

Thesis of a DLA Dissertation

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Church Music Compositions of the Lübeck Years in  
the Life of Hugo Distler

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## I. Background of the Research

Hugo Distler's life and artistic output are well-known within musicology; nevertheless, due to the historical context, his work was surrounded by numerous misunderstandings until the early 2000s. It is noteworthy that, to date, no substantial study or analytical treatment of Distler and his compositions has been published in Hungarian. One of the most thorough examinations of Distler's sacred music is Ursula von Rauchhaupt's *Die vokale Kirchenmusik von Hugo Distler*, which also draws upon the composer's correspondence to provide valuable insights into the genesis of his works. The centenary of Distler's birth marked a significant turning point in the scholarly reception of his music, revitalising research on his art. In this context, Barbara Distler-Harth's 2008 biography *Hugo Distler – Lebensweg eines Frühvollendeten* has proved an indispensable resource for scholars.

In comparison with earlier publications, the present dissertation differs in its approach and focus. Previous studies have tended either towards excessive biographical detail or narrowly circumscribed analytical investigations, whereas this dissertation examines one of Distler's most formative creative periods,

thereby offering a balanced perspective between these two extremes.

## II. Sources

The study began with Ursula Hermann's biographical work *Rufer und Mahner*, shortly followed by Ursula von Rauchhaupt's *Die vokale Kirchenmusik von Hugo Distler*. While these two works complement one another, both may be supplemented and extended. Barbara Distler-Harth's *Hugo Distler – Lebensweg eines Frühvollendeten* offers a more comprehensive biography than Hermann's volume, whilst various analytical studies provide more detailed insight than Rauchhaupt's work. Among these are Christian Strinning's *Hugo Distlers früher Vokalkontrapunkt*, Friedrich Neumann's *Anmerkungen zum Kompositionsstil von Hugo Distler*, and Wolfgang Thein's *Funktion, Deutung, Verkündigung*.

Within the context of German church music, the historical processes of the period are most fully analysed in Rainer Bayreuther's *Die Situation der deutschen Kirchenmusik um 1933 zwischen Singbewegung und Musikwissenschaft* and Jörg Fischer's *Evangelische Kirchenmusik im Dritten Reich*.

*“Musikalische Erneuerung” und ästhetische Modalität des Faschismus.*

Furthermore, correspondence examined at the Hugo Distler Archive in Lübeck revealed details which have been overlooked or differently interpreted by previous researchers. Manuscripts held at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich offer a more comprehensive view of Distler’s studies and provide additional insights into both published and unfinished works.

### **III. Methodology**

At the outset, I sought to develop a broad understanding of the period, including the social and musical developments that shaped it. I also endeavoured to situate Distler’s work in relation to his contemporaries. Chapter 1 presents these contexts in a concise manner. Chapter 2 relies heavily upon Barbara Distler-Harth’s biography, yet draws primarily upon correspondence from the Lübeck Archive to examine the principal works composed during Distler’s Lübeck period. In parallel, Chapters 3 and 4 provide more detailed analyses and systematically present Distler’s compositional techniques, thereby facilitating a clearer understanding of his works.

## IV. Results

Hugo Distler emerges as one of the most significant composers of twentieth-century German sacred music. This dissertation presents and analyses his principal Lübeck-period works, their historical context, and the characteristics of a new polyphonic vocal style rooted in the traditions of earlier masters. Distler's compositions emphasise the dual purpose he identified in Lutheran worship: proclamation of the Word and worship (*Verkündigung und Anbetung*). He regarded his art as being in the service of the Word, which he perceived as timeless, thus ensuring that his compositions, though produced within a brief life, occupy a distinct and vivid place in music history. The originality of this dissertation lies not only in its status as the first Hungarian-language study of Distler, but also in its dual focus: presenting the wider movements of German church music during his era while situating Distler's art within this historical and musical context.

## **V. Activities Related to the Subject of the Dissertation**

### **2018.04.17. Liszt Academy, Great Hall**

Excerpts from Hugo Distler: Totentanz (op.12/2) performed by the Hungarian Radio Choir.

### **2021.08.16. Doctoral College of the Reformed Church in Hungary**

Lecture entitled Hugo Distler and his church music choral compositions.

### **2021. Evangelical National Collection**

Bivio: Studies from the workshop of the Evangelical National Library 2020.

Study entitled Hugo Distler's church choral works.

### **2022.10.27. Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary Faculty of Pedagogy, Young Researchers' Conference, Budapest**

Lecture entitled Church Music Compositions of the Lübeck Years in the Life of Hugo Distler.

**2022.11.23. The Liszt Academy of Music, Sir Georg Solti Chamber Hall**

Hugo Distler: *Kleine Adventsmusik*, (op. 4) Hungarian premiere. Aliz Szeitl (flute), András Győri (oboe), Anna Gál-Tamási (violin), Péter Turi (organ), Őri Chamber Choir

**2023.10.13. Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary** Faculty of Pedagogy, Nagykőrös, Lecture on *Hugo Distler's efforts to renew German church music* at the conference entitled *Ecclesiastical Art and Responsibility*.

**2023. Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary** Faculty of Pedagogy, Nagykőrös, online publication, *Ecclesiastical Art and Music Pedagogy I*. (ISBN 978-615-6637-17-8) A study entitled *Hugo Distler's efforts to renew German church music*.

**2023.11.14. The Liszt Academy of Music, Sir Georg Solti Chamber Hall**

Performance of Hugo Distler: *In der Welt habt ihr Angst*, (op. 12/7) and *Ich wollt, daß ich daheime wär*, (op. 12/5) with the participation of the Capella Columbae vocal ensemble.

**2023.12.11. Pápa Reformed Theological Academy**, Advent concert featuring several Distler compositions with the participation of the Capella Columbae vocal ensemble.

**2023.12.12. The Liszt Academy of Music, Sir Georg Solti Chamber Hall**

Performance of the chorale arrangements *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* from Hugo Distler's *Die Weihnachtsgeschichte*, (op. 10), opus with the participation of the Capella Columbae vocal ensemble.

**2024. Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary** Faculty of Pedagogy, Nagyköros, online publication, *Ecclesiastical Art and Music Pedagogy I.* (ISBN 978-615-6637-30-7) A study entitled *The Declamatory Style of Hugo Distler's Church Music Works.*

**2024.11.28. Evangelical National Museum**

Organized by the Luther Association of Hungary and the Evangelical National Museum, a presentation entitled *The Heritage of the Reformation – Hugo Distler's Church Music.*