachet auf*. m.90-93. BA 9231.



Fig. 29 Repeated Notes. *Wachet auf*. m.151-152. BA 9231. (above)
Repeated Notes. *Singet dem Herrn*. m.46-49. BA 6483. (below)

The ending trumpet call after the proper fugue resembles the “Singet, Singet” from *Singet dem Herrn*. Intensity builds up through repeated notes followed by a flurry. The flurry is disrupted by another incident of an embellished harmonization.



Fig. 30 Hymn-like setting with Ornamentation. *Wachet auf*. m.170-171. BA 9231.

The work concludes with an extended passage of parallel motion, a common ending for Distler’s vocal works.



Fig. 31 Repeated Parallels. *Wachet auf*. m. 177-180. BA 9231.

Distler felt that the German chorale would be the future of new music. This can be seen in the chorale based themes of most of his sacred works. The only sacred works that do not have a chorale based theme are the two works written while he was in Stuttgart: *Dreissig Spielstücke* and his last organ work *Orgelsonate* (Trio).

***Dreissig Spielstücke* (1938) and *Orgelsonate* (Trio) (1939)**

In Stuttgart, he greatly missed both having a church position and the Stellwagen organ. To remain proficient with the organ, and inspired by the possibilities of the organ and how it could improve the home life of families, Distler had a small house organ built by Paul Oot. The interest in returning the organ to the home is in line with Distler's discussion on the nature of the organ in "The Organ of Our Time".

"The heyday of organ-building fell into that archaic age of Western musical culture, since secular music still possessed the chastity of the cultic, and the "musica sacra" the serenity of profane music; the type of "house" or "chamber" organ of that time (an example: the house organ in the St. Annen-Museum in Lübeck) is therefore completely the same as that of the church organ."

In the same article, Distler writes about the new house organ, i.e. mechanical instrument that is built within the historic model:

"Finally, the organ as a new house instrument in the structure of the great reconstruction of our musical forms of increased importance, since it was still the purpose and task of all

domestic and sociable music making, at least should have been to increase everyday life, to make him [organ] more relatable, let him sanctify it in the true sense.”

Distler’s statement reflects his belief in the organ’s absolute sacred properties and suggests that music made for the home can still have sacred properties. This is consistent with his statement regarding choral music’s positive influence on non-church music in the 17th century.

Distler wrote Op 18 No.1 *Dreissig Spielstücke* and *Orgelsonate* Op 18 No.2 to encourage installation of house organs for communal music in the home. The pieces are secular in their appearance; however, they subtly incorporated Distler’s belief in the organ as a sacred instrument. The most compelling evidence is present in the epilogue to Op.18 where Distler suggests that the organ with its presence helps “sanctify” the home.

The forms of the pieces of the *Dreißig Spielstücke* are mostly secular in their conception: sonatina, toccata and fugetto, pastorella, etc. However, the writing styles within these secular forms mirror the writing style in the sacred organ works more than secular piano works. These secular pieces also have some elements of Distler’s choral works.

Within the collection, there are three small partitas. The first two are based on folksongs while the third partita is set to a chorale. The tune Distler uses is *Wo Gott zum Haus nicht gibt sein Gunst*. This tune’s first stanza is “If God does not give his blessing to the house, then everyone works for naught.” This chorale emphasizes the importance of God in the home and the best way to acknowledge His presence is by the sacred organ, playing sacred music in the home. As in his organ partita *Nun komm*, Distler uses a preexisting choral setting, by Hans Leo Hassler, as the theme. Coincidentally, Scheidemann composed an organ intabulation of Hans-Leo Hassler’s motet *Alleluja, Laudem Dicte Nostro*.

The *Dreißig Spielstücke* was marketed for small house organs or other keyboard instruments, but Distler stated in the epilogue that the purpose was for the “re-institution of the organ as a household instrument.”

While the *Dreissig Spielstücke* has a direct sacred connection by the inclusion of a chorale partita, the *Orgelsonate* contains indirect ones which are not as obvious. Distler’s viewpoint in these last quotes regarding the house organ is the final brace to solidify Distler’s perception of the function of the organ. All the mystical ideas that Distler had about the organ and its role in the liturgy apply to this instrument in the home. He claimed an organ will always be a sacred instrument. These feelings are confirmed in the *Orgelsonate* (Trio), a sacred motet with three voices, that is in the guise of a secular trio. Because of the anti-church musician attitude in Stuttgart, Distler did not write any sacred music while there. However, knowing how Distler viewed the organ and its absolute sacred properties, one sees a connection between the secular genre of the organ trio and the sacred vocal art in his last work for his beloved instrument.



Fig. 32 Distler’s House Organ built by Paul Oot, 1938. BA 9233. XVII.

In this study I will be focusing primarily on the third movement of the *Orgelsonate*, since the first two contain most of the same elements that have been previously discussed. However, I will draw attention to two details in the first movement. The first detail is some interesting information that Distler provides about trills. There is a written-out trill in triplet rhythm from measure 28 to 33 which Distler calls purely a suggestion. The written implication of the straight triplet trill is a possible reference to melisma instead of a trill. It is strange that he does not do this anywhere else in the organ works. There are trills in *Wachet auf* and *Nun komm* that are not written out. In his choral works there are instances of written out trills with the desired effect of a melisma; one can interpret this trill in the same way as a melisma. There is also an instance within this *Trio* movement of declamatory repeated notes as previously discussed.



Fig. 33 Declamatory Repeated Notes. *Orgelsonate*. Mvt.1, m.46-50. BA 9233.

The third movement of the *Orgelsonate* has strong vocal qualities mixed with idiomatic keyboard passagework.



Fig. 34 Bass Function. *Orgelsonate*. Mvt. 3, m.7-20. BA 9233.

The most important vocal aspect of this piece is the purely melodic function of the bass. Through all three movements, the bass voice is treated as an independent melodic voice instead of a solely harmonic function usually found in an instrumentally inspired trio for organ. Examples are the Bach *Trio Sonatas*.



Fig. 35 Bach. Bass Function. *C minor Trio Sonata*, BWV 526. Mvt. 1, m.1-6. Breitkopf. 1867.

This is also true in the choral works, as stated in Distler's description of the true independence of the voices as people passing each other, while still contributing to society as a collective. It should be clarified that the bass does create some harmonic function; however, I believe this function is a result of the independent voices, not the purpose of the bass.

The first point of imitation has duets between the upper voice and the bass interacting. These duets are similar to ones that de Lassus wrote for three voices and the ones present in Distler's SAB pieces from Op. 5.





Fig. 36 Interacting Voices. *Orgelsonate*. Mvt. 3, m.31-39. (above) m.50-57. (below) BA 9233.

This section also has the same three note figuration with identical slurring that appears in *Singet*.



Fig. 37 Common Slurring. *Orgelsonate*. m.23-26. BA 9233. (above)
Singet. m.8-11. BA 6483. (below)

The repeated notes and solo in the second interior section can be viewed in the same manner as the repeated notes in *Singet* and *Das ist wahr*.

The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt, labeled 'Zeitmaß nur wenig ruhiger', shows a melodic line with repeated notes and a pedal point. The bottom excerpt shows a vocal line with repeated notes and a pedal point. Both excerpts are in G major and 3/4 time.

Zeitmaß nur wenig ruhiger

**)

Pedal: ohne 16' (und 8')

ist mir Barm - her - zig - keit wi - der - fah - ren, auf daß an

ist mir Barm - her - zig - keit wi - der - fah - ren, auf daß an

keit wi - der - fah - ren, auf daß an

ist mir Barm - her - zig - keit wi - der - fah - ren, auf daß an

Fig. 38 Repeated Notes. *Orgelsonate*. m.83-96. BA 9233. (above)
Repeated Notes. *Das ist Wahr*. m.64-68. BA 6483. (below)

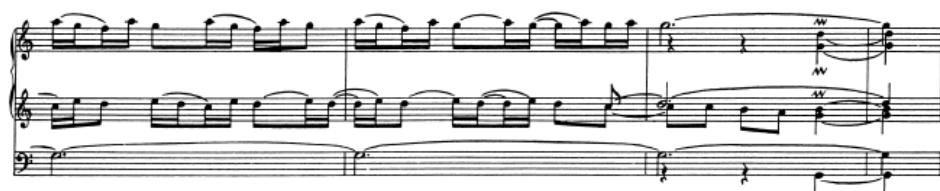
They are repeated words that declare the text with an ornamented melody in the soprano mirroring the ornamented hymns.

In the transitional section that returns to the rondo theme there is an extended passage of parallel octaves between the alto and the bass. This resembles the several passages that we have seen earlier. The use of such an extended passage in parallels is unusual for a chamber music ensemble, but as, previously discussed, the choral works consistently make use of these parallels. The second transition section to the rondo theme implements a hocket in a similar manner to the hocket in *Nun komm*. Distler's decision to have the passage played on a single sound (both hands on the same manual) is a curious one. This is very unorthodox in a trio. When performed as written with one voice taking the top stave and the second taking the lower, a three voice hocket is formed (S A A 2), similar to the hocket from variation four of *Nun komm*.



Fig. 39 Hocket. *Orgelsonate*. m.118-121. BA 9233.

Within the trio there is a plethora of divisi, the division of a single voice into multiple voices, which occur primarily in either the alto or soprano. It would be uncharacteristic of a Baroque trio, especially an organ trio, to have divisi within the voices. In the Bach *Trio in c minor*, there is an instance of a divisi in the form of a double stop, which is idiomatic to string writing, an influence on Bach's organ trios. The divisi within the voices in the Distler *Trio* is more akin to the divisi within a choral piece, as it would be unidiomatic to perform on a stringed instrument. There are instances of sustained notes in the upper part of the divisi that stringed instruments could not play while playing the lower part of the divisi. This is apparent in measures 11 – 18 (Fig. 34) as well as at the end of the movement (Fig. 40). Distler also uses divisi within his three-voice pieces in *Der Jahrkreis* op 5. (e.g., *Jesus Christus unser Heiland*). The writing in these pieces is very closely related to the *Orgelsonate*.



half_ er uns_ aus der Höl - - - len Pein._

half_ er uns_ aus der Höl - - - len Pein._

Fig. 40 Divisi. *Orgelsonate*. m.209-212. BA 9233. (above)
 Divisi. *Jesus Christus*. m.13-19. BA 676. (below)

The final section of the third movement is a chaconne with the theme of the first point of imitation as the ostinato.

keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in

keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E -

Preis, sei Eh - re und Preis, sei Eh - re

sei Eh - re und Preis, sei Eh - re und

E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig -

- wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig - keit, in E - wig -

und Preis, sei Eh - re und Preis, sei Eh - re

Preis, sei Eh - re und Preis, sei Eh - re

BA 6483

Fig. 41 Interlocking Cells. *Orgelsonate*. m.206-212. BA 9233. (above)
 Interlocking Cells. *Das ist wahr* m.204-217. BA 6483. (below)

The final flourish uses interlocking patterns above a pedal point. This ending mirrors many of Distler's lively motets in its execution as shown in *Das ist wahr* as well as in the organ chaconne from *Nun komm*. The combined vocal elements that Distler presents in the *Orgelsonate* leads me to believe that he was thinking of a choir instead of a chamber music ensemble.

The early vocal composition techniques that are present in *Dreissig Spielstücke* and *Orgelsonate* are the same techniques that are present within the chorale-based organ works and choral works that form Distler's compositional language for sacred music. This common language combined with his opinion of the true nature of the organ and its sacred mission leads me to believe that, despite the Third Reich's discouragement of writing sacred music, these works labeled secular share the same intention as his sacred works.

12. Other Organ Pieces

Other solo works that Distler published for organ in the collection *Kleine Orgelchoralbearbeitungen* Op 8 No. 3 can be viewed as examples of mostly improvisations on chorales. There are two interesting pieces from this collection. One is the small choral partita on *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns den Gotteszorn wandt* (1933) which is not an improvisation but clearly composed as shown by its complexity. This small piece provided a simpler bicinium and imitative polyphonic movement that would contribute to the more complicated bicinium and fugue of *Wachet auf*. The first movement of *Jesus Christus unser Heiland* is a harmonization of the Luther hymn tune, in a polyphonic choral setting, mirroring the choral settings from Op 5. What makes this a choral inspired piece is the interaction of multiple voices with the tune in the tenor. This type of setting with free voices around the cantus

in the tenor is identical to Balthasar Resinarius's setting of *Nun komm* that Distler uses. The following bicinium shares the same vocal qualities that *Wachet auf* does with Distler's choral music, but it is rhythmically simpler.

Distler's choice of identifying the third movement a *ricercar* is a reference to an earlier polyphonic form. In the North German School, including a choral *ricercar* in the Magnificat cycles was common. The choral *ricercars* resembled motets. The *ricercar* as a genre was viewed as a study piece with no clear distinction as an instrumental or choral piece. The multi-section *ricercar* contains several similarities to the fugue of *Wachet auf*, however *Jesus Christus* has greater contrast in tempo and thematic material in the sections. *Wachet auf*'s development is more gradual and the different sections flow together more regularly due to the common ideas within them and the dovetailing of sections. The points of imitation in *Jesus Christus* are very distinct and present new ideas and new tempos, closer to Distler's vocal motets which feature tempo changes signaling new sections (e.g., *Singet dem Herrn*).

Wie Schön Leuchtet der Morgenstern uses three chorales: the tenor uses *Wie schön*, the soprano uses *Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele* and the bass uses *Wachet auf*. The combination of different chorales and texts was a method of composition found in the Medieval period. The other miscellaneous choral harmonizations and preludes also have qualities similar to Distler's choral music that have been present in that previous works discussed.

An unpublished work that strengthens the argument for the choral connection, is the *orgelpartita* on *Jesus Christus unser Heiland* (Version 1) The first version of this piece was almost finished but abandoned for the current version of *Jesus Christus unser Heiland*. The first version had chorale variations more similar to *Nun komm* than to *Wachet Auf* and a completely

different *ricercar*. The unused *ricercar* closely resembles the chorale *ricercars* of Scheidemann or Praetorius with large note values played in a flowing lyrical manner.

12

Mäßig rasche ♩

Rückpositiv: Gedackt 8; Quintatön 8; Prinzipal 4; Oktave 2; Scharf 4 fach

marcato

Regal 2;
Bordun 4;
Dulzian 8;
Gedacktpommer 8;
Subbaß 16;
Rauschpfeife 4 fach

Fig. 42 Ricercar. *Jesus Christus* Op. 8 No. 3. m.1-8. BA 9232

13. Transcriptions of Choral Works

To further connect the organ music to the choral music, I transcribed three choral pieces and arranged them for the organ. In this process I did not alter any notes or markings. These transcriptions can be viewed more as a reduction of the choral works, similar to the reductions that are commonly present in modern editions of Renaissance vocal polyphony. The choral pieces I transcribed were *Singet dem Herrn*, the partita on *Es ist ein Ros* from, *Weihnachtsgeschichte* and the final verse of the *Totentanz*. To create the registrations for these works, I followed the models that Distler presents in his organ works as well as his description of choral dynamics. In this passage from Distler's article on the Bach Dorian Fugue he writes of the idea of terraced dynamics in choral and organ music.

“The dynamic design is not achieved by modifying the sound as such, but rather by tonally juxtaposing larger groups of form; Organ dynamics are thus more generous than

that of any other instrument. It becomes effective only in the long term, but provided the organ has the necessary breadth of formal design, the more magnificently, the dynamic of the organ the peculiarity of the formal structure.”

Like choral music of the 17th century the organ’s dynamic changes are intended to show formal points. This is present within the fugue of *Wachet auf*. Each new section has a different Werk Prinzept registration. He never adds stops during a section. Terrace dynamics are also present in the vocal works. In *Singet dem Herrn* the dynamics do not fluctuate within each section; however, they change drastically between sections. Since the formal design is similar to the Toccata and Fugue of *Wachet auf*, my registration for *Singet* was based on the North German Werk Prinzept.

The image shows a musical score for the organ and pedals. The Organ part is in treble and bass clef, and the Pedals part is in bass clef. The tempo is 'Rasch, doch nicht hastig.' and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into three sections: 'Verbreiten.....' and 'Zeitmaß'. The Organ part has a registration of 'II'. The Pedals part has a registration of '3'. The Organ part has a registration of 'II'.

Fig. 43 *Singet dem Herrn*. m.1-9. Transcribed J. Embry, 2018.

The registrations for *Es ist ein Ros* were drawn from the registration that Distler presents in the choral variations of *Nun komm*. Most of the registrations for *Nun komm* were based on 8ft pitch, with the one exception being the sixth variation with the tune in the bass. This modification was informed by the sixth variation in *Nun komm*'s 16ft based pedal. The registration for the fourth variation was inspired by the registration of variation 3 of *Nun komm* using an 8ft reed as the tenor. The most interesting and unique variation to set was the third one,

as it required playing a four-part texture under a solo. Two options presented themselves in setting this variation for organ. The first was playing the four parts in the hands and the solo on a 2ft in the pedal. The second was playing the solo in the right hand, soprano and alto in the left hand and the tenor and bass in the pedal. The second choice was preferable to me since I wanted to have a distinct sound for the solo, one that was not overbearing but distinct. Using the pedal to play two voices is within the tradition of the North German School as demonstrated by Arnolt Schlick (1455-1525) and Matthias Weckmann. Both composers wrote vocally inspired works that feature double pedal (e.g., Schlick's *Salve Regina* Fourth Part and Weckmann's *Es ist das Heil* Verses 6 and 7).

The image displays two musical staves for organ. The top staff, labeled 'Org.' and 'Ped.', shows measures 6-10 of 'Es ist ein Ros Variation 3'. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 4/4. The right hand (soprano) plays a melodic line, while the left hand (soprano and alto) and the pedal (tenor and bass) play a four-part texture. The bottom staff, also labeled 'Org.' and 'Ped.', shows measures 16-18 of 'Es ist ein Ros Variation 6'. The key signature is D major and the time signature is 4/4. The right hand (soprano) plays a melodic line, while the left hand (soprano and alto) and the pedal (tenor and bass) play a four-part texture.

Fig. 44 *Es ist ein Ros* Variation 3, m.6-10. Trans. by J. Embry, 2018. (above)
Es ist ein Ros Variation 6, m. 16-18. Trans. by J. Embry, 2018. (below)

The registration for *Totentanz* was inspired by hymn playing practices which are intended to compliment the voices. The registration change in the middle section was done to enhance the urgency that is created by the sudden tempo change.

Schwer daherschreitende Viertel
♩=72

II

11

Bedeutend rascher
♩=120

I

+I/Ped

Fig. 45 *Totentanz*, “Die Seele, weil sie ist geboren zur Ewigkeit”, m.1-5 and m. 11-15. Trans. by J. Embry, 2018.

Playing the transcriptions feels very similar to playing the organ works. At first I thought that the level of difficulty in the independence of the voices would be greater in the choral works. This turned out not to be the case. Of all the pieces I studied, the one I found most difficult to play was the Fugue from the *Wachet auf* partita. Distler’s organ works were not written to be simpler for the organist to manage multiple independent voices. In the organ and choral pieces I studied, the complexity of the counterpoint was a consistent representation of Distler’s complex, intricate style. The only extra technical challenge that was added by the choral works was the key. Some of the parallel fifths in *Singet* were awkward when they appeared in E major. Since the vocal works were never intended to be played on the organ, this was not unexpected. What was unexpected was how comfortable the vast majority of the works felt on the organ. This

adaptability of the works to organ with his writing on the similarities of the organ and choral works strengthens my belief that he viewed the two media as connected. As I stated in the section on *Nun komm*, when I arranged some of the organ works to choir pieces, the text of *Nun komm* fit very naturally and the parts fit comfortably in the range of the three corresponding vocal parts.

These experiments support the evidence I found in the historical and primary sources of Distler's writings on the organ as well as the evidence presented in the analysis of the organ works. With all three conclusions combined, I believe that Distler did indeed view the organ and the choir as the same canvas for his sacred compositions.

14. Conclusion

The music of Hugo Distler would not exist if it were not for the climate in Germany with the Liturgischebewegung, Orgelbewegung, Singbewegung, and Confessing Church. Distler's philosophy took shape from the influence of these movements and his beliefs as a devout Christian. It was difficult for him to hold these beliefs when the Nazi party, which he felt might have had shared goals, instead, appropriated the sacred values of the Lutheran church and corrupted them. The party's eventual disapproval of the sacred music that Distler loved so dearly and the effect that had on Distler's life in Stuttgart may have played a large role in the composer's suicide.

In his introduction to the recording "Geistliche Chormusik von Hugo Distler," Söhngen stated: "His concern is always with the meaning behind the words, with the spirit and feeling of them which he brings out in his music." This is even more evident in the organ works as he has to abstractly bring out the spiritual meaning of the text without the use of words.

Distler's musical language dematerializes the words in order to liberate the Word, and thereby explain it at the same time. "One can hardly fail to be affected by the forcefulness of his musical preaching" (Söhngen). Is there any better way to preach the Word than through the instrument whose instrumental sound is one of a "high sacral dignity?"

The text of Distler's *Totentanz* perfectly sums up the composer's life and views: "The soul, since it is born for eternity, has no true rest in the matters of this time. Hence it is astonishing that you should love the world so much and concentrate too much on ephemeral matters." Hugo Distler strived to create a new sacred music that would transcend into eternity, by blending different compositional techniques from Medieval and Renaissance vocal traditions with the theology of Luther. It was Distler's hope that this music would become part of the infinite. However, the time he was born into and which shaped his musical outlook would also be the one to cause his untimely end. The politics and cultural shifts no longer allowed him to participate in his passion of sacred music which resulted in despair. Distler was unable to continue his dream to fully realize the role of new sacred music for the organ in the liturgy. By looking at the connection of the organ works to the choral works, it is possible to see the spark of the divine intentions that Distler had for the organ as a sacred instrument.

There are no recordings of Distler playing his own works, but there are several accounts in writing of his performances. All mention how Distler was able to bring something out of his own works that no one else could. It is my belief that Distler was not merely playing the organ and his organ compositions, but conducting his celestial choir.



Fig. 46 Hugo Distler at the Stellwagen Organ. Hugo Distler Archiv, Stadtbibliothek, Lübeck.



Fig. 47 Singing faces painted on the pipes of the Stellwagen Organ
 “Distler’s Celestial Choir” photo by J. Embry, 2018.

Appendix A

Published Organ Works of Hugo Distler

- Op.8/1 Orgelpartita "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" 1932
 I. Toccata
 II. Choral mit Variationen
 III. Chaconne
 IV. Toccata
- Op. 8/2 Orgelpartita "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" 1935
 I. Toccata
 II. Bicinium
 III. Fuge
- Op. 8/3 Kleine Orgelchoral-Bearbeitungen (1930-1938)
 I. Vorspiel und Satz "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" (Epiphanias)
 II. Vorspiel und Satz "Das alte Jahr vergangen ist" (Neujahr)
 III. Partita und Satz "Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns den Gotteszorn wandt" (Passion und Abendmahl)
 IV. Drei Vorspiele und Satz "Christe, du Lamm Gottes" (Passion)
 V. Vorspiel und Satz "Mit Freuden zart" (Ostern)
 VI. Vorspiel und Satz "Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig" (Totensonntag)
 VII. Partita und Satz "Christ, der du bist der helle Tag" (Abend)
- Op 18/1 Dressig Spielstücke für die Kleinorgel (1938)
- Op. 18/2 Orgelsonate (Trio) op. 18/2 (1939)

Appendix B

17th Vesper Program Dec 26 1932

Orgel <i>Präludium, Largo und Fugue C Dur</i>	Bach
Chor “Nun freut euch”	Bened, Ducis
Pastor Eingangswort und Lesung (Introduction and Reading)	
Orgel Vorspiel “In dulci jubilo”	Walther
Chor “In dulci jubilo”	Praetorius
Gemeinde (congregation) Choral vers3	
Chor “Choral” (4 st)	Praetorius
Gemeinde Choral Vers 5	
Chor “Hört zu und seid getrost”	Schröter
Chor “Geborn ist uns Immanuel”	Praetorius
Orgel Vorspiel “Lobt Gott, ihr Christen”	Buxtehude
Gemeinde Choral	
Chor “Choral”	Schröter
Gemeinde Choral Vers 3	
Orgelpartita “Nun komm der Heiden Heiland”	Distler
Pastor Vaterunser und Segen (Lord’s Prayer and Blessing)	
Chor Amen	
Gemeinde Choral “Lobt Gott, ihr Christen”	
Vers “Heut Schleusst Er wieder auf die Tur”	
	Bach

Unter dem Nachtspiel der Orgel verlässt die Gemeinde die Kirche. Kirche geheiz
(After the organ plays, the congregation leaves. Church heated.)

(Hugo Distler Archiv, Stadtbibliothek, Lübeck.)

Appendix C

Stop List for the Stellwagen Organ, St. Jacobi, Lübeck

Hauptwerk:	Principal 16	Brustwerk:	Gedackt 8
	Oktave 8		Quintaton 4
	Oktave 4		Waldflöte 2
	Oktave 2		Zimbel
	Spielpfeife 8		Schalmei 8
	Flöt 8		Regal 8
	Trommet 8		
	Mixtur	Pedal:	Subbass 16
			Spielpfeifenbass 8
Ruckspositive	Gedackt 8		Spielpfeifenbass 4
	Quintaton 8		Posaune 16
	Holhflöte 4		Trommet 8
	Principal 4		Trommet 4
	Oktave 2		
	Scharf		
	Trechregal 8		
	Krummhorn 8		
		Tremulant durch alle Werk	
		2 Sperrventil	
		Manualumfang C, F, Fis, G-c3	
		Pedalumfang C, D(als Obertaste). E, F-d2	
		Schleifladen	
		Mechanische Traktur	

(Distler: New Edition of the Complete Organ Works, Vol. I. Bärenreiter. 2008. XVII.)

Appendix D

Specification of Distler's House Organ

Unterwerk:

Lieblich Gedeckt 8
 Prinzipal 4
 Waldflöte 2
 Nasat 2/2/3
 Zimbel

Oberwerk:

Regal 8
 Gedacktfloete 4
 Prinzipal 2
 Sifflote 1
 Terz 1 3/5
 Quinte 1 1/3

Pedal:

Dulzian 16
 Pommer 8
 Rohrgedackt 4
 Rauschpfeife

Manualkoppel,
 Zwei Pedalkoppeln
 Tremulant
 Mechanische Traktur
 Schleifladen

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