"Leave All That You Have, That You May Take All:" What Hugo Distler's Totentanz Reveals About His Life and Music

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A Monograph

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The College of Music and Dramatic Arts

by
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ABSTRACT

Hugo Distler (1908-1942) has been described as the most important composer of Protestant Church music in Germany in the early twentieth century—a remarkable epithet given that he was a professional church musician and composer for only about twelve years before his life was abruptly ended with his suicide in 1942. Though he is more well-known in Germany, in the United States public perception of Distler is often limited to two basic “facts:” (1) he is a neo-Baroque composer whose works emulate Heinrich Schütz, and (2) his suicide was an act of resistance against the hated National Socialist regime. This study follows the premise that this may not be an accurate distillation of Hugo Distler’s life and musical style, and Totentanz, opus 12 no. 2 is the primary lens through which this postulation is examined. English-language scholarship on Distler is relatively scant, so German sources are consulted and translations are provided for relevant excerpts, some of which are made available for the first time in English. In addition, a thorough examination of musical, cultural, political, and religious movements during Distler’s life is undertaken in order to fully contextualize Totentanz and allow for informed speculation in some cases. Evidence to support these speculations is presented in the form of letters, articles, testimonies, and perhaps most importantly, musical examples. Historian Frederic Spotts has said, “Half the world believes what the other half invents.”¹ This study attempts to neither invent nor blindly accept the inventions of others, but rather to re-examine the life and music of a complicated but eminently gifted composer who deserves to be more clearly understood.

INTRODUCTION

Hugo Distler (1908-1942) is a fascinating figure in twentieth-century German music. On the surface he appears easy to categorize. He is known primarily for his sacred music output, particularly his choral and organ music. His style was influenced by prevailing reactions to late Romanticism in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century, notably the Orgelbewegung (Organ Reform Movement) and Gebrauchsmusik ("utility music") movement. Frequently described as a neo-Baroque composer, he openly admired the music of German Baroque masters such as Heinrich Schütz, Dietrich Buxtehude, and Johann Sebastian Bach. Biographers are also quick to note the branding of his music as "degenerate" by Nazi propaganda, his repeated attempts to avoid conscription by the Nazi military, and his suicide at the age of thirty-four, two weeks after receiving yet another summons for military service. These details paint the portrait of a deeply religious, acutely sensitive composer whose works emulate the forms and styles of the Baroque era, the heyday of German protestant music.

However, a deeper examination reveals inconsistencies and a shifting portrait of a complex man with a compositional style that defies simple labels. Many of these inconsistencies can be explored through the lens of one of Distler’s more idiosyncratic works, Totentanz, op. 12 no. 2. Distler’s opus 12 is entitled Geistliche Chormusik, named after the collection of sacred German motets by Schütz published in 1648. Unlike most of the other motets in Distler’s collection, which are generally shorter and contain biblical or traditional Lutheran chorale texts, Totentanz has fourteen movements and a text comprising aphorisms by Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), a mystic poet and Catholic priest. Despite his epithet as a neo-Baroque composer, Totentanz can best be described as possessing an amalgamation of stylistic traits found in medieval, Renaissance, and twentieth-century music. Although Distler was influenced by the
principles of Gebrauchsmusik and frequently composed sacred choral music for use in worship services that require only modest forces, there is a decidedly less pragmatic inclination to this work. In addition to the fourteen a cappella choral movements, there is spoken dialogue interspersed between each choral movement, and interpolations of solo flute after each dialogue. Finally, the subject matter of Totentanz explores Distler’s eschatological views in an overt and undeniable way, and these views are in stark contrast with the Nazi view toward eschatology. Combine these new pieces of information with the fact that the year before Distler composed Totentanz he registered as a member of the Nazi party, and scholars are left with more questions than answers in the quest to understand Distler and his music.

Need for the Study

Very little English language scholarship has been done on Hugo Distler and his works. The first important study—truly the only significant published writing on Distler in English to date—grew out of a dissertation by Larry Palmer, resulting in the book Hugo Distler and His Church Music, published in 1967. The past ten years have seen an increase in Distler scholarship with the following doctoral dissertations: Hugo Distler and the Renewal Movement in Nazi Germany by Todd Harper in 2008; Hugo Distler (1908-1942): Recontextualizing Distler’s Music for Performance in the Twenty-First Century by Brad Pierson in 2014; and Championing Distler’s Gebrauchsmusik: A New Edition of the Es ist ein Ros’ entsprungen Variations from Die Weihnachtsgeschichte, Op. 10 (1933) by Timothy Campbell in 2015. Pierson’s dissertation includes an analysis of the musical language in Geistliche Chormusik, opus 12, which includes occasional examples from Totentanz, along with discussions of Der Jahrkreis, opus 5, Mörike-Chorliederbuch, opus 19, and some other smaller choral works. The other two dissertations focus on Distler’s Choralpassion and Die Weihnachtsgeschichte.
Another dissertation by Katherine FitzGibbon from 2008 called *Historicism and Nationalism in the German Requiems of Brahms, Reger, and Distler* includes a chapter on Distler’s *Totentanz*. FitzGibbon makes the claim that *Totentanz* belongs in the line of succession from the Lutheran funeral music of Schütz, Lechner, and Bach through the German Requiem tradition handed down from Brahms. Her dissertation uses the music of Brahms, Reger, and Distler to examine how musical historicism relates to German nationalism from the time that Germany became a unified country through the Nazi era. Though she provides some background and context for Distler’s *Totentanz*, she provides only the information needed to support her thesis concerning historicism and nationalism. Moreover, her analysis provides a movement-by-movement description of the historicist elements, but she does not synthesize her findings in order to present a larger point about the compositional framework used by Distler in this work.

Finally, none of these studies have focused exclusively on *Totentanz* as a means to challenge popular notions about Distler, nor has anyone provided the choral community with a discussion of performance practice considerations. The present study aims to fill this gap. Specifically, this study will (1) review Distler’s education, influences, musical positions, and other biographical details, including his affiliation with the Nazi party, as they pertain to or illumine the understanding of *Totentanz*; (2) provide a thorough profile of the inception of this work, including the artwork that inspired it, the sources of the sung and spoken texts and an exegesis of these texts, and the forces involved in the premier performance; (3) offer an analysis of the work in terms of style characteristics and compositional techniques; (4) present a conductor’s guide to performance practice considerations.
Chapter One

Chapter one will include biographical information, including Distler’s early life, his education and musical training, his first job at St. Jakobikirche in Lübeck, his early compositions in Lübeck, and his collaborations with Bruno Grusnick and the Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis. Chapter one will also briefly discuss the rise of the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) and the extent of Distler’s affiliation with the Nazis. Finally, this chapter will also provide details about his final years, including his death.

Chapter Two

Chapter two will discuss Distler’s compositional style and the important musical movements that influenced his style, including the Orgelbewegung, Gebrauchsmusik, and Neoclassicism movements. In addition, because he was a church musician, this chapter will also examine the liturgical reform movements at the time. Finally, this chapter will make special mention of important teachers, mentors, and colleagues who had a direct and significant influence on the development of Distler’s style, namely Hermann Grabner, Günther Ramin, Bruno Grusnick, and Pastor Axel Werner Kühl.

Chapter Three

Chapter three will take a more detailed look at the structure within the Nazi party, including the Reichskulturkammer (RKK), the Reichsmusikkammer (RMK), and Distler’s role as an examiner in the RMK. Included in this discussion will be an overview of how Nazi leadership regarded music, the role they envisioned music playing in the Third Reich, and the ways that the National Socialist government both supported and weakened the music profession. This chapter will also discuss the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) and the impact they had on Distler’s career as a conductor of children’s choirs. Finally, chapter three will examine the relationship between the
Nazi party and Distler and attempt to answer the question of exactly how Distler was viewed by the party and how the party was viewed by Distler.

Chapter Four

Chapter four will provide additional details about the Totentanz. Issues concerning when and why it was written, and when, where and by whom it was premiered will all be addressed. In addition, the art and literary influences on the genesis of this work will be discussed. Chapter four will also address eschatological perspectives surrounding this work—in particular Distler’s view in contrast with the Nazi view of eschatology.

Chapter Five

Chapter five will provide an analysis of the work in terms of stylistic traits and compositional devices. Examples from the work will be excerpted, and traits will be organized by the following categories: (1) Medieval Traits—florid melismas; use of church modes; parallel motion in fourths, fifths, and octaves; discant-like passages; use of Mensurstriche and metric ambiguity; and open fifth cadences; (2) Renaissance Traits—imitative polyphony, phrase elisions, and Picardy cadences; and (3) Twentieth-Century Traits—quartal harmony, quartal melody, and excessive expression markings.

Chapter Six

Chapter six will offer a conductor’s guide to performance practice issues surrounding this work. Aspects to be discussed include: (1) performing forces, (2) dialogue and solo instrument usage, (3) language for choral movements and spoken dialogue, (4) use of media, and (5) programming suggestions.
Chapter Seven

Chapter seven will synthesize the questions and answers put forth in this study and summarize how this in-depth study of Distler’s Totentanz might lead to a broader and more complete understanding of Distler’s life, death, and musical style.

Conclusion

The first line of text from the opening of Totentanz is, “Laß alles, was du hast, auf daß du alles nehmst;” translated, “Leave all that you have, that you may take all!” Being a motet for All Saints’ Day, November 1, the consoling message is that in death we leave behind all that we have in the world, so that we may take up the riches of the afterlife. When Distler composed this work at the end of 1934, nearly two full years after Hitler and the Nazis ascended to power in Germany and began the process of building the Third Reich into what they hoped would be a one-thousand-year reign of the Aryan race, did he envisage the death and destruction his country would inflict on the world in the coming years? Moreover, did he somehow also prophesy his own death, at his own hand, on All Saints’ Day eight years later?

These questions may never be able to be answered unequivocally, but they make for a fascinating point of departure into this study. Totentanz has been called, “the most notable expression of Distler’s individual style.”2 If, in another sense, we are willing to “leave all that we have,” in the way of assumptions about Distler’s life, death, musical style, and affiliation with Nazism, we are able to take a fresh look—and we may even be able to take up the riches of a new understanding of a complicated and elusive musical genius.

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CHAPTER ONE

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Hugo Distler’s life story is an affecting tale, equal parts heartwarming and heart-rending. What is known of his personal life is primarily due to two biographies—Larry Palmer’s Hugo Distler and His Church Music (1967) and Barbara Distler-Harth’s Hugo Distler: Lebensweg eines Frühvollendeten (2008). The latter biography is written by Hugo Distler’s daughter and is only available in the German language, though Pierson has helpfully translated salient portions of Distler’s early life in his dissertation Hugo Distler (1908-1942): Recontextualizing Distler’s Music for Performance in the Twenty-First Century (2014), and this study will provide translations of relevant excerpts from his adulthood. Palmer’s biographical information is almost entirely informed by interviews with Distler’s surviving wife, Waltraut.

Early Life

Hugo Distler was born on June 24, 1908 in Nuremberg, Germany, a city in northern Bavaria. Even from his earliest breaths, Distler’s life seems to have been marked by despair and struggle: he was born illegitimate, as his parents were never given permission to marry from his paternal grandparents, who felt Distler’s mother was “not from a good family.”³ His mother, Helene Distler, was a twenty-six-year-old milliner or dressmaker when she met his father, August Louis Gotthilf Roth, a factory owner⁴ or mechanical engineer.⁵ Perhaps August’s parents were aware that Helene herself was born out of wedlock. Though her parents did eventually


⁴ Ibid., 4.

marry, soon thereafter Helene’s father died and her mother remarried. Helene’s mother and stepfather ran a butcher shop and, due to responsibilities involved with operating the butcher shop, were apparently somewhat inattentive when it came to raising Helene and her sister.\textsuperscript{6} Exactly which of these factors resulted in August’s parents denying permission for him to marry Helene is unknown, but nevertheless they refused to bend, even after Helene became pregnant. Instead they offered money for child support, which Helene rejected out of pride.\textsuperscript{7}

Helene reportedly grew increasingly bitter toward August, which transferred to Hugo, particularly once it became apparent that she would never marry August.\textsuperscript{8} Thus, when Hugo was four years old and Helene met and fell in love with Anthony Meter, a toy salesman from Chicago, she decided to move to Chicago with Anthony and start a new life there while leaving Hugo to be raised by his grandparents in Nuremberg. This is particularly heartbreaking in light of the fact that Anthony apparently offered to adopt Hugo, but Helene turned it down because she did not want to deal with “baggage from the past.”\textsuperscript{9}

As an adult, Distler rarely spoke of his childhood, so not many details are known about the nature of his upbringing with his grandparents, Johann Michael Herz and Kunigunda Herz. By many accounts, his grandparents provided a “very loving and nurturing home” for Distler.\textsuperscript{10} Yet Palmer describes him as a “sensitive, nervous, and lonely child…[who was] not readily

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} Pierson, “Hugo Distler,” 6.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 7.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 8.
\end{itemize}
understood” by his grandparents,\textsuperscript{11} and Distler’s close friend Oskar Söhngen was quoted as saying Distler had a “difficult, unloved, and joyless childhood.”\textsuperscript{12}

Distler attended the local grammar school and began taking piano lessons with Elisabeth Wiedmann and Carl Dupont at the \textit{Privatmusikschule Dupont}.\textsuperscript{13} At the Dupont School he displayed obvious musical talent at a young age, despite being dismissed twice for disciplinary reasons.\textsuperscript{14} In 1925 his grandmother died and his step-grandfather fell into financial hardship, and Distler had to withdraw from the Dupont School on account of finances. He applied for a scholarship at the Nuremburg Conservatory, but he was denied twice on account of “lack of talent.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Leipzig}

In 1927 he graduated from the Melanchthon-Gymnasium, and the following fall he went to study music at the Leipzig Conservatory. His primary teachers there were: Günther Ramin (organ), Hermann Grabner (theory and composition), Carl Adolf Martienssen (piano), and Max Hochkofler (orchestral conducting).\textsuperscript{16} At first Distler wanted to be a conductor, but was


\textsuperscript{12} Quoted in Pierson, “Hugo Distler,” 8.


\textsuperscript{14} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 17.


\textsuperscript{16} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 17-18.
persuaded by Grabner to switch his focus to church music, where he could compose as well as conduct and would have greater job security.\textsuperscript{17} Grabner wrote of Distler:

> It means a special enrichment for a teacher, if, from the great number of students with average talent…a young genius suddenly emerges, from whose artistic expressions speaks forth the certainty of a distinguished career, full of blessing for mankind. I had this certainty about Distler from the first instant of our work together. … [His work] did not show an everyday mechanical and tiresome solution of the customary practice assignments but rather revealed in every exercise a small work of art, filled with substance and offered with a fascinating ease of execution.\textsuperscript{18}

In 1930, when Distler was just beginning his fourth year at the Leipzig Conservatory, his step-grandfather passed away.\textsuperscript{19} Additionally, by 1930 the entire world, including Germany, was feeling the economic effects of the American Stock Market crash. Between the Great Depression and the death of his step-grandfather who had been financing his studies, Distler was forced to seek early employment before completing his degree.\textsuperscript{20} Distler’s organ teacher, Ramin, recommended him for the job as organist at the St. Jakobikirche in Lübeck. After being named a finalist and going to Lübeck on November 30 for a live audition, he was ultimately offered the position, which he began on January 1, 1931.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{17} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 18-19.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 18.


\textsuperscript{20} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 19.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 21-25.
Lübeck

Distler held the position as organist at the St. Jakobikirche in Lübeck for exactly five years; he would eventually resign the position on New Year’s Eve 1936. 22 But between the disappointing experience of having to leave the conservatory early and the circumstances that led to his eventual resignation, Distler enjoyed a period of tremendous growth, personally and professionally, and an overwhelming degree of success and happiness. It might be fair to say that Distler experienced the happiest years of his life while in Lübeck, for while he would go on to reach even greater heights of fame and prestige in subsequent positions, the later years were also accompanied by the weight of tremendous responsibility, stress, and anxiety. By contrast, everything about his tenure in Lübeck bespeaks an environment ripe for cultivating a young, energetic, creative musical genius such as Hugo Distler. Indeed, most of Distler’s significant sacred choral works come from this five-year period, including the collection that contains Totentanz, the primary subject of this study.

Perhaps the single most important contributing factor to this fertile environment is the triumvirate that formed between Distler, Pastor Axel Werner Kühl of St. Jakobikirche, and Bruno Grusnick, conductor of the Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis. The influence that these three men had on each other cannot be overstated. By the extent of their collaborations on countless musical endeavors, it would appear that these men shared a common philosophical underpinning—a foundation that spurred them to work tirelessly and selflessly to promote and advance one another’s goals and dreams. Put simply, they believed in each other. That Distler

stumbled into this kind of work environment, one that many people wish they could have, in his first position, is indeed one of the great fortunes of his life.

Pastor Axel Werner Kühl had come to the St. Jacobikirche in Lübeck just a few years prior to Distler, in 1928, at the age of 35. He was young and full of ideas about using music as a more integral part of the worship service, even if this necessitated a reduced role of the spoken word. He waited until Distler’s arrival, after the retirement of Distler’s much older predecessor, to incorporate his ideas. These ideas became manifest in a series of Vespers services, commencing on February 15, 1931.23 The first Vespers program primarily featured music by Dietrich Buxtehude,24 undoubtedly an homage to the mid-Baroque master who was for forty years the organist at the nearby Marienkirche in Lübeck. Pastor Kühl was an accomplished baritone singer and participated in the sung Vespers services. The choir that sang in the services was the Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis, under the direction of Bruno Grusnick.25 Their first collaboration a mere six weeks into Distler’s job marks the first of many subsequent endeavors between these three men.

In another example of their support for one another, Grusnick was formerly the choirmaster at St. Jakobikirche, but in the spring of 1931 he gave the position over to Distler. This was essentially a kindness, as the organist’s salary alone did not constitute a livable wage. Moreover, this satisfied Distler’s interest as a conductor, as he thus had a volunteer church choir

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24 Ibid., 26.

25 Ibid.
and a children’s choir under his direction. The children’s choir sang often in the Sunday morning services and occasionally in the Vespers services.  

Distler produced thirty-eight Vespers services during his five-year tenure in Lübeck. A complete list of the programs appears in an appendix to Palmer’s book, but it is relevant to this study to point out a few significant details. As mentioned, the first Vespers was on February 15 and featured music of Buxtehude. The second Vespers was on March 15 and featured music of Bach. The next Vespers was on April 3 and was the Good Friday Vespers, which featured the Schütz *St. Matthew Passion*. Grusnick had programmed this work the year before, and with this repetition a new tradition was established—that the Schütz *St. Matthew Passion* would be performed every Good Friday at St. Jakobikirche. Notably, this performance would prove to be a crucially influential event in Distler’s compositional career and would later inspire him to compose his *Choralpassion*, op. 7. The fourth Vespers came about a week later, on April 12, featuring Easter music composed by Scheidt, Hassler, and Krieger.  

It is manifestly clear from the first four programs that these men had a deep affinity for the German Baroque masters—Buxtehude, Bach, Schütz, and Scheidt. These composers, along with Pachelbel, became the staples of the Vespers programs. The exception is a handful of Vespers programs that featured music by Distler and his contemporaries—Walter Kraft, organist at the Marienkirche in Lübeck; Kurt Thomas, who would later become *Thomaskantor*; and Ernst Pepping, notable composer to whom Distler is most often compared stylistically.

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27 Ibid., 26-27.
Not only was Pastor Kühl’s vision being realized with the Vespers services, Distler, with assistance from Kühl and Grusnick, found a venue and a means to perform his compositions. In June of 1931, when the town was celebrating its 400-year anniversary of the Reformation in Lübeck, Distler’s compositions were given their first public performance. They were well-received by audience and critics.\footnote{Palmer, Hugo Distler, 28-29.} On October 4, 1931, the sixth Vespers at St. Jakobi featured Distler’s \textit{German Chorale Mass}, op. 3. This Vespers also coincided with the \textit{North German Organ Week} event in Lübeck. The eighth Vespers was on November 29, 1931, and featured the first performance of Distler’s \textit{Little Advent Music}, op. 4.\footnote{Ibid., 30.} On January 24, 1932, St. Jakobi gave its tenth Vespers, which was the first to feature his children’s choir. For this Vespers, the choir sang music by Distler which would eventually be published as part of \textit{Der Jahrkreis}, op. 5.\footnote{Ibid., 31.} On March 19, 1933 he gave the premier performance of his \textit{Choralpassion}, op. 7, which, according to Palmer, “…was the first of Distler’s works to receive true national recognition.” Before the year was over, the piece was performed in Leipzig, Barmen, Nuremberg, Kassel, Königsberg, and Frankfurt-am-Main.\footnote{Ibid., 37.} In nearly every event, Grusick’s \textit{Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis} was the choral group giving the premiere performance, with the exception of the children’s choir pieces.

On June 10-12, 1933, Distler served as guest contemporary composer at the \textit{Kirchengesangstage} in Stuttgart, which Palmer gives as evidence of his expanding fame in
Germany.\textsuperscript{32} The first full performance of his \textit{Die Weihnachtsgeschichte}, op. 10, was on December 26, 1933 at the twenty-third Vespers. The work was thoroughly praised by a local critic.\textsuperscript{33}

The year 1933 also brought some professional recognition beyond the performance of his compositions. He became head of the chamber music department at the Lübeck \textit{Staatsconservatorium und Hochschule für Musik}, and he also traveled to Berlin-Spandau to teach at the \textit{Schule für Kirchenmusik}.\textsuperscript{34} Twice a month he made three-day visits to Berlin for this appointment.\textsuperscript{35}

Though this timeline charts Distler’s professional success in his first two years in Lübeck, he also experienced significant developments in his personal life. He began teaching organ lessons to a man named Erich Thienhaus, and the two became close friends. Distler was often invited to the Thienhaus house. Thienhaus had a sister named Waltraut, who happened to also sing in the \textit{Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis}. A courtship began between the two, and on October 14, 1933, they were married in the St. Jakobikirche.

So it is clear that the year 1933, Distler’s twenty fifth year, was an unmitigated success for the young, budding composer. That same year was an extremely significant year for Adolf Hitler, who was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Chapter three will go into much greater depth on the subject of the Nazi party, but it is necessary at this time to address

\textsuperscript{32} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 38.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{34} Dennis Shrock, \textit{Choral Repertoire} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 606.
\textsuperscript{35} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 36.
some crucial developments that unquestionably directed the trajectory of Distler’s life and career.

Almost immediately upon taking power, Hitler and other Nazi leaders began removing influential Jewish musicians from their positions, including Bruno Walter and Kurt Weill.\textsuperscript{36} According to scholar Erik Levi, “The first three months of Nazi rule in 1933 bore witness to one of the most tumultuous changes in German musical life. Within weeks, a whole swathe of prominent musicians, regarded by the new regime as politically and racially unacceptable, had been forced out of work and felt compelled to leave the country.”\textsuperscript{37}

Despite this reprehensible act of racism, there were many musicians who felt a renewed sense of hope for the future of their profession. The Weimar Republic had done little to oversee the music profession from the central government. In a word, the music profession in the Weimar era was highly disorganized, to the profession’s detriment.\textsuperscript{38} From 1929 to 1932, the Great Depression led to rapidly declining audiences at professional music performances, and local governments withdrew financial support for the arts.\textsuperscript{39} By the end of the Weimar era, many professional musicians were unemployed, and the Republic could not or would not provide the necessary leadership to rescue the music profession from impending downfall.

When Hitler and the Nazis took power in 1933, one of the first things they did was establish a centralized organization to oversee all matters of culture in Germany. According to


\textsuperscript{37} Levi, \textit{Mozart and the Nazis}, 16.

\textsuperscript{38} Pamela M. Potter, \textit{Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 9-10.

\textsuperscript{39} Levi, \textit{Mozart and the Nazis}, 4-5.
musicologist Pamela Potter, “No longer subject to the inconsistencies of regional administration, cultural affairs could, at least in principle, flourish under uniform practices and promises of financial support. …[This] appealed to a large number of prominent artists who would otherwise feel no attraction to the Nazi movement.”¹⁰ It has been suggested that Distler was one such musician who was initially attracted to the Nazi party on the grounds of what they could do for the profession.¹¹

This is not to insinuate that Distler’s relationship with the Nazi party was entirely favorable from the start. On November 20, 1933, the Reichsbischof (Reichs Bishop) Ludwig Müller and the Reichsjugendführer of the HJ (the leader of the Hitler Youth) Baldur von Schirach made an agreement which resulted in all of the boys from his church choir being called to an HJ service every time Distler scheduled a choir test with them.⁴² In order to keep his children’s choir alive, Distler had to add girls to the choir.⁴³ This situation might have provided an early indication to Distler that he and the Nazi party had opposing goals.

Perhaps the most significant point of conflict between Distler and the Nazis arose from the schism in the Lutheran church. In 1932, a group of Lutherans who were ardent supporters of the Nazi party formed a faction called the “German Christians’ Faith Movement.” They were Lutherans who were supportive of the Nazi ideology of racial purity and strong government

¹⁰ Potter, Most German of the Arts, 11.


administrative control. A second group, which formed in 1933, called themselves the “Confessional Church,” and they disapproved of the Nazi agenda and opposed the German Christians. Pastor Kühl was one of the leaders of the Confessional Church, so in essence he became an enemy of the state. Distler, as one of Kühl’s closest friends and most staunch allies, was therefore in a position of opposition with the German Christians, and by extension, the Nazi party and Hitler. Chapter three will examine this situation in closer detail, but the final stroke that resulted in Distler’s resignation on New Year’s Eve 1936 had its genesis in this conflict that began brewing in 1933.

The Lutheran schism was also responsible for Distler registering as a member of the Nazi party on May 1, 1933. In April 1933, a group of Lutheran pastors from Lübeck who were associated with the Confessional Church met to discuss their response to the growing threat from the German Christians. According to Distler-Harth,

the intimidated Lutheran pastors of Lübeck deemed it necessary to “sacrifice one of their pawns:” they convened a meeting of the Lutheran church members behind closed doors, and decided after a turbulent controversial debate that the “lower-level” church employees—among them the organists and sextons of St. Mary and St. Jakobi—should join the NSDAP in order to demonstrate the compromise of the Lutheran church members with the National Socialists, and thus enabling the pastors to not have to take this step themselves… On May 1, 1933, the traditional holiday of the socialists and the working class, there was—from NSDAP propaganda and promotions—in all of Germany a wave of party entries. […] Hugo Distler and Walter Kraft joined the party in Lübeck. Pastor Kühl could avoid this step.45

The twenty-fourth Vespers occurred on February 25, 1934 in conjunction with the annual Volkstrauertag (Memorial Day). Leonhard Lechner’s Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod

44 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 50-51.

45 Barbara Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler: Lebensweg eines Frühvollendeten (Mainz, Germany: Schott, 2008), 158-159.
(German Sayings of Life and Death) was the centerpiece.\textsuperscript{46} This work had actually previously been performed at the St. Jakobikirche. On Nov. 16, 1932, the St. Jakobikirche performed an enacted \textit{Totentanz} (Dance of Death) featuring the music of Leonhard Lechner, presumably his \textit{Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod}. According to Palmer, this “probably provided the germ that grew into Distler’s own \textit{Totentanz} motet.”\textsuperscript{47}

Meanwhile, Distler experienced some of his first critical failures in the year 1934. May 24, 1934 was the premiere of Distler’s \textit{Ewiges Deutschland} (Eternal Germany), a secular cantata consisting of five short a cappella choruses, melodramatic recitation, and an orchestral introduction, fanfare, several intermezzi, and eight dances. Despite the hype leading to the premiere, the work was not well-received by critics or the general population, and the work fell immediately into obscurity. Not even the score exists today.\textsuperscript{48} This work was quite idiosyncratic among Distler’s oeuvre; it is a secular choral work with orchestral accompaniment. Perhaps the lackluster reception of this work deterred Distler from composing subsequent works in a similar vein. It is notable that this work was a German nationalistic work, presumably an attempt to attract the attention and favor of the Nazi leadership.

The premiere performance of \textit{Totentanz} was on September 29, 1934 at the Katharinenkirche in Lübeck. The performing forces were the \textit{Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis}, conducted by Bruno Grusnick, with spoken parts enacted by members of the \textit{Dramatischer Laienchor}.

\textsuperscript{46} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 40.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 45.
The year 1934 seems to have ended on a high note for Distler. At the culminating performances of the Kassel *Musiktage* on Sunday, October 13, 1934, Distler played the harpsichord solo part in a performance of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in the afternoon concert. The evening concert featured the *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis* conducted by Bruno Grusnick performing only Distler’s works, including portions of the *Deutsche Choralmesse*, opus 3, several motets, and the *Totentanz*.\(^{50}\) According to Palmer, “Newspapers all over Germany reported the tremendous impressions made by Distler’s music at this concert.” One critic published in the magazine *Lied und Volk*, “Hugo Distler is the great hope of German church music, or more succinctly, of German music.”\(^{51}\) To close out the year, Distler welcomed his first child. Barbara Distler was born on December 5, 1934.

Both of the St. Jakobi organs were restored in 1935, which must have been highly satisfying for Distler. A festival to honor the re-consecration was held on October 25-27. The final event was a concert by the Dresden Kreuzchor, which was originally supposed to be an all-Bach concert, but they announced at the performance that they would open the program with Distler’s *Deutsche Choralmesse*.\(^{52}\)

During the year 1936, Distler was at the St. Jakobi church less and less. Part of this was due to his duties as professor at two conservatories, part was due to an increase in guest engagements around Germany, but part may have been due to the escalating tensions in the

\(^{50}\) Palmer, *Hugo Distler*, 47-48.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 47-50.
By December, the situation had escalated such that Pastor Kühl was placed under house-arrest and forbidden to preach; he was eventually forced to leave Lübeck altogether.

At the same time that Pastor Kühl was exiled, Grusnick had to serve a short-term military obligation in Hamburg and Distler was left alone and without an ally in Lübeck. The mighty trio had been disbanded, and Distler, despairing over the situation, looked elsewhere for a job. He originally accepted a full-time position at Berlin-Spandau, but ended up receiving an offer to teach at the Württemburgische Hochschule für Musik in Stuttgart and he took the second position because it came with a choir to direct. He left on April 1, 1937.54

Stuttgart

His position at the Hochschule in Stuttgart included teaching form and analysis, composition, choral conducting, and conducting two school choirs. Initially he had difficulties getting along with the students in Stuttgart because they were Nazi supporters and he was a church musician. Some particularly ardent students boycotted his efforts. In time some of this animosity dissolved but he never came to have a “completely free and easy” relationship with his students.55

Shortly after arriving in Stuttgart he founded the Esslinger Singakademie, an oratorio society. It was fairly easy to find singers because a previous oratorio society in the area had recently disbanded and the director had left the city.56 At long last, Distler had the opportunity to

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53 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 50.

54 Ibid., 55-56.

55 Ibid., 56.

56 Ibid.
conduct an accomplished adult choir with whom he was able to perform works such as Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*.

Nevertheless, it would seem that the political situation in Germany had been weighing on him heavily, even as early as 1937. In May 1937 he wrote a letter to Pastor Kühl and admitted that he had thought of leaving the country. He went to Sweden in August 1937 to try to find a job there but was unsuccessful.⁵⁷

Despite this one documented attempt to leave Germany, Distler continued to experience recognition as a composer in his homeland. The largest of Germany’s church music festivals during this era, *Das Fest der deutschen Kirchenmusik*, was held in Berlin from October 7-13, 1937. Distler’s compositions were given several performances at the festival. On Sunday, October 10, 1937, the president of the RMK, Dr. Peter Raabe, conducted the Berlin Philharmonic in a concert that included Distler’s harpsichord concerto. Approximately 20,000 visitors from around the world were in attendance. Much to the annoyance of the Nazi press who described this new church music as “un-German” and “degenerate,” it was a tremendous success.⁵⁸

Distler closed out the year with a return visit to Lübeck. The *Totensonntag* Vespers at St. Jakobikirche on November 21, 1937, included a performance of *Totentanz*, and Distler was in attendance for this performance.⁵⁹ By this time, Pastor Kühl had returned to Lübeck and the Confessional Church was successfully suppressed.

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⁵⁹ Ibid., 60.
Unfortunately, the acceptance of the German public did not prevent future discord with Nazi administrators, and the following spring Distler found himself once again a victim of Nazi scrutiny and sanctions. On Palm Sunday, 1938, he conducted the Esslingen Singakademie in a performance of Bach’s St. John Passion without prior approval from the Nazi Kulturgemeinde, which resulted in the disbanding of the Singakademie. His last words to the choir were, “Es muß Ihnen das Glück genügen, daß Sie diese Werke mitgesungen haben.” (“It will have to suffice that you have sung this work.”)\(^{60}\) Then in May he wrote to his brother-in-law Erich Thienhaus about a rather upsetting occurrence that nonetheless confirmed in his mind the state of how things were in Nazi Germany. He had composed thirty pieces for an organ conference in Freiburg, but the organizers tacitly removed the sacred organ pieces from the program.\(^{61}\)

Distler began composing his Mörike-Chorliederbuch, a collection of forty-eight secular choral songs, in September 1938.\(^{62}\) The fortuitous opportunity to premiere the Mörike-Chorliederbuch came in June 1939, when Distler was given last-minute permission to travel to Graz, Austria with his Stuttgart Hochschule choir to perform at the Festival of German Choral Music. It was here that Distler reached the height of his esteem and favor among the German press and population. A press report by Hans Weitzer in the *Südostdeutsche Tageszeitung* read,

> Among all the choral composers heard thus far, we can say with assurance, Distler has won the most exuberant applause. The applause experienced the joy of virtually discovering itself, and it was propelled aloft from the springboard of the realization that once again German art was producing young masters.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{61}\) Ibid.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Palmer, *Hugo Distler*, 65.
It was this festival in Graz that eventually led to his position at the *Staatliche Akademische Hochschule für Musik* in Berlin-Charlottenburg the following year. A professor of the school was in attendance and was impressed with Distler’s talent.\(^{64}\)

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, France and Great Britain declared war, and World War II had begun. In early 1940, Distler received his first summons to report for a physical exam for the military. He spent all spring writing to influential friends, trying to find a way to be released of this duty. He felt that a position in Berlin might make him important enough to secure his release,\(^{65}\) thus, he accepted the job in Berlin in August 1940.

**Berlin**

The position in Berlin came with the title, “Professor,” which in German education is granted by the state ministry.\(^{66}\) This was a very high honor for a thirty-two-year-old composer. He succeeded Kurt Thomas for the position, which included teaching composition, organ, and choral conducting.

Distler began his new position on October 1, 1940. Though initially the Distler family lived in Berlin, in November he and his family moved to Strausberg, more than 20 miles northeast of Berlin. Distler hoped that his family would be safer there from the potential of bombings which were occurring in Berlin.\(^{67}\) In 1941 he became the director of the Berlin *Staats-*

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\(^{65}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 67.

This was arguably the highest position for a choral conductor in Germany at the time, and Distler rather hoped this would cement his ranking as a person indispensable to German culture.

Unfortunately, that turned out not to be the case. The date of January 16, 1941, was momentous for reasons both wonderful and horrific—Distler’s third child, Brigitte was born, and he received another summons from the army. Once again Distler was successful in getting the summons rescinded, but the whole situation nonetheless added to his anxiety. From July through December, his wife and three children remained at their summer house on the Baltic, which kept Distler’s family out of the vicinity of Berlin during the war. However, he was only able to see them on special weekends, and his work schedule kept him furiously occupied.

Around April 1942, he became a target of the SS. In a letter from his publisher Karl Vötterle to Distler, Vöttlerle recounted a conversation with the SS-Oberführer Karl Cerff. Cerff questioned the new music that Vötterle was publishing, claiming that it only helps the enemies of the NSDAP. He insinuated that it was time for Vötterle and Distler to go to a Nazi training camp so that they can understand the work the Nazis were trying to accomplish.

Death

On October 14, 1942, Distler received his third conscription order, and a little more than two weeks later he took his own life. Larry Palmer’s account from his 1967 book is quoted extensively in English-language scholarship on Distler, as it provides the most thorough

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68 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 67.
69 Ibid., 68.
description of this event in an English source. In this account, Distler’s wife, Waltraut, and their children were once again staying on the Baltic in October 1942 when the order was received.

Palmer paints the picture of Distler’s last days on earth:

On the evening of October 31 he went for a long walk, came home and played his beloved house organ for the last time, selecting the Bach A Major trio on *Allein Gott in der Höh’ sei Ehr* from the Leipzig *Great Eighteen* chorale preludes as his farewell. The following day, November 1, was All Saints’ Day. The tormented young man ended the living horror of his life. He moved a bed into the kitchen, placed a photograph of his dear family so he could see it, took a Bible in one hand and a brass cross in the other, turned on the gas, and lay down to sleep forever.  

Distler’s daughter provides a different account, with variations that are minor and yet have far-reaching significance. Waltraut and the family were at their home in Strausberg, just outside of Berlin, when Distler received the order on Wednesday, October 14. Nearly immediately, “in a state of abysmal anxiety and despair,” he drove to see the family in Strausberg. The next day he returned to Berlin, but then wrote his wife the following letter on October 15:

Forgive me at all, and have forbearance with me the next few days: you cannot guess in what terrible way my hitherto good state of mind has suffered because of this new twist.

The thought of being separated from you and our children is completely distressing to me, already the thought makes me crazy.

You know how an indescribable loneliness constantly resides in me, a feeling of being separated from everything and everybody, what I should not describe, that such a message as yesterday throws me completely out of balance. Help me to pray to God that he will try me before him, who falls upon so many. I could not stand it, not at all.

And look after me in the near future.
Now to the rehearsal: how little I feel like doing it.
All the same, how happy I am to have you.
Yours sincerely, Hugo


72 Distler-Harth, *Hugo Distler*, 322.
On the weekend of his death, he had once again been at the home in Strausberg with his family. On that Sunday morning, November 1, Distler had to leave early to return to Berlin for church. Distler-Harth describes this poignant moment just before he left:

…he stepped up to the bed of his still sleeping wife, woke her carefully, and bid her farewell in the way he always did before he went to Berlin. Not yet quite awake, she had—as she later became aware—the fleeting impression that he had spoken softly in a tear-stained voice.\(^{74}\)

Then Distler-Harth describes how later in the day no one had heard from Distler and he had not returned to the house in Strausberg, so Waltraut and Ruth (Distler’s cousin who was visiting at the time) decided to drive to Berlin to check on him. She then provides this account of how they came to discover his body, with shocking new details:

Finally, Waltraut Distler, accompanied by Ruth Dittrich and Ursula Ebbecke, had opened the door to the apartment, had perceived the smell of gas, had walked into the kitchen, and had found Hugo Distler in a street suit collapsed under the window, a small photograph of his family pressed in his hand. Apparently he had tried to open the window at the last moment, but had no strength to do so.

Waltraut first rushed out into the stairwell, had laid him on a step and loudly cried, “the only time in her life.” Then she ran back into the kitchen and tore open the window. Apparently, Hugo Distler had still managed to turn off the gas stove that he had turned up before he dragged himself to the window.

On the table lay a farewell letter, written in irregular, blurred writing, in which Hugo Distler begged his wife for forgiveness for his actions and those who had stood by him until the end…\(^{75}\)

The discrepancies in the stories are particularly unsettling considering that Palmer’s book is based on interviews with Waltraut. If Barbara’s story is to be believed, Distler changed his

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\(^{73}\) Distler-Harth, *Hugo Distler*, 322.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 330.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 331.
mind about ending his life. He managed to turn off the oven, but it was already too late—he did not have the strength to open the window for the fresh air that may have saved his life. Why would Waltraut not provide Palmer with these crucial details? The second account is all the more heartrending when one thinks of a frightened and lonely Hugo Distler, his final thought the realization that his will to live, which surged from within only at the last moment, was not enough to save him in the end. Perhaps details such as these were too painful and terrible to relive.

Exactly what drove Distler to commit suicide is the subject of great debate. The most popular explanation—the romanticized version, which admittedly has natural appeal—is that Distler was so strongly opposed to the Nazi ideology that he would rather end his life than be forced to take up arms and fight for them. Undoubtedly, this is the story his family would like to advance. Nevertheless, some scholars submit different theories, which will be further explored in chapter three.

For now, two details are worth noting. First, in a tragically ironic twist, the day after Distler’s death his name appeared on the *Führerliste*, a list of names of people so indispensable to German culture that they would be exempt from military duty.76 Did Distler really have no idea that this list was about to be released? Why was he so convinced that all hope was lost? What compelled him to take his life on that particular date, apparently unwilling to wait a day longer?

The second detail to note is the significance of the day on which he chose to end his life—All Saints’ Day. This detail is particularly important for this study, because *Totentanz* is a

motet for All Saints’ Day. All human beings will eventually die and pass from this world, but only those who commit suicide get to choose the date of their passing. For the rest of us, we are as helpless in choosing the date of our death as we are the date of our birth. To date, no scholar has uncovered a catastrophic, last straw event in Distler’s life on October 31 or November 1. This suggests that his decision to commit suicide had been brewing for a time, and that particular date was a result of thoughtful, intentional selection. In the Lutheran Church, All Saints’ Day is the day that the faithful departed are remembered and honored. Perhaps Distler found some appeal in the notion that he would die on the exact day that, according to his religious beliefs, he would be remembered and honored by others of his faith. This consolation may have acted as a salve for the loneliness and isolation he felt. This also suggests that All Saints’ Day may have always held a position of particular reverence and significance to him, which, if true, offers new context with which to view the Totentanz. Although this theory is impossible to prove, it is nonetheless completely plausible to assume. More on Distler’s eschatological views will be explored in chapter four.

Distler’s life story is rife with both triumph and tragedy. To have overcome such woeful beginnings only to succumb to inner demons in the end is certainly a pitiable fate for Distler. The powerful legacy Distler leaves behind is his music. Chapter two will examine Distler’s musical style, including the movements and people who influenced him.
CHAPTER TWO
MUSICAL STYLE AND INFLUENCES

Summary descriptions of Distler’s musical style never fail to mention the influence of Heinrich Schütz:

“Much of [Distler’s] music is scored in mixed meters, with intricately rhythmic melodic lines that emulate the careful text declamation that was so prevalent in the music of Heinrich Schütz.”

“As Bartók assimilated folk materials into a distinctive style, so Distler absorbed the music of Bach and Heinrich Schütz.”

“The basis of Distler’s work was the rediscovery of old forms and genres, and his highly effective word-painting evolved from the music of Schütz, but without imitating him.”

“Distler, who wrote for sacred as well as secular occasions, composed in a neo-Baroque style patterned on his great exemplar Heinrich Schütz, and he preferred a cappella choirs.”

The exclusive focus on Schütz is understandable to an extent. Distler himself credited Schütz as a major influence in the afterword to his Choralpassion, op. 7. It is well documented that the Schütz St. Matthew Passion was performed every year on Good Friday at the St. Jakobikirche during the years Distler served there as organist and choirmaster (1931-1936), and that this had an enormous impact on him. In addition, other works by Schütz were frequently featured on the Vespers services held at the St. Jakobikirche during Distler’s term of

77 Shrock, Choral Repertoire, 606.

78 Strimple, Choral Music in the Twentieth, 39-40.

79 Neumann, “Distler, Hugo.”

employment. Distler named his Geistliche Chormusik, op. 12, after Schütz’s collection by the same name. In his 1967 book, Larry Palmer goes into extensive detail about the parallelisms between Distler and Schütz in terms of their lives and their musical style. He even states that a comparison of the Schütz St. Matthew Passion and the Distler Choralpassion would be a worthy study. Twelve years later, in 1979, John Catanzaro took his advice and made this topic the subject of a master’s thesis. Another twelve years after that, in 1991, David Deffer compared the Schütz and Distler settings of “Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied” for his doctoral dissertation. The influence of Palmer’s book, which remains the only published book on Distler in English, cannot be overstated in all subsequent English-language scholarship on Distler.

Note that the above quotes highlighting the Schütz-Distler connection were all written in the past twenty years. It might also be worth noting that earlier writings on Distler did not contain the same degree of emphasis on the influence of Schütz. In Charles Anders’s 1962 thesis, he writes, “The influence of Schütz on Distler is more spiritual than actual. Distler spoke to the twentieth century, for which an entirely new and individual language was required. Yet the names of Schütz and Distler have been frequently linked together.”

Gilbert Seeley includes a lengthy segment on Distler in his 1969 doctoral dissertation German Protestant Choral Music Since 1925. In it, he mentions Schütz only twice—once to merely note that Schütz also wrote a

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81 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 165-177. Appendix A lists every program for the thirty-nine Vespers services held at St. Jakobikirche during Distler’s tenure.


collection entitled *Geistliche Chormusik*, and the second time in this context: “Although Distler acknowledged his debt to the Schütz Passions in the writing of [his *Choralpassion*], it appears that he was also influenced by Kurt Thomas’ *Passionmusik nach dem Evangelisten Markus* (1926).”

Anders and Seeley take a decidedly less emphatic stance when illustrating Schütz’s degree of influence on Distler, and Seeley suggests that other influences might also be worth considering.

Is the strict comparison to Schütz that is so heavily touted today justified? Is it possible that over time scholars and musicologists have succeeded in inadvertently perpetuating an exaggerated connection that in reality is merely a modest link? Are there other influences on Distler’s style that are just as powerful as Schütz, if not more so? To answer these questions, it is necessary to take a further look at the musical movements and the people who influenced Distler throughout his life, and examine writings by Distler, his closest colleagues, and music critics to see how his style was viewed by himself and his contemporaries during his life. By studying actual musical examples, proof of these connections may hopefully be established.

The first step is to consider the musical and cultural milieu in which Distler came of age. An extensive look at the politics of the time will be the subject of chapter three, but some basic background information is helpful to understanding the musical culture. After Germany was defeated in World War I, the country experienced two notable phenomena, which are not indistinct from one another. First, there was a sharp rise in interest for amateur music making, and second, there was a large number of “movements” (“Bewegung” in German) to reform

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86 Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, 4-6.
various arenas related to German culture. These actions were a part of the healing process for many Germans in the post-war era. Germany had just experienced a major military defeat for which they were forced to accept sole responsibility, and they were left feeling completely demoralized by the conditions laid out in the Treaty of Versailles. As Germans had long taken pride in their musical contributions, “Music was the best means for a defeated Germany to take its place in the sun.”

Singbewegung

Among amateur music groups, choral singing was by far the fastest growing activity in the period between the wars. According to at least one set of statistics, by the year 1931 there were two million Germans participating in choral organizations. Singing was so popular in part because it was more inclusive—it did not require the level of technical skill that other musical activities required, singers of different abilities could be accommodated, and economic differences could be minimized or negated. This amateur choral singing movement in Germany in the post- World War I era is sometimes referred to as the Singbewegung.

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88 Potter, Most German of the Arts, 4.

89 Ibid., 6.

Another important movement was the Jugendbewegung, or Youth Movement. This movement actually began prior to World War I with a group called the Wandervögel. What began as a group of bored, middle-class youths taking part in hikes and retreats in the countryside, rapidly expanded during the 1920s and 1930s to include youths from all classes and political parties. In addition to sharing a love of nature, these groups were also intensely interested in creative outlets, with singing being an integral part of the experience. This subset of the movement is referred to as the Jugendmusikbewegung, or Youth Music Movement. The music they favored included not only German folksongs but also, perhaps surprisingly, seventeenth-century polyphony. They had a highly romanticized view of the power of music to build communities and to free them from their bourgeois conventional lives, and the music of the great masters of the Reformation was the worthy vehicle. They renounced jazz, modern, and commercial music. It is believed by some that Distler participated in the Wandervögel as a youth, which, if true, would undoubtedly have influenced his musical tastes.

Singing was not the only musical outlet experiencing a “movement” in the post-war period. The Orgelbewegung, or Organ Reform Movement, flourished alongside the Singbewegung and is the movement with which Distler is most often affiliated, probably because

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91 Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, 7.

92 Adrio, “Renewal and Rejuvenation,” 416.


94 Katherine Lenore FitzGibbon, “Historicism and Nationalism in the German Requiems of Brahms, Reger, and Distler” (DMA diss., Boston University, 2008), 126.
of its natural ties to church music. In the early 20th century, organ scholars became increasingly dissatisfied with the excesses of the late Romantic style and the extravagant instruments built during that period. They turned their interest to the Baroque era, when the organ experienced its pinnacle of achievement in composition, performance, and popularity. As the Romantic organ was clearly an unsuitable instrument for performing Baroque masterpieces in an historically accurate manner, there was an interest in reconstructing Baroque organs. The first such organ was the so-called “Praetorius” organ built in 1921, based on specifications provided by Michael Praetorius in his treatise *Syntagma muscisum* (1619). Many of the musicians and teachers with whom Distler is most associated were also important figures in the *Orgelbewegung*.

**Berneuchener Bewegung**

Related to the *Jugendbewegung* and the *Orgelbewegung* is the Lutheran liturgical reform movement, known as the *Berneuchener Bewegung*, named after the location where the leaders of the movement met. This movement also began in the 1920s, with the primary intent to reform the Lutheran liturgy by returning to its traditional roots and to promote the spiritual life in Germany in the post-war era. Along with the reforms to the liturgy, the role of music in worship service was also of interest, leading to a call for new church music compositions. Again, this is a movement with which Distler was associated.

Adam Adrio emphasizes that all of the musical reforms in the sacred music genre were happening in secular music as well, stating that both secular and sacred music “were part of a

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97 Shrock, *Choral Repertoire*, 605.
struggle for a new style free from the expressive excesses of late romantic music.”\(^9\) He also claims that in the minds of post-war Germans there was a search for greater spiritual meaning leading to a renewed interest in sacred texts regardless of background, and this surely also had an impact on the growth in the sacred music genre. He writes, “A renewal of a cappella music—and this was among the goals of new music—could be achieved only by assimilating more substantial texts, newer and weightier spiritual materials… We must recognize that…the prevailingly spiritual orientation of large segments of the populace following the catastrophe of the First World War was behind the artistic events.”\(^9\) All together—the Singing Movement, the Youth Movement, the Organ Reform Movement, and the Liturgical Movement, in addition to the general interest in historicism—the entire effort is sometimes referred to as the Renewal Movement.

**Gebrauchsmusik**

There is one final musical movement to note, and that is *Gebrauchsmusik*. Although it is not a “Bewegung,” it nevertheless had at least a modicum of impact on Distler’s compositional choices, as some of Distler’s works can be categorized as being *Gebrauchsmusik*.

*Gebrauchsmusik* is music that is (1) practical, in the sense that it is intended for use with whatever instrumentalists are available, (2) popular, in the sense that it is meant to be accessible to the majority of the population, and (3) occasional, in the sense that it is written for a specific occasion or purpose.\(^1\) This was also in large part a reaction against the decadence and


\(^9\) Ibid., 415.

\(^1\) Palmer, *Hugo Distler*, 16-17.
subjectivity of the late Romantic. *Gebrauchsmusik* is most closely associated with Paul Hindemith, although Distler’s pragmatic compositional choices evince his mutual affinity for these ideals.

**Karl Straube**

Distler’s first significant musical mentors date back to his years at the Leipzig Conservatory (1927-1930). While in Leipzig, Distler frequently heard performances of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music sung by the *Thomanerchor*, under the direction of Karl Straube.¹⁰¹ Straube (1873-1950) had formerly been the organist at the *Thomaskirche* from 1902-1918 and was elevated to *Kantor* from 1918-1939. A lifelong friend and advocate of Max Reger, he completely shifted his style away from an “orchestral organ style of registration and performance, in the manner of Liszt and Wagner” around the year 1913,¹⁰² and from then on it would seem that he adopted the guiding tenets of the *Orgelbewegung*. Straube in fact inaugurated the famous “Praetorius” organ mentioned above.¹⁰³ Straube’s new style embraced the tone characteristics of these Baroque organs. He even withdrew his 1904 editions of Baroque organ music and reissued them without the “Romantic” organ registrations he had originally included.¹⁰⁴ Straube wrote in a letter to musicologist Wilibald Gurlitt in 1918, “What I wish to

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¹⁰¹ Shrock, *Choral Repertoire*, 605.


¹⁰⁴ Palmer, *Hugo Distler*, 16.
attempt is to influence the younger generation through the pre-Bach masters. In this connection I am thinking above all of Heinrich Schütz… His works…may perhaps lend impetus to new creations.”

Throughout his career as Thomaskantor, Straube conducted the Thomanerchor in weekly performances of Bach’s motets and cantatas, which Distler enjoyed attending during his time in Leipzig.

**Günther Ramin**

Karl Straube was influential in additional ways; he was essentially Distler’s “grandfather” organ teacher, as Straube taught organ to Günther Ramin who in turn taught Distler. Ramin (1898-1956) sang in the Thomanerchor as a boy, then studied organ and composition at the Conservatory. When Straube became Kantor, Ramin became the organist at the Thomaskirche. He eventually became Kantor after Straube—the twelfth in succession after J.S. Bach—and served in this capacity from 1939-1956. He was a world-renowned organist and as a conductor became “one of the most dynamic interpreters of Bach’s music.” Naturally, he was a leading proponent of the Orgelbewegung and was highly influential in Distler’s education. The two would continue to remain close friends and colleagues for the remainder of Distler’s life and would make frequent visits to one another to give guest performances.

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107 Palmer, *Hugo Distler*. Chapter one provides numerous accounts of their communication and visits.
Hermann Grabner

Hermann Grabner (1886-1969) was the other significant teacher Distler had at the Leipzig Conservatory. Grabner was Distler’s composition teacher and the influential figure who convinced him to shift his career focus from conducting to church music. Grabner studied composition with Max Reger (1873-1916) during the few years Reger spent teaching composition in Leipzig and then followed Reger to Meiningen when Reger took a position as the court orchestra conductor. Reger is often associated with musical historicism, and it is logical to assume that Reger may have shared some of his affinity for Bach with his student Grabner. Grabner eventually returned to Leipzig as a composition lecturer in 1924, where he had the opportunity to teach Distler when he arrived in 1927. Grabner’s most important contribution to the music profession was a popular textbook on harmony called *Allgemeine Musiklehre als Vorschule für das Studium der Harmonielehre, des Kontrapunktes, des Formen- und Instrumentationslehre.* Grabner was a registered member of the Nazi party and even joined the SA, the Nazi party’s paramilitary force, in 1933. In 1940, Grabner created a revised edition of

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111 FitzGibbon, “Historicism and Nationalism in the German Requiem of Brahms, Reger, and Distler.”

his textbook in which he removed all references to Jewish composers or “modern” music.\footnote{Painter, \textit{Symphonic Aspirations}, 255.}

During Nazi control of Germany, Grabner also composed several songs for the Third Reich. These undeniable affiliations with the Nazis led to some difficulties for Grabner when the war was over. Nevertheless, Grabner was an unmitigated supporter of Distler’s musical promise and was a devoted teacher and friend during Distler’s tenure as a student at the Leipzig Conservatory.

Kurt Thomas

A contemporary of Distler’s who also studied with Straube and Grabner is Kurt Thomas (1904-1973). Thomas was only four years older than Distler but completely embraced the Renewal Movement from his early years and was an immediate forerunner and influence on Distler’s work. In 1925, at the age of twenty-one, he was hired to teach theory and composition at the Leipzig Conservatory.\footnote{Hanspeter Krellmann and Erik Levi. “Thomas, Kurt.” \textit{Grove Music Online}. Oxford University Press, accessed January 22, 2017, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27865.} He was teaching at the conservatory when Distler enrolled as a student in 1927, and though no sources identify Thomas as one of Distler’s teachers, it is reasonable to assume that they at least knew one another. Perhaps Distler may have even taken a class with Thomas at some point. Regardless, their paths crossed more than once; when Distler took the professorship position at the Berlin Hochschule he replaced Thomas. Some years after Distler’s death, Thomas was named Thomaskantor (1955-1961). Perhaps if Distler had not chosen to cut his life so short, one day he may have continued to follow in Thomas’s footsteps and become Thomaskantor himself.
Axel Werner Kühl

Finally, this chapter would be incomplete without also discussing Distler’s closest friends and colleagues in Lübeck, for, though they did not reach the same level of international fame and recognition as Straube, Ramin, and Thomas, they had a longer-lasting and more profound impact on Distler than anyone previously mentioned. Axel Werner Kühl (1893-1944), pastor of the St. Jakobikirche in Lübeck where Distler served as organist, was also strongly associated with the *Orgelbewegung* and the *Berneuchener Bewegung*. As noted in chapter one, Pastor Kühl was the initiator of the Vespers services that began six weeks after Distler’s employment commenced and continued to be held at regular intervals throughout the next five years. Pastor Kühl was also a singer and participated in the Vespers services. Undoubtedly, Pastor Kühl’s support of Distler and his vision for new Lutheran church music provided the fertile ground in which Distler could cultivate his compositional style, particularly with his sacred oeuvre.

Bruno Grusnick

Finally, Bruno Grusnick (1900-1992) also moved to Lübeck in 1928, the same year as Pastor Kühl, where he promptly founded the *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis*. He was subsequently hired to be cantor at St. Jakobi beginning in 1930—a position he remarkably held until 1972. 115 One year after Grusnick started working at St. Jakobi, Distler moved there and the three began their collaboration. In fact, Distler was already planting seeds for future work together before he even moved. On December 7, 1930, just after he was offered the position at St. Jakobi but a few weeks before he began, Distler wrote a letter to Grusnick thanking him for his support of his candidacy for the position. He was clearly already very excited about the

prospect of the upcoming Vespers services they would soon initiate: “I think my first Abendmusik should be dedicated to Buxtehude; I mention it, for I hope to be able to count on your choral group for it. I am all anticipation!”116 Over the next six years, Grusnick’s Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis would almost invariably be the choir to premier Distler’s choral works and help launch Distler into national and international fame. Distler’s music became standard repertoire for the choir, and they continued championing Distler’s music long after the composer’s death.

As chapter one addressed, Distler, Kühl, and Grusnick formed a very special collaborative team for five years, and their influence on one another was powerful and absolute. In Kühl’s words, “It is through this fantastic working partnership among us three—certainly something completely extraordinary and not often found—that support for one of us is at the same time help for the others. Moreover, I believe a good portion of the excellent success of our Vespers must be credited to this working partnership, this working together of altar, choir, and organ.”117

Contemporaneous Sources

So what does Distler himself say about his musical influences? As already discussed, some of his prefaces or afterwords to specific works or collections mention a specific composer who inspired him to write that particular work, but he has also written in a general sense about other influences on his style, and these are particularly enlightening to study. In 1931 Distler wrote in a letter to Waldemar Klink:

The Lübeck “younger set” [Walter Kraft, Bruno Grusnick, and Distler]… are consistent and even prejudiced, if you will, in their enthusiasm for the music from the 16th century,

116 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 23.

117 Ibid., 39.
back to the old French (Machaut), English (madrigalists), and Netherlanders of the early school (Ockeghem), and in their endeavors to make this music, and only this music, the basis for their own. We have the most priceless treasures from this period (I myself a 3-manual, 30-rank organ from the years 1496 to 1600, in St. Marien the equally old and beautiful Totentanz organ), which for us signify life present and future.\textsuperscript{118}

The salience of this quote is that it confirms Distler’s keen interest and admiration in music of the medieval and Renaissance periods. He even admits that he and his colleagues endeavored to make “only this music” the basis of their own compositions. Any reference to Schütz or other Baroque masters are notably absent in this quote.

It is also enlightening to examine how Distler’s contemporaries described and defined his music. In December 1932, a critic in the \textit{Lübeckische Blätter} wrote the following after hearing a concert of Distler’s music:

Hugo Distler always surprises a person anew with the accuracy of his musical language, a language no longer committed to groping about for the proper expression but already master of it with a sovereignty that is all but amazing for the composer’s youth. Additional features of his style, important to him as a church musician, are the religious fervor of his expression, the deep conviction of the holiness of God’s Word, and the warmth of feeling elicited by this conviction. This warmth makes itself felt again and again, and one is transported as a result.\textsuperscript{119}

In a letter dated December 27, 1933, to a critic who praised Distler’s \textit{Die Weihnachtsgeschichte}, Pastor Kühl wrote the following:

I should like to give expression to my great joy over the statement in your review that \textit{[Die Weihnachtsgeschichte]} impressed you with its simplicity… For me the curious thing about all this is (as you may have seen by looking at the score subsequently) that in general the performance can be carried off successfully only by an especially well-trained choir. The unequal barring in the various parts, the changing rhythm of the individual voices, and the difficulty of the entrances certainly make heavy demands, it seems to me. That in spite of these the music is so extraordinarily and strongly effective, therein lies the special secret of Distler’s art.\textsuperscript{120}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{118} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 31.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 35.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 40.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Finally, his friend and colleague Oskar Söhngen writes,

He and other composers of his generation brought to an end the undisputed reign of instrumental music, which characterized the 19th and early 20th century, through the rediscovery of the human voice, and of its marvelous, mysterious, and plastic qualities… One will search in vain in Distler’s music for illustrative touches, devices of tone coloring, or expressions of “Affekt.” His concern is always with the meaning behind the words, with the spirit and feeling of them which he brings out in his music…¹²¹

What these passages reveal is the supreme importance of text, and in particular the meaning of the text, in Distler’s compositional process. Distler placed a premium on the textual message—often a spiritual message—with the music playing a subservient role and existing only to heighten and enhance the true meaning of the text. This is the reason why people have been so moved by Distler’s music over the past century—Distler’s music gives one the sense that he has magically uncovered a hidden subtext underlying the words that can only speak directly to the soul, and his music is the medium through which that message is conveyed. While the ears attend to the word, the music communes directly with the soul.

Declamatory Style of Schütz and Distler

Much has been written about Distler’s attention to text, and the descriptor “declamatory” is often associated with his music. Declamatory is a term also affiliated with the music of Heinrich Schütz, and this is perhaps the most convincing argument for the link between Distler and Schütz. Both composers do have a declamatory approach to text setting, in the sense that accented syllables are assigned longer note values and the arc of the musical phrases are consistent with spoken inflection. However, text declamation can also describe how the text setting interacts with and reinforces the meter as well as how textural elements are used to augment the meaning of the text, such as homophony vs. polyphony, solo vs. ensemble, double

choir, imitation, word painting, etc. In their approach to meter and texture, Distler and Schütz no longer exhibit such a striking resemblance. In essence, they are alike only in the same way any adept composer would approach a clear and natural text setting. In David Deffer’s aforementioned dissertation comparing the Schütz and Distler settings of Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied, he appears to agree that Schütz and Distler have different approaches to declamatory text setting and makes a notable point in this regard. He writes, “In the use of quickly changing meters, Distler had at his disposal a technique which allowed him great freedom in maintaining the natural rhythms of the German language—a freedom of which Schütz would not have dreamed.”¹²²

To provide an illustrative example, Schütz’s “Selig sind die Toten” is arguably one of the most beautiful and moving pieces of choral music from the Baroque era. It was published in 1648 in the collection Geistliche Chormusik—the same collection that is the namesake for Distler’s Geistliche Chormusik in which Totentanz appears. The text is from Revelation 14:13:

Selig sind die Toten,  
die in dem Herren sterben,  
von nun an.  
Ja, der Geist spricht:  
Sie ruhen von ihrer Arbeit,  
und ihrer Werke folgen ihnen nach.  

Blessed are the dead  
which die in the Lord,  
from henceforth:  
Yea, saith the Spirit,  
that they may rest from their labours;  
and their works do follow after them.  

Distler’s setting of the same text was published in 1933 in the collection Der Jahrkreis, op. 5. Figures 1 and 2 show the first couple phrases of both motets. The natural text declamation is apparent—accented syllables are assigned longer note values and for the most part the pitch rises and falls in the manner of spoken inflection.

¹²² Deffer, “A Study of Two Motets based on Psalm 98,” 32.
Beyond the basic treatment of the text however, immediate differences are apparent.

Schütz’s setting makes use of prolation signs and barlines, and the text setting strongly reinforces
the metric accents. Notes falling on beat 1 or beat 3 invariably receive a syllabic accent. By contrast, Distler’s setting does not use bar lines—at least not in the opening section pictured here. The solo begins on a melismatic chant, which is notated using rhythmic values but nevertheless does not imply a regular meter in any way. There are fourteen quarter-note equivalent values before the chorus enters on the soloist’s last note. Then the chorus’s responding phrase lasts for thirteen quarter-note equivalent values before the soloist enters on the chorus’s last note. The chorus’s part is in a choral-recitative, or parlando, style—declamatory in its own way certainly, but not in a metrical way, as in Schütz’s setting.

The other glaring difference is the use of texture. Schütz uses six vocal parts—three female and three male—and Distler uses soprano solo with soprano, alto, and bass chorus. Schütz begins the first phrase, “Selig sind die Toten” (“Blessed are the dead”), in a homophonic texture, and then the consequent phrase, “die in dem Herren sterben” (“which die in the Lord”), is set using imitative polyphony. Distler begins with the soprano solo with a free chant, followed by the chorus in a homophonic choral recitative, as described above. Distler sets the entire text, “Blessed are the dead, which die in the Lord” in this manner. Finally, Schütz’s setting makes use of basso continuo, as was the prevailing custom of the day, and Distler’s setting is a cappella.

The affective quality that results from these two fundamentally different approaches to meter and texture could not be more contrasting. Schütz’s setting is poignant and lovely, with well-timed and well-prepared dissonances that resolve in immensely satisfying ways. However, Distler’s setting conjures an image of a woman who has just lost a great love—a husband or child perhaps—whose grief causes her to let out a mourning, wailing, cry of pain and loss. The other funeral attendees can only offer steady, gentle reassurances that they are there with her and share her pain. There is no melody to be found in the opening of this setting, because what is
being expressed is too primal to be sentimental. This is what Oskar Söhngen meant by saying, “His concern is always with the meaning behind the words, with the spirit and feeling of them which he brings out in his music…” After becoming acquainted with Distler’s setting, Schütz’s setting almost seems inappropriately refined.

This is one small illustrative example that serves to challenge the entrenched belief that Distler’s music is modeled off of Schütz’s music so wholly and completely. This is not to suggest that Distler was not influenced by Schütz—that would be a preposterous claim, as Distler himself acknowledged Schütz’s influence on specific works. A detailed comparison of both composer’s full oeuvres is not in the scope of this study, but in order to have an open mind for the analysis of Totentanz, it was necessary to address the notion that Schütz was Distler’s most important influence. As this chapter has shown, the many musical and liturgical movements at the time, along with a handful of close mentors and collaborators, helped to shape Distler’s style, which is not solely indebted to Schütz. Chapter three will delve into the political climate at the time, as well as examine Distler’s affiliation with the Nazi party.

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123 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 104.
CHAPTER THREE
DISTLER, NATIONAL-SOCIALISM, AND THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE THIRD REICH

It is challenging to ascertain exactly what Distler’s affiliation was with the Nazi party and what, if anything, Nazism had to do with Distler’s decision to commit suicide at the age of 42. Many of the Distler biographies are written by or informed by Distler’s family and close friends, and naturally they would have a vested interest in downplaying Distler’s complicity with the Nazi party. Palmer, whose biography was informed by Distler’s wife Waltraut, goes so far as to contend that Distler was part of a resistance movement, writing, “His work in church music, in the face of the severe Nazi opposition to such music, may be regarded as a resistance gesture.”\footnote{Palmer, Hugo Distler, 147-148.} He also attributes his suicide, at least in part, to “the Nazi party’s war against the church, and the general disability of an artistic spirit to fit into a totalitarian state.”\footnote{Ibid., 72.}

Music scholar Nick Strimple, who specializes in music of the Holocaust, disagrees and even suggests that Distler was an eager and willing collaborator with the Nazi party. While discussing Distler and some of his contemporaries, he writes, “…their personal integrity has been tarnished somewhat by recently uncovered evidence showing their cooperation with the Nazis to have been more willing, extensive, and profitable than previously thought.”\footnote{Strimple, Choral Music in the Twentieth Century, 36-37.} He notes as evidence that two of Distler’s pieces were used at commemorative festivals for the Munich Beer Hall Putsch and Hitler’s installation as chancellor.\footnote{Ibid., 39.}
Moreover, German historian Michael Kater points to the Nazi reaction to Distler’s death, which evinces their high regard for the composer. He writes, “When Distler committed suicide in 1942, the regime-beholden Zeitschrift für Musik called him ‘a strong talent’ and deplored his loss, and the Hitler Youth Thomaner-Chor of Leipzig sang his hymns in his memory.” Finally, the fact that Distler was put on the Führerliste, rather than being opportune news delivered at an inopportune time, is rather irrefutable proof of his high significance to the Nazi agenda.

Distler’s inconclusive affiliations with the Nazi party are by no means unique. Apart from composers who emigrated, nearly every composer who lived during the Third Reich and still remained in Germany at the conclusion of the war was subjected to the denazification process to ascertain the extent of their collusion with the Nazi party. Documented party membership, appointed leadership positions, commissioned works, and even statements from speeches and letters would be submitted as incriminating evidence that a composer was a Nazi ideologue. But none of these actions necessarily reveal intent, and during denazification trials it was fairly easy for a composer to claim that these actions were taken out of necessity for one’s life and livelihood rather than a symbiosis of beliefs.

Some Third Reich composers, such as Richard Strauss, Carl Orff, and Paul Hindemith, have been written about extensively. Comparatively, very little can be found that provides documentation of Distler’s moves and motives. Any insight to be gained, even if only speculative in nature, must come from relating what little is known of Distler to the more fleshed out accounts of other composers, against a backdrop of the general milieu for musicians in Nazi Germany. From there, perhaps some guarded inferences might be made about the nature of

Distler’s association with the National Socialist regime and whether the political situation directly prompted his suicide.

**Role of Music in Nazi Germany**

An appropriate point of departure is to examine the role of music in German society just before Hitler came to power. Germans viewed themselves as the “people of music,”¹²⁹ and they could be forgiven for thinking of themselves as such. After all, the “three B’s”—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms—not to mention Handel, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Wagner, and Schoenberg and many others, were all German. So was Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Bruckner, Mahler, and, again, many others, if “German” is expanded to include those born in present-day Austria—a completely valid position given that Austrians are ethnic Germans. There is simply no denying the fact that the majority of renowned classical composers are German. If further defense is still required, one only needs to point out that the so-called “nationalist” composers—Russian, Czech, Spanish, etc.—are described as such with the implicit comparison against a German standard.¹³⁰

As previously stated in chapter two, taking pride in their musical heritage was one way that Germans attempted to heal during the Weimar era. However, in the early years of the National Socialist regime, music went from being a national pastime to a political tool. According to musicologist Adolf Aber,

> When Hitler’s gang came to power they were faced with the great problem: “How can we re-arm on the necessary, gigantic scale without arousing the suspicions of the outside world?” To this it was probably Goebbels who found the answer: think “war” every


¹³⁰ Ibid., 1.
minute, but shout “peace” every second. One way of “shouting peace” was to arrange music festivals…

This position is backed by musicologist Pamela Potter, who specializes in German and Jewish studies:

The Nazi government, taking special notice of the historical centrality of music in reinforcing German pride, chose to capitalize on music’s important functions toward a variety of ends. The Nazis took note of the growing popularity of amateur music making [and] integrated musical activities into the party and military organizations… Above all, Nazi leaders exploited Germany’s international reputation as the “people of music” toward building an image of global strength. They pumped resources into struggling musical institutions of world fame in an effort to mitigate irate foreign accusations of Nazi atrocities and to downplay their image as barbarians.

This explicit Nazi tactic was confirmed by the leader of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach, who, even in the midst of war, stated in a speech at the opening concert of the Mozart Week of the German Reich event in Vienna on November 28, 1941,

The National Socialist government has, from the very first day of its functioning, pursued a systematic fostering of the arts. Even though our adversaries time and again try to spread the lie that National Socialism is hostile to the arts, the Movement’s seizure of power nevertheless marked the beginning of generous cultural work. No government in the world, but also no German government before us, ever invested such enormous means in the cultivation of our traditional cultural heritage and contemporary artistic creation as today’s leadership of the German nation.

To a degree, these words are not mere hyperbole. In June 1933 the unemployment rate in Germany was 28.9 percent, but among the music profession, unemployment was nearly double

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132 Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, xii.

that rate.\textsuperscript{134} By the start of the war, unemployment in music had been effectively eliminated.\textsuperscript{135} This impressive feat deserves a closer inspection and some additional data.

As a result of the worldwide economic crisis brought about after the stock market crash in 1929, the music profession suffered greatly in Germany. Between 1929 and 1932 audiences declined thirty-two percent in Hamburg, Germany’s second largest city. Local governments withdrew financial support for the arts in order to shore up welfare. In Berlin in 1931, the government subsidy for the Berlin Philharmonic was cut by a third initially, and then by half. The drastic reduction in funding affected opera perhaps more so than any other musical genre due to its great expense.\textsuperscript{136} When Hitler took control, Richard Strauss reportedly said, “God could be thanked if finally Germany had a Reich Chancellor who was interested in the arts.”\textsuperscript{137} To be sure, after the Nazis took power, money poured in for musical organizations. The Nazis saved the Berlin Philharmonic from declaring bankruptcy, and according to Aber, “Up to the outbreak of war no opera house in the world was so richly endowed as Göring’s \textit{Staatsoper} in Berlin.”\textsuperscript{138}

The elimination of unemployment in the music profession is laudable, but also must be understood more clearly. According to Dr. Berta Geissmar, secretary to Wilhelm Furtwängler and manager of the Berlin Philharmonic, after 1933 “Absolute chaos reigned in the musical

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{135} Ibid., 99.
\bibitem{136} Levi, \textit{Mozart and the Nazis}, 4-5.
\end{thebibliography}
world.”\textsuperscript{139} In the first few months of 1933, conductors Bruno Walter and Fritz Busch were removed from their positions. Performances of Kurt Weill’s new opera were removed from the schedule in theaters around Germany, and the composer was convinced to flee to France. On April 7, 1933, the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service terminated contracts of musicians working in orchestras, opera houses, and conservatories.\textsuperscript{140} Coordinated assaults—in person and in press—on Jewish musicians were carried out by two organizations, the KfdK and the SA.\textsuperscript{141} The \textit{Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur} (KfdK), or Fighting League for German Culture, was a Nazi organization founded in 1928,\textsuperscript{142} and the \textit{Sturmabteilung} (SA), or Storm Detachment, was the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party.

\textbf{Reichskulturkammer}

The \textit{Gleichschaltung}, referring to the coordination and consolidation of all organizations under the new government, began immediately after Hitler took power and continued throughout that first year of Nazi control.\textsuperscript{143} On September 22, 1933, the \textit{Reichskulturkammer} (RKK), or “Reich Culture Chamber,” was instituted to oversee seven areas of German culture—literature, radio, theatre, music, films, fine arts, and the press. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels was installed as the president of the RKK on November 1. It must be noted that the KfdK, which had been fighting on behalf of Nazi ideology in the music community for years, was essentially


\textsuperscript{140} Levi, \textit{Mozart and the Nazis}, 16-18.

\textsuperscript{141} Meyer, \textit{The Politics of Music in the Third Reich}, 22-23.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 24.
passed over with the formation of the new organization, revealing the importance Hitler gave propaganda as a means of total control over German cultural life.\textsuperscript{144}

Each of the seven chambers within the RKK had its own president, although these presidents were legal representatives of the RKK—not its members—and any real power was retained by Goebbels.\textsuperscript{145} The presidents were named by Goebbels at an inaugural event held in Berlin on November 15, 1933. At this event he also announced that all artists were to become members of their respective chambers by December 15, 1933, in order to be eligible for professional employment.\textsuperscript{146}

\textbf{Reichsmusikkammer}

The \textit{Reichsmusikkammer} (RMK), or “Reich Music Chamber,” immediately went to work establishing a new set of laws to regulate the music profession. Meyer writes, “In effect, all musicians learned that the right to practice their craft was a privilege which the regime extended to those it deemed loyal.”\textsuperscript{147} The RMK had departments for composition, soloists, orchestras, entertainment music, music education, choral music, church music, concert agencies, copyright, vendors, financial and legal matters, and thirty-one regional offices. Within a short amount of time, the RMK succeeded in: (1) establishing wages for professional musicians, (2) setting regulations for professional certification, (3) placing restrictions on amateurs performing for

\textsuperscript{144} Meyer, \textit{The Politics of Music in the Third Reich}, 91.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 95.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 93.
money, (4) introducing exams and training courses for private music instructors, (5) and creating a pension plan.¹⁴⁸

Richard Strauss was the first president of the RMK, with Berlin Philharmonic conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler serving as deputy president. However, Strauss maintained a strained relationship with Nazi authorities throughout his tenure and did not always fall immediately into party line. In particular, he took issue with the exclusion of Jews from membership, though “like others in the early years of the regime he did not grasp the enormity of Nazi racial policy.”¹⁴⁹ The Gestapo also intercepted some “compromising” letters he had written to Jewish writer and émigré Stefan Zweig, with whom he had previously collaborated as librettist and secretly hoped to collaborate more in the future. The final straw was a letter dated June 17, 1935, in which he claimed to Zweig that he was miming the role of president “in order to prevent worse.”¹⁵⁰ Within a month he was pressured into resigning—the official reason given was his “advanced age and poor health”—and Peter Raabe was named as his replacement. Raabe, though far less renowned and accomplished than Strauss, proved to be far more compliant.¹⁵¹

To understand how the RMK addressed the huge unemployment concerns in the music profession, it is helpful to examine some additional statistics and procedures. In 1933 there were 23,889 unemployed musicians, which decreased to 14,547 by 1936 and was nearly eliminated by 1939 at the start of the war.¹⁵² First, amateurs were not allowed membership to the RMK, which

¹⁴⁸ Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, 11-12.


¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 194.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 102.

¹⁵² Ibid., 99.
meant they could not be employed. Second, it goes without saying that membership was declined to those with unacceptable ancestry or questionable political affiliations, as determined by a questionnaire and with the aid of the Gestapo.\textsuperscript{153} Final determination of RMK membership fell mostly under the domain of the RMK president, although the Goebbels had highest authority in appeals.

Clearly, the means by which the National Socialist government achieved the feat of reducing unemployment was simply regulating who was and was not eligible for the status of “professional musician,” and thus eligible for employment, in combination with the systematic firing of Jews from their positions. According to Meyer, “Captivated by Nazi elan, while subject to threats and seduction, [musicians] joined the many new musical organizations in the hope of securing employment, professional recognition and prestige. The word was out that Pg’s [\textit{Parteigenossen}, “party members”] would be hired first, favored for promotion, their compositions performed and aired over the radio.”\textsuperscript{154} Distler was, of course, among the many professional musicians who joined the party and registered with the RMK in 1933.

The RMK passed several new laws throughout the first years of existence, which nearly always reinforced Nazi racial policy. An ordinance announced on September 29, 1934 decreed that musicians were forbidden to use foreign or foreign-sounding names and were required to change their names back to their civil names by October 31, 1934 or face expulsion from the RMK.\textsuperscript{155} There were also ordinances against “undesirable and dangerous music.” On October 10, 1935, music publishers and dealers were ordered to notify the RMK of any sales of music by

\textsuperscript{153} Meyer, \textit{The Politics of Music in the Third Reich}, 98-100.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 89-90.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 104.
composers who left Germany after the Nazi seizure of power. In December 1937 music publishers were reminded to submit copies of any foreign music to the Official Censorship Office of the Propaganda Ministry for approval before distributing.\textsuperscript{156}

On December 21, 1937, the RMK established a music examining board 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.” Examiners served in various regions and were tasked with determining whether private music teachers were teaching in a manner acceptable to Nazi policy. Distler was appointed examiner in the Stuttgart area, and according to Palmer, this was

a task which distressed him greatly, but one which he took on, hoping in a small way to help those whom he was forced to examine. Many teachers were declared undesirable and thereby lost their only means of livelihood; Distler hoped by accepting membership in the board to offer leniency to a few of these unfortunates.\textsuperscript{157}

If this is indeed true, it would appear that Distler had the same motives in mind as Richard Strauss when he accepted the presidency of the RMK. Paul Hindemith is another composer who also had a fluctuating relationship with the National Socialist regime, and at one time held a leadership position in the RMK. Since Hindemith’s struggle for acceptance as a composer in the Third Reich is so well documented, a closer examination of his experience may help elucidate understanding of the extremely difficult situation composers faced during this era, despite the torrent of claims of the positive impact the Nazis had on the music profession.

\textsuperscript{156} Meyer, \textit{The Politics of Music in the Third Reich}, 105.

\textsuperscript{157} Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 60.
Hindemith was appointed to a leadership position in the Reich Music Chamber in February 1934, serving under Strauss and Furtwängler. His *Mathis der Maler* symphony was premiered in Berlin in March 1934, conducted by Furtwängler. Even though he had previously been a Nazi target due to his modernist style, this work appeased the party, and even, according to one German musicologist, “conformed very precisely to the official expectations for modern German music in the Third Reich.” However, in May 1934 Hindemith lost his hard-fought goodwill with Nazi leadership when he publicly denounced Hitler while in Switzerland, and almost immediately performances of his works were banned in Germany.

Against Hindemith’s many critics and enemies, Furtwängler was his most ardent and vocal supporter. In November 1934, Furtwängler wrote an article published in Berlin’s daily newspaper called “The Hindemith Case,” in which he makes a fervent plea for keeping Hindemith in Germany and allowing his works to be performed. So despised was this action by Nazi leadership, including Rosenberg (leader of the KdK), Goebbels, and Göring, that Furtwängler was forced to resign all of his political and artistic positions at the time.

Despite this threat Hindemith remained in Germany trying to get back in the good graces of the party, though in the entire year of 1935 not one of Hindemith’s works saw public performances in Germany. Finally, in January 1936, Hindemith publicly swore an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler, and within months his works were being performed again. This

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159 Ibid., 33.

160 Ibid., 38.

161 Ibid., 41.
reversal of fortune proved to be short-lived, however; in Hitler’s September 1936 Nuremberg rally speech he decried “Bolshevism in politics and culture, art and politics.” Goebbels saw that speech as official clearance to take a bolder stance, and in October he officially banned performances of Hindemith’s works in Germany, once and for all. In the Nazi exhibition on “degenerate music” in May 1938, some of Hindemith’s music was featured. Finally, in late summer of 1938, Hindemith and his wife moved to Switzerland, eventually settling in the United States in 1940 and becoming a U.S. citizen in 1946.

“Degenerate Music”

The “degenerate music” exhibit referenced above was part of the inaugural festival of the Reichsmusiktage on May 22-29, 1938 in Düsseldorf. This event, produced by the RMK, was supposed to become an annual event, but the 1939 festival would prove to be the last due to the outbreak of war. The festival was a massive display of all affiliated units within the RMK, but one of the most pertinent components of the festival was the display on “degenerate music.” This supplied the Nazis with perhaps their most practical opportunity to present a cogent definition of “degenerate” music—something they had been attempting to do for years. In reality, this proved more difficult to do in the field of music than in art, which they had successfully accomplished the previous year in Munich.

The “degenerate music” exhibit was prepared by Hans Severus Ziegler, the director of the National Theater in Weimar, and included an accompanying printed catalogue written by

162 Kater, Composers of the Nazi Era, 42.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid., 47.
Ziegler. Unfortunately, Ziegler was not an educated musician, so he tended to write about music in vague generalities. In the absence of a clear definition of degenerate music, the Nazis chose to target specific composers, most of whom were Jewish or had Jewish affiliations, either through marriage or professional dealings. Schoenberg, naturally, was a primary target, because of his Jewish heritage and also because he was credited with inventing atonality, the sworn enemy of German tonality. Other notable targets were Anton Webern (a student of Schoenberg’s), Kurt Weill (who was Jewish), Igor Stravinsky (who was composing using Schoenberg’s dodecaphony), Paul Hindemith (whose wife was Jewish), and even Richard Strauss (for his collaborations with Zweig).¹⁶⁶ The targeting of Strauss is particularly notable since he had formerly been the head of the RMK. Distler found out after the Reichsmusiktage of 1938 that his music was originally meant to be included in the “degenerate music” exhibit, but due to the intervention of Gerhard Maassens, his music was spared from the exhibit.¹⁶⁷

Religion and Nazism

Nazism and sacred music had an even more complicated interaction. Nazism was not an overtly religious political movement; in fact, Nazi leaders would have preferred pagan rituals to Christian ones in German society. Nevertheless, by the Nazi era, sacred music had become distinctly tied to the notion of “Germanness” among the German people. This was evident even among the German Wehrmacht, with militarism and sacred music sharing several ties. There are anecdotes of German troops spontaneously breaking out into Protestant hymns after military

¹⁶⁶ Potter, Most German of the Arts, 16-21.

victories. A Protestant soldiers’ songbook was issued just before the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and was used throughout the war to maintain morale. Finally, though the genocide of the Jews during the Nazi reign is generally deemed to be an issue of racism, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 defined a Jew as someone whose grandparents practiced the Jewish religion. Sacred music therefore became a divisive instrument—a way to identify “true Germans” from those who are not. As Doris Bergen claims, church music “echoed the legal assumption that only Christians were Aryans, and only Aryans were Germans.”

German Christians

During the Nazi reign, there were movements to de-judaize sacred music, primarily coming from two distinct groups—German neopagans, who viewed Christianity as disguised Judaism; and the *Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen* (Faith Movement of German Christians, shortened hereafter to German Christians). The German Christians included approximately 600,000 members, both lay and clerical, from within the official Protestant Church. German Christians held the vast majority of powerful and influential positions during the Nazi era, including holding twenty-five out of twenty-eight regional positions and outnumbering non-

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169 Ibid., 144.

170 Ibid., 143.

171 Ibid., 145.

172 Ibid., 146.
German Christians among university faculties.173 They adopted the slogan of “one Volk, one God—one Reich, one Church,” in a clear alliance with Nazi goals. They also stated, “We profess to participate in the creation of a militant and truly völkisch Church, in completion of the German Reformation of Martin Luther, which alone does justice to the total demands of the National Socialist State.” The Church musicians who identified with the German Christians organized in the KfdK, publishing their own journal, Kirchenmusik im Dritten Reich (Church Music in the Third Reich), the cover of which was adorned by swastika and cross.174

As early as November 1933 they held a rally stating their mission—to “purge everything ‘un-German’ from the worship service” in order to attract all National Socialist party members to the church. This included removing all Old Testament references, including Zion, Jerusalem, and Abraham. In hymns, words like “Hallelujah,” “Hosanna,” and “Immanuel,” which are Hebrew words, had to be replaced with equivalent German phrases and sayings. Eventually, the melodies themselves went under scrutiny. Melodies by composers such as Mendelssohn, who were of Jewish ancestry, were removed. The further they examined the melodies, the more they realized how many of them were based on old Hebrew melodies, even going back as far as Gregorian chants. The German Christians then called for new Aryan melodies, resulting in hymnals containing German Christian “songs of struggle”—tunes with martial rhythms and militaristic lyrics.175

Though the German Christians were to an extent successful at ridding the church of Jewish members and musicians and effecting change with regard to liturgy, prayers, and

173 Bergen, “Hosanna or ‘Hilf, O Herr Uns,’” 146.


175 Bergen, “Hosanna or ‘Hilf, O Herr Uns,’” 146-149.
scripture readings, it proved to be very difficult for the German Christians to make the grand sweeping changes to sacred music that they espoused. The deeply entrenched cultural loyalty to the traditional hymns proved too strong, and the general population seemed to be unwilling to give up the beloved hymns they knew so well. The German people simply did not care to sing the new, unfamiliar songs. Even several outspoken German Christian leaders took a more moderate stance on musical reform. One prominent leader said “it was in ‘bad taste’ to sing rabble-rousing, fighting, or even folksy songs in the church because they…violated the ‘hallowed stillness’ of the house of God.”176 Also, the amount of changes that would be necessary to completely eradicate any Jewish influence from church music made the task nearly impossible. A 1939 study by the Institute for Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence in German Church Life found that only 4.4 percent of content from hymnals could remain in its original form.177 Finally, suggested changes to lyrics—for example, replacing “Hallelujah” with “Gelobet sei Gott” in Handel’s chorus—were unwieldy.178

The Confessional Church

By May 1933, Martin Niemöller had rallied a group opposed to the German Christians, and they formally separated from the state church. Initially calling themselves the Pfarrer-Notbund (Emergency Association of Pastors), they eventually became known as the Confessional Church. Perhaps in response to the schism that was created by this action, Thomaskantor Karl Straube prepared a statement which was signed by thirty-eight other church musicians. A sympathy declaration was then signed by an additional group of twenty-nine

176 Bergen, “Hosanna or ‘Hilf, O Herr Uns,’” 150.
177 Ibid., 151.
178 Ibid.
church musicians in Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein and Lübeck—Distler among them. These signed statements were presented at an organists’ conference in Berlin in May, and later published in Zeitschrift für Musik in June. Straube’s statement included these words:

We who have been working for the regeneration of Church music and the study of organ music, witness with joy the return of the people to Church music today. We profess our faith in the community-rooted power of all church music… born in the struggle against disintegrating forces of liberalism and individualism. We acknowledge the völkisch basis of Church music… We reject a German Evangelical Church music which is not indigenous, which is born of a cosmo-political spirit.  

It is perhaps startling and unexpected to read a word like völkisch—a nineteenth-century ideal that became highly politicized by Hitler and was arguably the most commonly manipulated term in Nazi rhetoric—in a statement by Straube regarding church music. However, Oskar Söhngen offers an explanation: that Straube cleverly appropriated Nazi rhetoric in an attempt to render the German Christians irrelevant and impotent. 

In any case, the German Christians persisted, as did the struggle between the two factions. The Gestapo arrested seven hundred Confessional Church pastors, but this action did not permanently suppress the Confessional Church. In May 1936 they sent a memorandum to Hitler in which they denounced the Nazi’s anti-Semitic policies and measures and insisted that the state withdraw from control of the church. Once again, hundreds of pastors were arrested, church funds were confiscated, and one of the signers was murdered. 

Pastor Kühl was a leader of the Confessional Church, which led to his house-arrest and subsequent exile. This precipitated Distler’s permanent departure from Lübeck, as described in

\[180\] Ibid., 53.  
chapter one. By the time Distler returned to Lübeck for a visit in November 1937, Pastor Kühl had returned, the Confessional Church was successfully suppressed, and Pastor Niemöeller was in prison in Berlin. Throughout 1937, more than 807 Confessional Church pastors were arrested, many sent to concentration camps.¹⁸² Pastor Niemöeller was tried on March 2, 1938, but was acquitted of the main charge against him—underhand attacks against the government. He was fined two thousand marks and sentenced to seven months in prison, which he had already served, so technically he was to be released. As he left the courtroom he was apprehended by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp, where he remained until the Allied troops released him at the end of the war.¹⁸³

Office of Church Musicians

As a reminder, within the RMK there were several divisions representing different branches of the music profession, and the Office of Church Musicians, led by Karl Straube, was one. In September 1935 there was a massive purge of all “non-Aryan” church musicians in the RMK, who had originally acquired their membership “by means of collective incorporation of the profession.” The church did nothing to defend these musicians or intercede on their behalf.¹⁸⁴ Additionally, amateur organizations were required to be registered members of the RMK by May 15, 1934 in order to have permission to publicly perform. In November 1939 a new decree clarified that for purposes of simplification, Protestant Church Choirs as a subgroup were to be dissolved and reinstated as one of the three official subgroups—male choirs, mixed choirs, or

¹⁸² Palmer, Hugo Distler, 60.
¹⁸³ Ibid., 62.
folk music ensembles.\textsuperscript{185} This policy once again reinforced the insignificance of church music to the Nazi cause.

**Hitlerjugend**

One final aspect of the Nazi organization deserves an overview in this study—the impact of the *Hitlerjugend* (HJ), or “Hitler Youth,” on the professional music community. As described in chapter two, the *Jugendbewegung*, or German Youth Movement, began around the turn of the century with the *Wandervögel* and grew during the first quarter of the twentieth century to include many groups representing all political parties, religious groups, and social classes. The HJ was founded in 1922 as one of many youth organizations at the time, but it rapidly increased its membership alongside the growing strength of its founder and National Socialism. The youth movement effectively disappeared after 1933, when the HJ became the only legal youth organization. Other youth organizations could either disband or be absorbed in the Hitler Youth. By 1936, 5.4 million youths belonged to the HJ voluntarily, and after 1939 membership was made mandatory.\textsuperscript{186}

The diabolical brilliance of the HJ rivals the Nazis’ manipulation of music and culture. Millions of German youth were indoctrinated through their membership in the HJ. Kater writes, “It was one of the great propaganda achievements of the Nazi rulers… Young people, with their ideals and energies, would have been especially vulnerable to [Nazi] values in their own search for identity and meaning.”\textsuperscript{187} Throughout the early 1930s the social pressure on a youth to join


\textsuperscript{186} Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, 14.

the HJ must have been immense, and these impressionable youths grew to be so exceedingly
great in number as to shape the effect of Nazism in Germany. With a membership of millions
and enormous cultural influence, the HJ would have been a formidable opponent for anyone at
odds with the mission of the HJ.

Chapter one has already described an early conflict between Distler and the HJ. In
November 1933, Distler unfortunately did find himself at odds with the local HJ in Lübeck, who
were scheduling their members for service every time Distler scheduled a choir test.\(^{188}\) Many
years later, when Distler was living in Berlin, he encountered a similar situation. In the fall of
1941 Distler was the conductor of the Berlin \textit{Staats- und Domchor}, and once again the local HJ
scheduled meetings during his rehearsal times. When he went to the ministry of education to see
what could be done, he was told to either do secular music or do without the boys.\(^{189}\)
Undoubtedly coincidental, it may be nonetheless worth noting that Distler encountered serious
friction with the HJ the year before he composed \textit{Totentanz} and again the year before he
committed suicide.

\textbf{Distler and Nazism}

Clearly, the impact of Nazi policy on the lives of professional musicians during the Third
Reich is absolute and unmitigated. Without having lived through it, it is nearly impossible to
empathize with the difficulties faced by professional musicians, particularly composers and
church musicians. Michael Meyer discusses the challenge of trying to understand the choices,
words, actions, and motives of musicians in Nazi Germany:

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item\(^{188}\) “Biographischen Daten,” Hugo Distler, accessed November 23, 2016,
http://www.hugo-distler.de.
\item\(^{189}\) Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 69.
\end{itemize}
One invariably asks whether the “culture producers” who betrayed enthusiastic support for the “Third Reich” did indeed genuinely identify with Nazi cultural policies or—in view of the incredible unemployment rate among musicians (far exceeding that of the population at large)—whether they simply took advantage of new opportunities at the expense of Jews and others purged at the onset of the regime. If the latter, to what degree were they aware of their contribution to a cultural façade for the terror state, for the cynical manipulators and perpetrators of unspeakable crimes? Terror and fear adds another dimension which is stressed in nearly all recollections and is legitimate in view of the many people who fell victim to the regime. Motives and rationales most certainly were contradictory in the case of many, and varied among individuals.¹⁹⁰

Based on the overview of Nazi structure, practices, and policies provided in this chapter, these are the important themes to emphasize:

(1) For professional musicians (composers, performers, church musicians, etc.), it was necessary to obtain membership in the RMK in order to maintain employment. Membership required proof of Aryan ancestry and loyalty to Nazi party. Party membership was not an option.

(2) Once RMK membership was established, composers faced additional challenges. Nazi authorities controlled composers’ performance rights, publisher sales, and permission to travel abroad. It was absolutely essential for composers to remain in the good graces of the party in order to making a living and have their works performed.

(3) Party approval fluctuated constantly. Unconditional and permanent endorsement was never granted, and the National Socialist government maintained control with the constant tacit threat that composers could at any time be labeled “degenerate” by the Nazi press. Joseph Goebbels, as Propaganda Minister and President of the RKK, had absolute authority.

(4) Party leadership positions were highly desired, not only because a degree of autonomy and trust was bestowed, but because those holding these positions would—with great caution—be in a position to aid others.

(5) Sacred music composers faced further threats, as sacred music did not strictly conform to National Socialist ideals. The infighting between the two factions of the Lutheran church contributed additional levels of complexity. Sacred music composers would have felt pressure to take on projects outside the church that were in the spirit of Nazi ideology and would earn state approval.

With the exception of that last point regarding sacred music, Paul Hindemith certainly struggled with all of these themes. It is easy to question why a composer would choose to stay in Germany and not emigrate, but love of homeland, the desire to stay near friends and family, and ignorance of the full extent of the Nazi racial policies were undoubtedly powerful factors. These factors led Hindemith to go so far as to publicly declare an oath of allegiance to Hitler in order to have the ban against his music lifted. In the end though, even that was not enough to secure lasting Nazi approval, and he eventually emigrated to Switzerland and finally the United States. Hindemith must have felt somewhat like Sisyphus, condemned to continue pushing the boulder of his career up the Nazi mount, only to have it come crashing down over and over again. It must be noted that this was the experience of the composer who, according to Michael Kater, was “the most prominent composer of the younger generation in Germany at the beginning of Nazi rule.” If a composer of this level of esteem and world renown was subjected to such a high

191 Sisyphus, a King of Corinth in Greek mythology, had once figured out how to cheat death. As punishment, he had to live out eternity in Hades pushing a large boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down again.

192 Kater, Composers of the Nazi Era, 49.
degree of scrutiny and hardship, what must it have been like for a lesser known and established sacred music composer like Hugo Distler?

It is not a stretch to propose that all of the aforementioned pressures were present in Distler’s life. The facts are that Distler registered as a party member in 1933, by 1938 he held a position of leadership in the RMK, and just at the time of his death in 1942 he was placed on the *Führerliste*. These facts are indisputable and, frankly, are not interesting by themselves. What is interesting is the question of *why* these are the facts. A review of Distler’s timeline, as it relates to his affiliation with the National Socialist regime, might prove helpful and instructive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 1933</td>
<td>Distler registers as a member of Nazi party</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 1933</td>
<td>Distler signs statement on church music written by Straube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Distler has problems with church choir boys and HJ, adds girls to children’s choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1934</td>
<td>Première of Distler’s <em>Ewiges Deutschland</em> (Eternal Germany), despite heavy press it was not well received and never performed again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>late summer 1934</td>
<td>Première of Distler’s <em>Lied von der Glocke</em>, it was called “negroide Musik” by a critic and never performed again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1934</td>
<td>Premiere of <em>Totentanz</em>, critical success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1934</td>
<td>Kassel <em>Musiktage</em>; several of Distler’s sacred choral works were performed including <em>Totentanz</em>; Distler described by critic as the “great hope of German music”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1936</td>
<td>Conflict between German Christians and Confessional Church escalates, Distler resigns St. Jakobi position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1937</td>
<td>Distler moves to Stuttgart, local Nazi students attack him because he is a church musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1937</td>
<td>Distler unsuccessfully tries to secure employment in Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1937</td>
<td><em>Das Fest der deutschen Kirchenmusik</em> held in Berlin, Distler’s music is featured and called “degenerate” by press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early 1938</td>
<td>Distler is appointed an examiner with the RMK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1938</td>
<td>Distler’s Esslingen <em>Singakademie</em> gives performance of Bach’s St. John Passion and is disbanded by Nazis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1938</td>
<td>Nazis remove Distler’s pieces from organ conference in Freiburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1938</td>
<td>Distler’s music is nearly part of “degenerate music” exhibit in <em>Reichsmusiktage</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1939</td>
<td>Première of <em>Mörike-Chorliederbuch</em> at festival in Austria; critics praise the work, saying “once again German art is producing young masters”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1939</td>
<td>Germany invades Poland, war begins</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
early 1940  Distler receives first military summons
October 1940  Distler moves to Berlin, begins “professorship” replacing Kurt Thomas
January 1941  Distler receives second military summons
1941  Distler named director of Berlin Staats- und Dom-Chor
July-December 1941  Distler’s wife and children remain on the Baltic, he sees them only on weekends
1942  Distler receives 2,000 RM as an award for composition through the RMK
April 1942  Distler becomes SS target, threatened with being sent to Nazi training camp
October 1942  Distler receives third military summons
November 1, 1942  Distler commits suicide

This timeline shows the extent of Distler’s struggle to maintain a reliably favorable standing with the Nazi party. He must have had an overwhelming desire to achieve this, not only to be assured that his life and livelihood, as well as the lives of his family members, were not in peril. But additionally, recalling Distler’s earliest childhood experience—renounced by his own parents and abandoned to be raised by his grandparents—one can reasonably surmise that throughout his life Distler was afflicted with a profound psychological need for acceptance that must have increased his anxiety over the entire situation.

But why take his own life? Many composers simply fled Germany during the Third Reich—an option that should have been possible for Distler as well, yet he chose a different path. While there is no doubt that the political situation and the military summonses were motivators in this decision, it alone cannot suffice for a plausible explanation. English-language scholarship has been short on details and has tended to regard his suicide as evidence of his ultimate refusal to fight for in the Nazi Wehrmacht. More recent German publications on Distler have provided new details that cast serious doubt on the validity of such statements. It is now known that Distler had received a call from Fritz Stein on Saturday, October 31, around 5:00

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p.m. informing Distler that while official written notification of his exemption from service would be forthcoming, he could be absolutely assured that it was indeed approved and he would not have to report for service on November 3. Fritz Stein was the director of the Berlin Musikhochschule where Distler taught, and he had been working feverishly on Distler’s behalf to obtain his *UK-Stellung* (“exemption from military service”). That Distler then telephoned his good friend Dr. Oskar Söhngen to share the news is doubly verified—in a letter written by Stein and published in Distler-Harth’s biography, and by Dr. Söhngen himself. Stein writes, “Prof. Distler had also informed Dr. Söhngen about this on Saturday, October 31st, and at the same time expressed his pleasure in the fact that now at least he could conduct his first concert with the *Staats- und Domchor*, a large Schütz celebration.”

In Söhngen’s words,

> On the eve of his self-chosen death, Hugo Distler called us. He had already heard that at the last moment his conscription order for military service for the hated National Socialism had once again been rescinded—for how long? There was no sense of joy in our conversation. On the contrary, his voice sounded tired and distant. But there was no indication of the grave decision he carried out the next morning.

It would seem there is some question as to whether this news brought Distler any sense of joy or relief, but it is absolutely clear that Distler knew that he would not have to report for military duty when he made the decision to end his life.

The theory that Distler’s suicide was an act of political and ideological resistance to National Socialism is simply not credible. Yet nor is the conjecture that Distler was a “willing collaborator” with the Nazis. Söhngen wrote, “In our political talks, Distler’s hatred of National

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195 Ibid., 336.

Socialism often found unrestrained expression.” Distler’s former student Jan Bender once told a story involving Distler suddenly running into hiding when he saw SS-men on the street he was walking down. Bender said, “He hated the Naizs and was afraid of them. He was a man of peace.” Distler-Harth tells an account involving Distler concealing, aiding, and feeding a young Jewish girl who found herself alone in Berlin in the summer of 1942, just months before his suicide. Finally, Distler’s own words provide subtle yet poignant testimony to the presence of a secret double life in Nazi Germany. In a letter to Jan Bender on February 13, 1938, Distler wrote, “Perhaps because I now work less than ever—for lack of time and scruples—I listen more to the voices around me, and there is also now in our seemingly poor present age, the existence of many secret lives, more underground, but perhaps precisely because of that, twice as endearing.”

Distler was, like many thousands of professional musicians during the Third Reich, a victim of a totalitarian regime that viewed his discipline as the ultimate political tool for control and domination, both at home and abroad. Though a certain percentage of musicians may have been Nazi ideologues and sympathizers, most were opportunists at worst, with all being victims of Nazi manipulation to some degree. As Michael Kater puts it: “One and all—musicians and singers, composers and conductors, all of whom had to make a living as artists in the Third

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197 Söhngen, “Erinnerungen an Hugo Distler,” 142.


199 Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler, 322.

Reich—emerged in May 1945 severely tainted, with their professional ethos violated and their music often compromised: gray people against a landscape of gray.”

In order to address an alternate theory of why Distler chose to commit suicide on November 1, 1942, an examination of his eschatological views may shed some new light. The next chapter will discuss this topic, along with an overview of Distler’s Totentanz of 1934. Considered by some to be of the Requiem genre, it is certainly the clearest example among Distler’s oeuvre to explicitly address life, death, and the afterlife.

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202 FitzGibbon, “Historicism and Nationalism in the German Requiems of Brahms, Reger, and Distler.”
CHAPTER FOUR

TOTENTANZ

Laß alles, was du hast, auf daß du alles nimmst;
Verschmäh die Welt, daß du sie hundertfach bekömmst!

Leave all that you have, that you make take all;
Spurn the world, that you may receive it a hundredfold!

The above aphorism is taken from The Cherubinic Wanderer by Angelus Silesius, book three, verse 219. It was also used by Hugo Distler as the text for the opening movement of Totentanz, opus 12, number 2. The sentiment expressed echoes a common Bible lesson—that if one is willing to forgo worldly possessions one may receive the riches of the kingdom of heaven. This was an important theme for Silesius throughout his life, who once wrote in a letter, “The world is a most beautiful naught.”203 In this quote, Silesius is highlighting the internal struggle between acknowledging the material beauty of the world while knowing that ultimately that beauty is completely meaningless. There is an eschatological element to the above passage, in the sense that it concerns death and the afterlife. What this passage means to Distler, why he selected this text, what prompted him to compose the Totentanz, and the multitude of influences on the genesis of this work—art, literary, musicological, religious, perhaps even political—are the subject of chapter four.

Geistliche Chormusik

Totentanz is published in a collection of nine motets entitled Geistliche Chormusik, opus 12. Totentanz is the second in the collection. The first seven of the motets were composed during the years 1934 to 1937, while he was living in Lübeck; the last two were composed during the Berlin years, at the very end of Distler’s life. Palmer considers the motets in this collection “the

crowning achievements of Distler’s sacred choral music.”  When he began this collection in early 1934, he originally intended it to comprise fifty-two motets, one for each Sunday in the liturgical year, but it was never completed.

To put this collection in context, it is helpful to review Distler’s choral music leading up to his opus 12. His first published choral work, written during his Leipzig years, is a motet based on a chorale—*Herzlich lieb hab’ ich dich, o Herr*, opus 2.  *Eine deutsche Choralmesse*, opus 3, was Distler’s first Lübeck composition and is also based on several chorales.  *Kleine Adventsmusik*, opus 4, is based on an Advent chorale and patterned off of a Bach chorale cantata.  *Der Jahrkreis*, opus 5, is a collection of fifty-three-part anthems, one for each Sunday of the year. Of the fifty-three anthems, forty-three are based on chorales and most of the rest have scriptural texts.  *Christ, der du bist der helle Tag*, opus 6/I is a short cantata based on a chorale.  *Drei kleine Choralmotetten*, opus 6/II is a collection of three motets, and once again, all are based on chorales.  Distler’s *Choralpassion*, opus 7, was inspired by the Schütz *St. Matthew Passion*, which was annually performed at St. Jakobikirche. With text assembled from all four gospels, the main unifying element of the work is the chorale *Jesu, deine Passion*,

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205 Ibid., 132.
206 Ibid., 106.
208 Ibid., 111.
209 Ibid., 113.
210 Ibid., 117.
211 Ibid., 119-120.
with the eight stanzas of the chorale spread out and occurring at important structural moments of the work. Die Weihnachtsgeschichte, opus 10, is the companion piece to the Choralpassion, telling the Christmas story. As with the Choralpassion this work is also a chorale partita, based on seven stanzas of Es est ein Ros’ entsprungen. Two chorale cantatas, Wo Gott zum Haus nit gibt sein Gunst and Nun danket all und bringet Ehr, comprise opus 11.

Though these works have basic stylistic differences—opuses 4, 6/I, and 11 all use instrumental accompaniment while the others are a cappella; and they are for double chorus (opus 2), six-part chorus (opus 3), five-part chorus (opus 7), four-part chorus (opuses 10, 6/II, and 11), and three-part chorus (opuses 4, 5, and 6/I) — there is one very obvious unifying element: the use of chorales as basis. Every single choral opus prior to Geistliche Chormusik uses at least one chorale as its basis. When additional text is needed, Distler uses scripture or other liturgical texts. Only three brief works use a text that does not fall into one of those categories—two movements from Der Jahrkreis are based on folksongs and one movement is based on a text by the poet Eduard Mörike.

So what would have inspired Distler, a devout Lutheran who was part of the Berneuchener Bewegung, to seek a text by Angelus Silesius—a seventeenth-century Catholic priest and mystic—for the Totentanz? One can only speculate, because Distler has only left written commentary on his musical influences, not his literary influences. But such an anomalous choice for him seems to indicate that he either experienced a catalyst of sorts that caused this

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212 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 121-124.
213 Ibid., 126-127.
214 Ibid., 130.
215 Ibid., 113-114.
detour into new religious and textual territory or that he had a hidden lifelong interest in mysticism and eschatology. Either account would supply a fascinating new line of inquiry into understanding the man and composer Hugo Distler. In support of the latter, one might consider that Michael Kater claims that the *Wandervögel* were “enthralled by mysticism,” and Distler is believed by some to have been in the *Wandervögel* as a youth. Perhaps Distler’s interest in mysticism had been sparked as a youth, and he kept this interest more or less hidden prior to composing *Totentanz*. But in order to consider whether the former theory might have merit, it will be necessary to more closely examine the events leading up to his composing *Totentanz*.

**The Years 1933-1934**

As discussed in chapter one, Distler had moved to Lübeck to be organist and choir director at the St. Jakobikirche in 1931, and he immediately began composing sacred choral music to be performed by either his church children’s choir or for Bruno Grusnick’s *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis*. The year 1933 in particular was an unqualified success for Distler. In addition to his job at St. Jakobi, he began teaching composition at the Lübeck *Staatsconservatorium und Hochschule für Musik*, and he also traveled to Berlin-Spandau a couple times a month to teach at the *Schule für Kirchenmusik*. He was invited to perform at a number of festivals across the country, and with works like the *Choralpassion* he was achieving nationwide fame. Critics wrote nothing but praise for his works and for his organ playing. To close out the year, Distler got married. After an early childhood marked by rejection by his own parents, Distler must have felt overjoyed about being accepted and supported by his closest friends and colleagues—Grusnick and Pastor Kühl—as well as by strangers and critics, and

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finally forming his own loving family with his wife Waltraut. The year 1933 must have ended with Distler in a state of deep contentment and bliss.

Unfortunately, the year 1934, the year in which Distler composed and premiered *Totentanz*, was marked by his first major professional disappointments. Grusnick describes how at the very beginning of 1934, Distler “suffers a nervous breakdown. He is neither physically nor mentally fit to face the excessive burden of his Lübeck and Spandau duties. He therefore has to give up Spandau at the end of the winter semester. Still feeling the effects of this crisis, the plan for his *Totentanz* begins to take shape.” Distler’s daughter, Barbara Distler-Harth, provides even more details. Of his exhausting work commitments, she writes,

> It seems, however, that it gradually became clear to him, exactly the dilemma he had maneuvered into, and that ultimately however, all came to an either/or—Spandau or Lübeck—if he did not want to be completely overwhelmed. However, Hugo Distler’s two equally powerful motives lay in conflict with one other: his desire for more freedom to compose and for professional development was opposed by the yearning for comfort in the shadow of the church spires of St. Jakobi.

On January 19, Hugo Distler suffered a nervous breakdown, which was more severe and alarming than any that came before. He remained unemployed for an extended period of time and required months to recover completely.

These quotes are extremely illuminating, because they establish Distler’s frame of mind and the psychological context underlying Distler’s compositional choices at the time that he composed *Totentanz*.

Distler-Harth goes on to provide additional information about the earliest plans for *Totentanz* while Distler was in the hospital recovering from his nervous breakdown:

> At the end of January, Hugo Distler had received a visit from Bruno Grusnick which was likely significant for his further development. Grusnick knew that Distler had already

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217 Bruno Grusnick, *Hugo Distler* (800 Jahre Musik in Lübeck, 1982), 17. All translations of this text are mine.

occupied himself with the subject of a “Totentanzspiel” since the summer of 1932. Grusnick’s visit to the hospital was apparently focused on the further development of this plan for the ultimate design of Hugo Distler's Totentanz, and specifically on the spoken texts that Johannes Klöcking should contribute.

Since their trip to the Harz Mountains [in the summer of 1932], Hugo Distler and Maria Thienhaus [Waltraut’s mother] had repeatedly talked about the realization of the Totentanz theme, and she was the one to suggest that he set to music the verses of Angelus Silesius from The Cherubinic Wanderer in his Totentanz. Distler presumably received the decisive impetus for the final design of the work on April 25th, 1934, in the 24th Vespers at St. Jakobi, in which Leonhard Lechner’s Sprüche vom Leben und Tod and the motet Selig Sind die Toten by Heinrich Schütz were performed and deeply impressed him.

At the time when Bruno Grusnick visited the patient, the vision for the form of the Totentanz assumed its first shape, and the young composer—in the quiet days of his convalescence—sank deep into the mystical thought-world of Angelus Silesius. And it almost seems as if these otherworldly ideas—in his outer torment—now gently called back to him in the profound sound-world of the old organs and the protective walls and churches of the quiet, medieval Lübeck…

The various influences and collaborators mentioned in the above passage—including Silesius, Lechner, and Klöcking—will all be explained in greater detail later in this chapter, but first there is one final piece of context to consider. In addition to his physical and mental health being compromised during the genesis of Totentanz, it is also worth a brief reminder that Distler experienced his first critical failures in the spring and summer of 1934. Grusnick again provides some context:

In April, he is asked by the Lübeck Stadttheater to write music for a great scenic cantata on texts by a young poet, Wolfram Brockmeier. Although he works passionately on his Geistliche Chormusik, he assumes this secular mission, in order to not jeopardize his political position. He has only three weeks to write the composition. On May 24, 1934, the world premiere of the work, which bears the title Ewiges Deutschland (Forever Germany), takes place in the Stadttheater.

219 Distler-Harth’s date of April 25 is incorrect. The Vespers to which she refers took place on Volkstrauertag, which was on February 25, 1934.

220 Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler, 185.

221 Grusnick, Hugo Distler, 17.
Chapter one already noted that this work was not well-received by critics despite its hype, and it was never performed again. Today, no score exists of this work. In addition, over the summer of 1934 he composed a work based on Schiller’s Lied von der Glocke for baritone, four mixed voices, two pianos, and orchestra. In a negative critique it was called “negroide Musik” (“negroid music”), and no more performances of this work were given.222

Could the combination of work pressures and critical rejections of his compositions, across the backdrop of Nazi upheaval and re-organization, have prompted Distler to be preoccupied with themes of death and the afterlife, the search for greater meaning in existence? It would be understandable if this was so. The works in Geistliche Chormusik undeniably address eschatological themes, even if the reason behind his interest can only be surmised. Palmer notes that five of the nine motets in the collection deal with an eschatological subject matter.223 Adrio writes,

If one surveys the motets of Distler’s Geistliche Chormusik, one finds an array of texts that turn more and more from the youthful, stormy beginnings of Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied to thoughts of mortality and death, texts which take into account only two events of the church year (the Passion and All Souls’ Day) and which correspond in only a few instances to Scriptures heard in the worship service.224

Leonhard Lechner and Deutsche Sprüche

Now that professional, political, and psychological contexts have been established, it is appropriate to examine specific music, literature, and art that influenced the creation of the Totentanz. Chapter one already noted that in November 1932, the St. Jakobikirche performed an


223 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 135.

224 Adrio, “Renewal and Rejuvenation,” 441.
enacted *Totentanz* featuring Leonhard Lechner’s *Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod*. Amidst the early germs of the Distler *Totentanz*, the *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis* performed the Lechner work once again for *Volkstrauertag* (German Memorial Day) on February 25, 1934, and Distler sang in this performance. According to Grusnick, this work “unsettled him deeply.”²²⁵ In the *Nachwort* to the *Totentanz*, Distler acknowledged the influence of Lechner’s work on his:

> The expert will readily recognize in choice of text, plan, length, and number of settings, in distribution, volume and number of voices, perhaps even in the shaping of words and meanings, the powerful model of Leonhard Lechner’s *Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod*, which, according to Friedrich Blume, represent the most ingenious *Totentanz* in the history of music.²²⁶

Details on the life of Leonhard Lechner (ca. 1553-1606) are incomplete at times. It is believed that he likely was a chorister under Orlando di Lasso in Munich from 1563-1570. After traveling around he eventually settled in Nuremberg in 1575, where he worked as an assistant teacher at a grammar school. From 1583-1585 he was *Kapellmeister* at the Catholic court of Count Eitelfriedrich IV in Hechningen, near Stuttgart, but as he was a devout Lutheran he eventually found a more secure position in Stuttgart at the court of Duke Ludwig of Württemberg. There he served as *Vice-Kapellmeister* in 1586 and eventually *Hofkapellmeister* beginning in 1594. His “final and most esteemed work” is a fifteen-movement cycle entitled *Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod*. Shrock submits that Lasso’s *Lagrima di San Pietro* was perhaps his model for this work, which Shrock describes as “a masterful summation of expressive compositional techniques.”²²⁷ According to Molison, “This remarkably expressive

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²²⁵ Grusnick, Hugo Distler, 17.

²²⁶ Translation by Brigitt Rauer, in the Preface of the authorized English version of *Totentanz* published by Mark Foster Music and edited by Malcolm Jones.

²²⁷ Shrock, Choral Repertoire, 121-122.
work, for four voices, has as its subject matter the reflections of man as he stands poised between life and death. The transitory nature of life on earth, the certainty of its conclusion, and finally the promise of resurrection are the specific themes of the psychologically related reflection.”

_Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod_ was not published in Lechner’s life, or even shortly after his death. It was rediscovered and published in 1926, which immediately resulted in a great deal of interest in the composer. The timing of the publishing of this work—only six years before it was first performed at St. Jakobi—is, of course, significant.

The text of the fifteen movements in _Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod_ were presumably written by Lechner himself. Molison writes, “The style and the subject matter of the 1606 manuscript leave little doubt that it was written with the knowledge that death was quite near.” He later adds,

The general content of the terse, epigrammatic stanzas is certainly not secular, but neither is it religious in a doctrinaire sense. The writer speaks as one who is able to look back on his own life and to advise those who are still in mid-course to be aware both of their own mortality (life’s joys and sorrows are merely transitory) and the certainty of their eventual release as believers. The message is universally religious in its confrontation of the self-aware human being with his world and with his own mortality.

It could be argued that the text to this work also has a strong mystical bent. The work contains fifteen brief movements that can be broken down thematically into three sections of five

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229 Ibid., iv.

230 Ibid., 31.

231 Ibid., 32.

232 Ibid., 143.
movements each. The first section concerns “the world of reality and man’s place in it,” the second “offers sober advice for dealing with such an existence,” and the third “directs man to turn his thoughts to God.” Distler’s Totentanz includes fourteen brief movements, organized structurally with an introductory and concluding movement with twelve inner movements referring to twelve different “characters” who take part in the Final Dance with Death. Clearly the larger structure does not mimic Lechner’s, but certainly the number of movements and the brevity of the movements (Lechner’s are 9-25 measures and Distler’s are 9-33 measures) is consistent with Lechner’s design.

FitzGibbon provides a textual, textural, and formal comparison chart of these two works, which this study does not need to replicate. In summary, both composers vary the texture as the text dictates, using imitative polyphony, free polyphony, paired imitation, three-against-one, and homophony to more compellingly convey textual meaning. Molison discusses how Lechner changes the texture sometimes in the middle of a movement to reflect a change in Affekt, sometimes even in the middle of a line of text to set off a particular word. There is no question that Distler has done the same in Totentanz. Hughes also notes that in Totentanz, shifts in texture indicate textual divisions.

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233 Molison, “The Sacred Choral Lieder of Leonhard Lechner,” 143-144.

234 FitzGibbon, “Historicism and Nationalism in the German Requiems of Brahms, Reger, and Distler,” 129.

235 Ibid., 131-133.

236 Molison, “The Sacred Choral Lieder of Leonhard Lechner,” 149.

Both composers also make extensive use of melismas in their respective works. Molison categorizes Lechner’s melismas, which are used in one to four voices at a time, by purpose: (1) madrigal-esque tone painting and symbolism, (2) to heighten the Affekt, or (3) ornamental at cadences.\textsuperscript{238} Again, examples of these three uses of melismas can also be found in Totentanz. One difference concerning the use of melismas is that Molison notes that sometimes the melismatic lines result in parallel intervals, but they are usually thirds, sixths, or tenths.\textsuperscript{239} Conversely, Distler’s melismas, if they are combined in two or more voices, nearly always involve parallel octaves, fifths, or fourths.

Finally, one other notable similarity is their approach to rhythm and meter. Molison discusses Lechner’s use of syncopation in Deutsche Sprüche and provides examples of “rhythmic anarchy” resulting in the “unhinging of the tactus itself.”\textsuperscript{240} In Totentanz, Distler uses mensurstriche. Use of mensurstriche is, according to Palmer, “a practice which stems, no doubt, from the transcription procedures of German musicologists of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, and one adopted by Distler in his later works as another device in his unending battle against the barline.”\textsuperscript{241} “Downbeats” are regularly deemphasized, and it is difficult to impossible to feel any sense of regular meter in much of Distler’s Totentanz. Molison also notes that syncopation is used in ways that paint the text. He points out Lechner’s use of dotted rhythms, particularly in melismatic passages and particularly when he is painting “guilt” or “anguish.”\textsuperscript{242} Dotted rhythms

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{238} Molison, “The Sacred Choral Lieder of Leonhard Lechner,” 127.
\item \textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 154.
\item \textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 157.
\item \textsuperscript{241} Palmer, Hugo Distler, 150-151.
\item \textsuperscript{242} Molison, “The Sacred Choral Lieder of Leonhard Lechner,” 158.
\end{itemize}
are also frequently employed by Distler in much of his oeuvre. Pierson notes the dotted eighth-sixteenth-eighth figure that appears prominently throughout much of Geistliche Chormusick.\(^{243}\) It is certainly to be found in Totentanz, especially during melismas, though it cannot necessarily be said that Distler uses this figure to paint “guilt” or “anguish.” This rhythmic figure appears on words such as \emph{alles} (“all”), \emph{tausendfach} (“thousandfold”), \emph{Nun} (“now”), \emph{Leib} (“body”), and \emph{gut} (“good”). In fact, it might be said that Distler uses dotted rhythms to connote lighter moods.

In thematic material, length, structure, texture, rhythmic elements, and compositional devices like melismas, it is clear that Distler emulated Lechner’s model. Nevertheless, as Adrio eloquently puts it, Totentanz is notable in that, for a work derived from a historical model, the “individual style of an imitative composer was allowed to emerge unimpaired.”\(^{244}\)

\textbf{Totentanz Artwork}

Lechner provided the musical model and the inspiration to compose a work based on the theme of life, death, and the afterlife. For the idea to formulate his new work specifically on the Totentanz allegory, Distler found inspiration in artwork in his hometown. In Denmark, which is only one hundred miles north of Lübeck, the expression, “to look like death warmed over,” is slightly altered: “to look like death from Lübeck.”\(^{245}\) Palmer explains the connection:

The northern city [Lübeck] has been identified with this theme [Totentanz] since an unknown medieval master painted, in a side-chapel of the Marienkirche in 1463, the well-known pictures of death’s invitations to high and lowly to come to the final dance with him. The famous small “Buxtehude” organ of the church was known by the name Totentanz organ because of its proximity to these paintings.\(^{246}\)


\(^{244}\) Adrio, “Renewal and Rejuvenation,” 440.

Distler’s St. Jakobikirche was located only less than a third of a mile away from another famous medieval church, the Marienkirche. These two churches, along with the Petrikirche, were consecrated in 1334; the Marienkirche is the third largest church in Germany.\(^\text{247}\) It is also the church where Dietrich Buxtehude worked from 1667 to 1707, and where Johann Sebastian Bach famously walked 280 miles in one direction—a journey lasting two weeks—to hear Buxtehude play in the fall of 1705.\(^\text{248}\)

The Black Death that swept across Europe in the mid-fourteenth century is often credited with the medieval preoccupation with death—a prevalent theme in gothic art and literature. Specifically, the “Dance of Death” (\textit{danse macabre} in French or \textit{Totentanz} in German) allegory is depicted all across Europe in paintings and frescoes, usually in a large-scale format on church walls, that date from the late Middle Ages. According to Gertsman, “As a rule, the \textit{danse macabre} fresco executed between 1424 and 1425 for the Parisian Cemetery of the Holy Innocents is considered to be the ancestor of all the subsequent paintings.”\(^\text{249}\) From there, Gertsman describes a “French line” that spreads across France, England, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Brazil, and a “German line” that spreads across Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Switzerland,

\(^{246}\) Palmer, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 45.


Poland, Sweden, Estonia, Finland, and Denmark. The *Totentanz* in Marienkirche, dating to 1463, is the oldest of its kind in Germany.

In the above quote by Palmer, he indicates that the artist who painted the Lübeck *Totentanz* is unknown. Palmer’s book was published in 1967, but today it is widely accepted—even in the absence of incontrovertible proof—that the painting was done by Bernt Notke. This theory was first suggested in 1923, but whether Palmer was not aware of it or whether he chose to not publish it due to its unproven status is not known. Notke was born in Tallinn, Estonia, then under German rule, around the year 1440, and moved to Lübeck in the early 1460s. That places Notke in Lübeck at the time the painting was made. Moreover, there is another *Totentanz* painting in the Nikolaikirche in Tallinn, extremely similar to the one in Lübeck, that is also believed to be by Notke. Comparisons between the two were first made in the second half of the nineteenth century. In time, some art historians started proposing that the Tallinn version was a copy of the Lübeck version, though there were disagreements in dating the Tallinn version. Eventually, the theory was posed that the Tallinn work was not a copy, but in fact a portion of the actual painting from Lübeck. In this theory, the original was damaged in 1588, and part was removed and sold to a Tallinn merchant who placed it in the Nikolaikirche. All of these are merely conjectures, and it is not within the scope of this study to speculate on the veracity of any

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250 Ibid., 44.

251 Elina Gertsman, “Death and the Miniaturized City,” 47.


253 Ibid., 98-99.
of these theories, interesting though they may be. What is known, is that part of the Totentanz in Tallinn still exists today, while the Lübeck Totentanz does not.

The Lübeck Totentanz was extremely large, measuring approximately six and a half feet high and up to ninety or more feet long. It covered three of four walls in a side chapel of the Marienkirche. The images began with an emaciated Death figure playing a flute and leading twenty-four characters in the final dance, each with an image of Death in between them. The characters included (in strict hierarchical order): pope, emperor, empress, cardinal, king, bishop, duke, abbot, knight, Carthusian, nobleman, canon, mayor, physician, usurer, curate, merchant, parish clerk, craftsman, hermit, peasant, youth, maiden, and baby. Below each of the images was text—a dialogue between each character and Death. In the dialogue, each character would make a plea to Death about the good deeds done on earth, and Death would respond with “biting remarks on his life, his profession, his vices, and his shortcomings.”

In the background of the painting was a distant cityscape of Lübeck, which, according to Gertsman,

serves as a foil for the intimacy of this interaction [between Death, its victim, and the viewer]: the depicted men and women cease to be just any men and women—they are local people, dressed in familiar clothing, speaking of familiar things—who struggle in the deadly dance not in an abstracted realm but in front of the beholder’s own hometown.

Not only does the cityscape of Lübeck provide a personal connection, allowing the viewer to be both “within the painting and without,” but it allows the viewer to return to the streets of Lübeck

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256 Ibid., 48.
“haunted, nonetheless, by the image of the impending death that weaves itself into the very fabric of their existence, and wrenches them from it.”

Gertsman certainly makes a compelling case for how personally affecting the *Totentanz* would be for a Lübecker like Distler.

What Distler would have been familiar with in the 1930s was not exactly the original, whether it was Notke’s or some unknown artist’s. In 1701, the painting had deteriorated into such a poor condition that it needed to be replaced with a copy. The artist selected for this task was Anton Wortmann, a man who was reportedly not a great artist but who admirably performed his duty of copying the original. In the same year, the pastor at the Marienkirche, Jacob von Melle, attempted to transcribe the original Low German text, which had become faded and damaged. Though his transcription has some issues, it is generally agreed that he did a fairly reliable job—a position partly defended by how close his transcription is to the surviving text from Tallinn. So rather than the work of the original artist and author, what Distler used as his model was actually Wortmann’s images and von Melle’s text.

Distler chose only twelve characters rather than the original twenty-four, and he did not start with the pope, presumably because as a Lutheran he had no interest in depicting the supreme leader of the Catholic church. Instead, Distler focused on these characters: emperor, bishop, knight, doctor, merchant, soldier, sailor, hermit, farmer, young maiden, old man, and

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child. Again, each character is depicted musically by one movement, and the entire work also includes an introductory and concluding movement. For the text of his Totentanz, it might have been a logical choice for Distler to set the text underneath the paintings; interestingly, he instead chose to include these dialogues as spoken exchanges between actors playing roles. If Distler had a historical model for such an unusual choice, it is not known. Palmer notes what an anomaly this is for a church musician who typically composed Gebrauchsmusik for the worship service, writing, “This work is more fitting for a vesper service on [Totensonntag] than for a church worship service, for it utilizes not only a choir, but speakers as well.”

For the spoken dialogue, he did not use von Melle’s transcription either. Instead, he enlisted a local Lübeck poet, Johannes Klöcking to reconstruct the original Low German version. Klöcking was also an elder in the Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis.

Angelus Silesius and The Cherubinic Wanderer

For the texts to the fourteen choral movements, Distler found his material in an altogether unexpected literary source—The Cherubinic Wanderer by Angelus Silesius. It will be helpful to examine the author of this text in greater detail, as it is difficult to understand on the surface why Distler should have been drawn to the writings of a seventeenth-century mystic and Catholic priest, when he had formerly adhered to chorale and scriptural texts.

Silesius was born Johann Sheffler in December 1624 in Breslau, Silesia (now Wroclaw, Poland; during Distler’s life it was part of Germany). Silesia has been known to produce many thinkers and writers “of a strong mystical bent,” and the area was also a hotbed for the Counter-

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261 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 135.

262 Grusnick, Hugo Distler, 17.
The Reformation struggle. The location of his birth would appear to have pre-destined Sheffler for a legacy in these arenas. At the time of Sheffler’s birth, the Thirty Years’ War was in its seventh year, which means that for the first twenty-three years of his life he lived during a war. For Silesians, the Thirty Years’ War was particularly violent; according to Sammons the war “[flowed] around Breslau in waves of bloodletting, marauding, and destruction.”

Sheffler’s childhood does not seem to have been any happier than Distler’s was. His father was forty years older than his mother and had a “blustering temperament,” and his mother reportedly had a “troubled life.” Moreover, his father died when he was twelve, and his mother died a year and a half later leaving Sheffler an orphan at the age of fourteen. When he left the Gymnasium in 1643 he first went to the University of Strassburg for a year and then transferred to Leiden University in Holland in 1644. Holland being the nation most tolerant of religions at the time, Sheffler would have been exposed to people from all religious backgrounds. Amsterdam was also the publishing capital of mystical works in Europe at the time. The exact extent and nature of these influences on his personal religious beliefs at the time is subject of scholarly interest, but remains unclear. Nevertheless, he left Leiden in 1646. He had unknown whereabouts for a year and then enrolled at the University of Padua in 1647, where he graduated in 1648 with an M.D. and Ph.D.

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263 Sammons, Angelus Silesius, 16.
264 Sammons, Angelus Silesius, 15.
265 Ibid., 16-17.
266 Ibid., 19-21.
In 1649 Sheffler gained employment as court physician in Oels, Silesia, for Duke Nimrod of Württemberg. In 1652 Sheffler had compiled a book of mystical prayers that he tried to have published, but this required permission of the court chaplain, and permission was not granted. It has been suggested that this event was the “last straw” for Sheffler, who felt that if he could not explore mysticism from within the Lutheran faith he would simply have to find other avenues. By December of 1652 he left the Lutheran Court of Oels, and in June 1653 he converted to Catholicism in Breslau and took the name Johann Angelus.

_The Cherubinic Wanderer_ was published in 1657 under the name Angelus Silesius. In order to have it published, Sheffler once again needed permission from the local authority on church matters, this time a Catholic (as that was his faith) and prominent leader of the Counter-Reformation. It would seem that reluctant permission was granted in order to not alienate such a valuable ally in the Counter-Reformation movement, though it was published in Vienna so as to maintain some amount of distance between this work and the people of Silesia.

Sheffler claimed to have written book one of _The Cherubinic Wanderer_ in a “four-day wave of inspiration.” It is not known precisely when these books—six in all—were written, but it is believed that they were written sometime between 1651 and 1657. It is generally assumed that much of the poems were written prior to his conversion to Catholicism in 1653.

267 Ibid., 21.

268 Sammons, _Angelus Silesius_, 24-25.

269 Ibid., 28-29.

270 Ibid., 29.

271 Ibid.
The Cherubinic Wanderer contains 1,676 poems in six books. The first edition only included the first five books and was published under the title Geist-reiche Sinn- und Schlussreime ("Sagacious Rhyming Sentences and Epigrams"). The second edition, published in 1675, contains the sixth book of poems as well and was given a new title: Cherubinischer Wandersmann. Though seraphim are the angels of love and devotion, cherubim are the angels of knowledge, so Silesius clearly means to indicate that the contents are meant to impart wisdom to a seeker or pilgrim.272

Sheffler was a mystic, and The Cherubinic Wanderer is a work of mystical writing. Sammons admits that mysticism is difficult to define, but notes its continued presence among spiritual people of all religions and of all times, stating that it “has a way of flourishing at times when institutionalized faiths and dogmas fail to meet the anxieties of human existence.”273 Was this what attracted Distler? If Distler was already inclined to experience high anxiety, and his country was in the midst of massive social upheaval just following the Nazi takeover, did he find that the Lutheran faith failed to provide solace in those stressful times? Sammons notes that “Within a well-defined religious organization and dogma, mysticism lives continually on the edge of heresy…”274 Mystics are typically uninterested in dogma, ritual, or sacraments as spiritual contemplation is the primary means to become one with God. In The Cherubinic Wanderer, Silesius makes at least one position clear: “Material creation, human existence, and the human will stand in the way of [unity with God] and must be overcome.”275

272 Sammons, Angelus Silesius, 36.

273 Ibid., 38.

274 Ibid., 41.

275 Ibid., 46.
Josef Schmidt offers “the poet’s search for meaning in a world of confusing signals and conflicting value systems” as one explanation for why the mystic poetry of Silesius has continued to find appeal among readers. He also writes that people of all faiths find in The Cherubinic Wanderer “a path to the abyss of spiritual encounter with the divine at the core of which the seeker is set free from anxiety and enabled to be attuned to the source of life that makes creative living possible in the face of death and potential annihilation. There one discovers the center of the unity of life that breaks down barriers of language, race, creed, or color…” This perspective adds two additional points that seem exceedingly relevant during the Third Reich—the struggle for creativity while under the threat of death and annihilation, and the divisiveness that stems from labels of race or creed. It does not take a creative leap to imagine that Distler may have felt that Sheffler spoke directly to his soul, acknowledging and affirming his deepest, most hidden fears while offering comforting words of a future blissfully united with God and free from the painful musings to which he was inclined.

The Cherubinic Wanderer primarily uses the epigrammatic couplet as its form. Epigrams are short, satirical statements, usually having a notably witty or unexpected ending. They can be analyzed as containing one of two basic types of endings—“the logical reversal of a relation,” and “a negation, leading to an affirmation of a new entity.” Sheffler often uses Alexandrine lines—six iambic feet with a caesura in the middle. The Alexandrine line was the most characteristic line form in German Baroque poetry.

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277 Ibid., 15.

278 Ibid., 11-12.
The subject of eternity is important to mysticism, as it is to Sheffler in *The Cherubinic Wanderer*. In fact, Sammons writes, “If Johann Scheffler is consistent with regard to any one point, it is this one.” Eternity is not seen as infinite time, but the absence of time, or the condition of stasis, “in which all things exist and happen at once,” which is essential to the mystic’s concept of unity with God. To Sheffler, one achieves unity with God when one recognizes that “Time and place are unreal things of this world which obscure the true nature of God and Godhead.”

Verses on the subject of eternity are scattered throughout all six books and do not represent any semblance of order or meaning.

Of course, death is a closely related concept to eternity, as it is a requisite step before one can achieve eternity with God. Sammons writes, “For the mystic, death, as it is commonly understood, is not a reality. More than having conquered the fear of death, he stands in astonishment before men who can have such a fear. He faces death, reaches out toward it, and joyfully embraces it, for it is his gateway to the dearly desired goal.” Reading this passage, one must wonder whether Distler resonated with the mystic view of death, and whether reading *The Cherubinic Wanderer* planted the seed that would lead to Distler’s death by his own hand eight years later. Did he “face death, reach out toward it, and joyfully embrace it?”

Distler-Harth poses the question, “But could such a world-view [as Sheffler’s] really correspond to the life-feeling of a 26-year-old, who was just beginning to discover the world for

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279 Sammons, *Angelus Silesius*, 47.


281 Ibid., 88.
himself and fully plunge into life?" 282 The question is clearly rhetorical, but in response she discusses an artifact that allows for some manner of conjecture:

The mentioned contemporary evidence is Distler’s much used copy of the 1934 printed small-format textbook of Totentanz. In this supplement he wrote his own annotations next to and over the imprinted text in a hurried pencil handwriting and, in parts, stenographic. Several verses in the notebook had been so vehemently crossed out that the marks from that clearly could be seen also on the next page and even on the empty inside of the red cardboard cover. Remarkably, Distler has not crossed out the texts of “death,” but seven of the fourteen sayings of Angelus Silesius.

The aggressive ferocity with which Hugo Distler was obviously striking through the works, and his quickly jotted down side notes, allow us to realize that he thought about the said texts—about what they mean for him—in a state of deep agitation. At this point, one can only speculate about the “why,” but it appears this inner struggle set into motion a new phase in his personal and artistic development. 283

The verses Distler selected for the fourteen movements of Totentanz come from all six books of The Cherubinic Wanderer and are not in an order consistent with their appearance in the publication. The verses used are: Book One, verse 260; Book Two, verses 69 and 138; Book Three, verses 55, 88, 129, and 219; Book Four, verses 23, 79, 92, 96, 128, and 200; Book Five, verse 113; and Book Six, verse 75. Distler must have read the entire volume and painstakingly considered which verses best capture the affect of each character presented in their dance with Death. The chart below contains the verses used in each movement and the location within The Cherubinic Wanderer for each verse. The subtitles given for each movement are my own, in an effort to more clearly denote which character from the artwork is depicted in each choral movement. Distler merely entitled each movement, Erster Spruch (“first saying”), Zweiter Spruch (“second saying”), and so on. The verse titles in bold are the original titles from The

282 Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler, 196.

283 Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler, 196.
Cherubinic Wanderer, and they do not appear in Distler’s published version of Totentanz. Distler chose occasionally to make minor changes to the original text; when this occurs the changes have been noted italicized and in brackets. Finally, English translations are included. The translations are of Distler’s version, in those instances where it differs from the original.

Erster Spruch: Introduction
Book Three, Verse 219
„Wer viel verläßt, empfängt viel“
Laß alles, was du hast,
auf daß du alles nimmst;
Verschmäh die Welt,
daß du sie hundertfach [tausendfach] bekömmst.

“He who leaves much, desires much”
Leave all that you have,
that you may take all;
Spurn the world,
that you may receive it a thousandfold!

Book Four, Verse 92
„Die Tagezeiten“
Im Himmel ist der Tag,
im Abgrund ist die Nacht,
Hier ist die Dämmerung;
wohl dem, ders recht betracht!

“The times of the day”
In heaven it is day,
in the abyss it is night,
Here it is twilight;
May he be well who regards it correctly.

Zweiter Spruch: Emperor
Book Four, Verse 96
„Die Figur ist vergänglich“
Mensch, die Figur der Welt
vergeht mit der Zeit;
Was trotzt du dann so viel
auf ihre Herrlichkeit?

“The body is perishable”
Man, the body of this world eventually passes away;
Why are you spiteful toward its glory?

Dritter Spruch: Bishop
Book Three, Verse 129
„Der gerade Weg zum Leben“
Wenn [Wann] du willst grades Wegs
ins ew’ge Leben gehn,
So laß die Welt und dich
zur linken Seiten [Seite] stehn!

“The straight path to life”
If you want to go straight
to eternal life,
leave the world and yourself
to the left side.

284 Translations are mine.
Vierter Spruch: Knight
Book Three, Verse 55
„An den Sünder“
O Sünder, wenn du wohl
bedächtst das kurze Nun
Und dann die Ewigkeit,
du würst nichts Böses tun.

“To the sinner”
O sinner, if you well
considered the fleeting now
and then considered eternity,
you would not do evil.

Fünfter Spruch: Doctor
Book Four, Verse 79
„Der beste Freund und Feind“
Mein [Dein] bester Freund, mein [dein] Leib,
der ist mein [dein] ärgster Feind;
Er bind’t und hält mich [dich] auf,
wie [so] gut er’s immer meint.

“The best friend and enemy”
Your best friend, your body,
is your worst enemy;
it binds and holds you,
though it always means well.

* Book Four, Verse 79 is a rare verse that is twice as long as the prevailing Alexandrine couplet,
so Distler removed the second half of the verse.

Sechster Spruch: Merchant
Book Five, Verse 113
„Gewinn ist Verlust“
Der Reiche dieser Welt,
was hat er für Gewinn?
Das er muß mit Verlust
von seinem Reichtum ziehn.

“Profit is loss”
The rich man of this world,
what does he have for profit,
when he must with great loss
part from his fortune?

Siebter Spruch: Soldier
Book Six, Verse 75
„Allein die Überwindung beruhigt“
Freund, streiten ist nicht gnug,
du mußt auch überwinden,
Wo du willst ewge Ruh
und ewgen Frieden finden.

“Surmounting alone soothes”
Friend, fighting is not enough,
you must also surmount,
if you want to find eternal rest
and eternal peace.

Achter Spruch: Sailor
Book Two, Verse 69
„Die Geistliche Schiffahrt“
Die Welt ist meine [deine] See,
der Schiffman Gottes Geist,
Das Schiff dein Leib, die Seel
ist’s, die nach Hause reist.

“The spiritual navigation”
The world is your sea,
the sailor is the Spirit of God,
the ship is your body, the soul
is that which journeys home.
**Neunter Spruch: Hermit**
Book Four, Verse 23

„Göttliche Beschauung“
Das überlichte Licht
schaut man in diesem Leben
Nicht besser, als wenn man
ins Dunkle sich begeben.

**“Divine view”**
The glaring light
you look at in this life
is not any better than if one
moves into the dark.

**Zehnter Spruch: Farmer**
Book Three, Verse 88

„Es muß gekreuzigt sein“
Freund, wer in jener Welt
will lauter Rosen brechen,
Den müssen vor allhier
die Dornen gnugsam stechen.

**“It must be crucified”**
Friend, whoever wants to pick many roses
in the other world,
must here first
sufficiently be pricked by thorns.

**Elfter Spruch: Young Maiden**
Book One, Verse 260

„Heut ist der Tag des Heils“
Braut, [Auf] auf! Der Bräutgam kommt!
Man geht nicht mit ihm ein,
Wo man des Augenblicks
nicht kann bereitet sein.

**“Today is the day of salvation”**
Arise! The bridegroom comes!
One cannot go with him,
if one is not prepared
for the moment.

**Zwölfter Spruch: Old Man**
Book Four, Verse 200

„Wie man die Zeit verkürzt“
Mensch, wenn dir auf der Welt
zu lang wird Weil und Zeit,
So kehr dich nur zu Gott
ins Nun der Ewigkeit.

**“How one shortens the time”**
Man, if your time on earth
has become too long,
so turn to God,
in the now of eternity.

**Dreizehnter Spruch: Child**
Book Two, Verse 138

„Der Schönste im Himmelreich“
Die Seele, welche hier
noch kleiner ist als klein,
Wird in dem Himmelreich
die schönste Göttin sein.

**“The most beautiful in heaven”**
The soul that here
is even smaller than small,
will be in heaven
the most beautiful goddess.
Vierzehnter Spruch: Conclusion

Book Four, Verse 128

„An den Weltliebenden“

Die Seele, weil sie ist gemacht [geboren] zur Ewigkeit,
Hat keine wahre Ruh in Dingen dieser Zeit.

Drum wunder ich mich sehr,
[Drum ist’s verwunderlich,]
daß du die Welt so liebst
Und aufs Zergängliche [Vergängliche]
dich setzest und begibst.
[dich allzusehr begibst.]

“To the world-loving”

The soul, because it is born to eternity,
has no true peace in things of this time.

So it is strange,
that you love the world so much,
and onto that which is transitory you so utterly take yourself.

Totentanz Premiere

As mentioned in chapter one, the premiere performance of Totentanz was on September 29, 1934 at the Katharinenkirche in Lübeck, with the Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis performing the choral movements and the Dramatischer Laienchor performing the spoken roles. It was performed shortly thereafter in Kassel for the Musiktage event on October 13. The work was able to reach a much larger audience for that performance, and as already noted, the performance resulted in Distler being labeled “the great hope of German music” by a music critic.

Solo Flute Variations

Another performance in 1934 has not been mentioned yet in this document and is extremely important because it resulted in a new musical component to an already multi-layered work. On Sunday, November 25, 1935, a performance was given at the Lutherkirche in Kassel by the Zulaufschen Madrigalchor, under the direction of Bruno Stürmer, with the spoken parts performed by the Laienspieler under the direction of Karl Magersuppe. For this performance,

285 Palmer, Hugo Distler, 45.

286 Ibid., 48.
presumably Stürmer and Magersuppe requested from Distler the addition of a solo flute part to connect the spoken dialogue to the choral movements. The choice of flute must be based on the fact that the figure of Death in the Lübeck painting is shown playing a flute, and in Klöcking’s script at the end of Death’s first monologue he bids all to come after the sound of his pipe. Distler complied and wrote a series of thirteen variations to a tune he calls “It Is a Reaper Named Death.”

Logistically, the flute serves to helpfully provide pitches to the choir so they can seamlessly begin each new movement. As nearly each movement begins and ends with a different tonal center than previous and subsequent movements, the flute part performs this very practical function by always ending on either the starting pitch of the next movement or at least a pitch from which the choir can easily derive their starting pitch. In terms of the drama of the work, the flute functions as a sort of curtain closing on one character and opening on a new character. Musically, it also reflects changes in character by wildly varying the tempo, meter, key, and mood of each variation. In doing so, the flute supplies the audience with “scene change music.” Generally, the plot is laid out in this manner:

- Death calls Character A forward
  - Flute plays an “introduction”
  - Choir sings an aphorism devoted to Character A
- Character A speaks, pleads with Death
- Death derides Character A and calls Character B forward
  - Flute plays an “introduction”
  - Choir sings an aphorism devoted to Character B
- Etc.

The flute allows space for the mental transition between the Emperor and the Bishop, then the Bishop and the Knight, and so on. In this way it also provides the audience with the time to reflect on the meaning of the sung aphorism and the spoken dialogue, perhaps gleaning a personal spiritual message.

The flute part adds so much value to the work that it is difficult to imagine that Distler did not initially plan for a flute part in his original conception of the work. In fact, the first published version did not include the flute part. After the November 1934 performance in Kassel, it was performed in this way one more time in the city of Homberg under the direction of Dr. Friedrich Struve, after which the flute part became lost and remained so for more than forty years. Unbeknownst to anyone, Karl Magersuppe, the original director of the acting company, had possession of the flute part the entire time. In 1976, Walter Opp directed a performance with the Osthessischen Kantorei, and Magersuppe was once again brought on the production team to supervise the actors. He brought the theretofore unknown flute part with him, and it was revived for that performance. It is now available in the 1993 Bärenreiter edition.²⁸⁸

The musical, art, and literary influences alone on Distler, which spanned from the Middle Ages to his present day, make Totentanz a fascinating work to study. The fact that this multi-movement work combines a cappella choir, solo flute, and a script for thirteen enacted roles makes it an extremely unique work, not just in Distler’s oeuvre, but in all of music history.

Eschatological Perspectives

But the most fascinating question to ponder, is what, if anything, Totentanz might have had to do with Distler’s death. Totentanz is a motet for All Saint’s Day, and Distler committed suicide on All Saint’s Day. Totentanz was one of Distler’s first nationally recognized works, and

²⁸⁸ Blankenburg, “zu den Flötenvariationen.”
it was beloved by audiences and critics from the outset. Praise for this work came at a time in Distler’s life when he had previously been getting critically panned for his secular attempts. It was modelled after a late Renaissance work that moved and “unsettled” him. It focused on the subject of eschatology, which Palmer described as a “lifelong preoccupation” for Distler. Whether Distler had been intrigued with mysticism since his early youth in the Wandervögel cannot be known; but it can reasonably be assumed that he read all 1,676 poems in The Cherubic Wanderer when he so carefully and deliberately selected his texts for Totentanz. Distler would therefore have absorbed verses like:

**Book Two, Verse 258**

**“Die Ewigkeit”**

Im Fall dich länger dünkt
die Ewigkeit als Zeit:
So redestu von Peyn
und nicht von Seeligkeit.

**“Eternity”**

In case you think eternity
is longer than time,
Then you are speaking of torment
and not of blessedness.

If Distler indeed felt tormented by this life, he might have longed for the blessedness expressed in the above verse.

Eschatology is often associated with the apocalypse, the “end of days,” and the final judgment, but it can also be used to refer more generally to issues of death, mortality, and the afterlife. Because of the broadness of the meaning, it can indicate perspectives raging from millennialism, found in Nazi theology, to the soul’s divine union with God, found in mysticism. Distler’s eschatological views, as expressed in the selection of texts, include the following elements: human beings are not born for this world, and if we accept this and set aside our desires for riches and success, then we can achieve unity with God and others and live for a

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290 Sammons, *Angelus Silesius*, 84.
blessed eternity in heaven. All human beings, regardless of their deeds on earth, regardless of their social standing, regardless of the wealth they accumulated during their time on earth, will take part in the same dance with Death in the end.

This viewpoint is essentially egalitarian, and this contrasts starkly with Nazi ideology and the notion of the Millennial Reich. According to Redles, millennial movements are often triggered by events such as natural disaster, war, or rapid social change. The societal chaos engendered by events such as these are interpreted as “a sign of imminent apocalypse.” This provides an historic tipping point, after which millennials anticipate a world in perfect order, free from hunger, disease, and death. In early twentieth-century Germany, the Weimar Republic was the catalyst, and the Nazi party would bring about the “tausendjährige Reich,” literally thousand-year kingdom.291 In millennial movements, a prophet/messiah has a vision for a “new way” and leads the believers into the righteous battle for ultimate salvation. Hitler viewed himself in this role and was also viewed as such by many Nazi followers. It has even been suggested that it was this messianic complex that made World War II an inevitability—a prophet/messiah has promised an apocalypse in order to gain followers, and an apocalypse must therefore be produced.292

Hitler said in a 1931 interview:

I intend to set up a thousand year Reich and anyone who supports me in battle is a fellow-fighter for a unique spiritual—I would almost say divine—creation… Betrayal of the nation is possible even when no crime has been committed, in other worlds [sic], when a historic mission has not been fulfilled.293


292 Ibid., 5-6.

293 Ibid., 65.
With inflammatory remarks like this, Hitler convinced his countrymen to line up behind him and enter into this “spiritual battle” so as to not betray their nation, but this was really just a front for bigotry and hatred. Redles writes, “The Aryan-Jewish conflict was, quite literally, interpreted as an eschatological war.”

Hitler and the Nazis indeed got the war they needed to prove that the millennial era was at hand. By 1942, the British had started air bombing German cities, and on Palm Sunday, 1942, they targeted Lübeck. Distler was living near Berlin at the time, but by the morning much of the city was in ruins, including the Marienkirche and the Totentanz Chapel. The famous medieval painting went up in flames, destroyed forever. This must have affected Distler tremendously. Grusnick writes, “Six weeks before his death [in September 1942], he again visits Lübeck to negotiate for a concert in November. From a wide open roof window of the city center, he looks over the ocean of destroyed houses to the ruins of Marienkirche. Tears are in his eyes.” Was he thinking of the lost painting that inspired his Totentanz? Was he thinking of the ruined buildings and churches that belonged to his once adopted city? Was he thinking of the vast material loss that inevitably accompanies war? And did he consider the following words from The Cherubinic Wanderer?

Book One, Verse 35

“Der Tod ists beste Ding”
Ich sage weil der Tod
allein mich machet frey;
Daß er das beste Ding
auß allen Dingen sey.

Death Is the Best Thing
Because through death alone
we become liberated,
I say it is the best
Of all the things created.

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294 Ibid.

295 Grusnick, Hugo Distler, 33.

296 Silesius, The Cherubinic Wanderer, 41.
CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS OF TOTENTANZ

This chapter will provide an analysis of Totentanz in terms of stylistic traits and compositional devices. With such a confluence of historical and contemporaneous influences behind the genesis of this work, one might expect to find in this work an amalgamation of musical characteristics. Indeed, one readily finds traits consistent with medieval music, perhaps an homage to the era which birthed the Totentanz allegory; Renaissance music, undoubtedly owing to the musical model of Leonhard Lechner; and twentieth-century music, in deference to the inescapable reality of the time in which he lived. Notably absent from this list is traits consistent with Baroque music. It is my position that one will search in vain for Baroque qualities in this particular work—a stance that the casual Distler enthusiast might find surprising, given the overwhelming amount of Distler scholarship linking his name to Heinrich Schütz.

Examples from the work will be excerpted, and traits will be organized by the following categories: (a) Medieval Traits—florid melismas; use of church modes; parallel motion in fourths, fifths, and octaves; discant-like passages; use of mensurstriche and metric ambiguity; and open fifth cadences; (b) Renaissance Traits—imitative polyphony, phrase elisions, and Picardy cadences; (c) Twentieth-Century Traits—quartal harmony, quartal melody, and excessive expression markings.

Medieval Traits: Florid Melismas

Chapter four already noted that Distler uses melismas in Totentaz, just as Lechner used melismas in Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod. However, unlike Lechner, when Distler uses melismas, he often does so in one voice while others are sustaining a drone. Though the melisma is notated in rhythmic values, the values used are meant to intentionally thwart the metric pulse
and imbue the line with the “otherworldly” quality of non-metric Gregorian chant. Despite this very fundamental difference between Lechner’s metric melismas and Distler’s chant-like melismas, Molison’s three categories of Lechner’s melismas, as discussed in the previous chapter, can be applied to Totentanz. They are: (1) madrigal-esque tone painting and symbolism, (2) to heighten the Affekt, and (3) ornamental at cadences.\(^{297}\)

An example of florid melisma for tone painting purposes is found in movement 1, measures 18-20 (Fig. 1). The soprano enters in a high register and sings “Im Himmel ist der Tag” (“in heaven it is day”). Following this passage, the bass enters in a low register on “Im Abgrund ist die Nacht” (“in the abyss it is night”), and the alto and tenor enter last on “Hier ist die Dämmerung” (“here it is twilight,” i.e. in between heaven and the abyss). It is the soprano part that has the florid melisma—suffusing the heaven-themed text with an ethereal and airy quality, while the alto and tenor sustain an open fifth drone. Notated rhythms combine eighth-note triplets and quarter-eighth combinations along with sixteenth notes. Distler’s expressive instructions above the line ask for “even more fluid than before, but always calm.”

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Fig. 1. Movement 1, mm. 18-20; Soprano chant over Alto and Tenor drone

Molison’s second category, “to heighten the Affekt,” can be found in the alto part in movement 4, measures 7-9 (Fig. 2). In this movement, “the sinner” is urged to consider just how brief and fleeting is “now” (Nun). On the second statement of this text, Distler has bass, soprano, and tenor respectively sustain an A, B, and C-sharp—a highly dissonant cluster on the word “sinner” (Sünder), yet another example of text painting—while the altos take full advantage of the momentary stasis to heighten awareness of the brief and fleeting “now” with a florid melisma on “Nun.” Though it may initially seem counter-intuitive to aurally extend the word “now,” Distler was likely attempting to highlight the concept of transience, as if to say, “Now that note is gone, and now this one, and yet there goes another. See how quickly a moment can pass into oblivion?” Again, Distler combines triplets and duplets in the chant, and he marks the passage “freely.”

Fig. 2. Movement 4, mm. 7-9; Alto on “Nun”

Molison’s final category is ornamental usage at cadences. Though Molison was referring to Lechner’s use of melisma heading into a cadence, Distler uses florid melismas to decorate the final sonority after it is reached. He does this a few times in Totentanz, but two examples will be highlighted here—the end of movement 2 (Fig. 3) and the end of movement 14 (Fig. 4). Again,
different rhythmic divisions are juxtaposed, and singers are instructed to sing “very delicately and with expression.”

Fig. 3. Movement 2, mm. 15-18; Soprano chant over Alto, Tenor, Bass drone

Fig. 4. Movement 14, mm. 33-38; Soprano and Alto I on final syllable

Medieval Traits: Use of Church Modes

While Totentanz is not an atonal work, it cannot be said that it is firmly rooted in a clearly defined tonality—not even within each movement. More accurately, in any given passage it is usually clear that there is a tonal center, but that center shifts quite frequently. Moreover, the pitch collection around that tonal center might just as likely indicate a medieval church mode as
a major or minor tonality. For example, movement 6 opens in E Mixolydian, cadences on an A-E open fifth, then is in D minor cadencing on D major, then is in E Dorian cadencing on B major, and finally ends in E minor cadencing on a unison E. All of this occurs in a span of 20 measures. Every movement of this work goes through at minimum two different modalities.

A musical example of Distler’s use of church modes appears above with the excerpt from the end of movement 2 (Fig. 3), which is in D Dorian. Two additional examples are the end of movement 10 (Fig. 5), which is in E Phrygian, and the end of movement 13 (Fig. 6), which is in D Mixolydian.

Fig. 5. Movement 10, mm. 13-18; This passage is in E Phrygian

Fig. 6. Movement 13, mm. 5-9; This passage is in D Mixolydian
Medieval Traits: Parallel Motion in Fourths, Fifths, and Octaves

The importance of parallel fourths, fifths, and octaves could not be overstated when discussing an analysis of this work. It is certainly the most prevalent harmonic feature in *Totentanz*; in fact, it is more illustrative to say that the only movements which do not have parallel fourths, fifths, and/or octaves are movements 3, 4, 7, and 13. For the sake of economy, the most pervasive uses of parallelism will be offered as examples—movements 2, 5, 9, and 14.

Movement 2 (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8) is the first movement that represents a character—the Emperor, the apex of the hierarchical procession of characters. This movement is the most starkly medieval of the entire work—it contains strict parallel organum at the octave and fifth in a passage that is also chant-like. No doubt meant to emulate the earliest uses of harmony in Western music history, this is perhaps a reference to the Holy Roman Emperors of the Middle Ages; i.e. a stylistic allusion to the First Reich by a composer living in the Third Reich. The entirety of the passages below contains alto and bass in parallel octaves, with tenor in the middle in parallel fifths against the bass. These passages represent the two “A” sections in a movement with clear ABA structure. Both “A” sections contain this text: “*Mensch, die Figur der Welt vergehet mit der Zeit*” (“Man, the body of this world eventually passes away”). The chant-like melisma on “vergehet,” which means “to pass (away)” or even “to die (away),” follows a descending line as if it, too, were passing away into the very depths of the singers’ ranges. The openness of the parallel fifths and octaves help to convey the cold truth of the transience of the human form.
Movement 5 (Fig. 9), which represents the Doctor, is also in ABA form, but in this case it is the faster, more metric “B” section that contains the parallel movement. It is the three upper voices that run parallel, with soprano and tenor in octaves throughout and alto in the middle. For the first phrase—the first statement of “der ist dein ärgster Feind,” (“which is your worst enemy”) the alto is a fourth above the tenor, and for the rest of the passage it is a fifth above the tenor. Unlike the previous example, the bass part is singing simultaneously but not in a parallel manner with the other voices, which may aurally obscure the parallelism appearing in the other voices.
Fig. 9. Movement 5, mm. 4-11; Soprano and Tenor are in parallel octaves throughout (except last note), Tenor and Alto are in parallel fourths in mm. 4-5, Tenor and Alto are in parallel fifths from pick up to m. 6 to the end of the passage (except last note)

Movement 9 (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11), the Hermit, has pervasive parallel fourths and fifths but not in a strict usage like the previous examples. Instead, different pairings of voices will seemingly sync into parallel motion for a few bars and then deviate onto individual paths again. At one point the two upper voices are in parallel fourths while the two lower voices are in parallel fifths, but the two pairings do not follow the same rhythmic motion or even contour and direction as the other pair. Movement 14 (Fig. 12), the concluding movement of the whole work, contains an extended passage where the soprano and alto move consistently in strict parallel fourths.
Fig. 10. Movement 9, mm. 1-6; Soprano and Alto mm. 1-4 on “überlichte Licht” are in parallel fourths, Alto and Tenor m. 6 on “man in diesem” are in parallel fourths

Fig. 11. Movement 9, mm. 7-11; Alto and Tenor m. 7 are in parallel fourths, Soprano and Alto m.8 through the downbeat of m. 10 are in parallel fourths, Tenor and Bass mm. 8-10 are in parallel fifths

Medieval Traits: Discant-like Passages

Another medieval trait that Distler uses through Totentanz is discant-like passages.

Discant-like passages will be here defined as passages where voices are primarily moving note-against-note in identical, or nearly identical, rhythms, in contrary motion away from and toward consonant fifths and octaves. In Totentanz, these typically occur on melismas in three or more voices heading into a cadence. Three examples of this technique are offered below, from
Fig. 12. Movement 14, mm. 13-24; Soprano and Alto are in parallel fourths in mm. 15-22
movements 1 (Fig. 13), 3 (Fig. 14), and 4 (Fig. 15). Note that movements 3 and 4 were two movements that did not contain any parallel fourths, fifths, or octaves; yet they are the clearest examples of discant approaching the final cadence.

Fig. 13. Movement 1, mm. 4-7; All voices on “alles”

Fig. 14. Movement 3, mm. 8-12; Alto, Tenor, and Bass on “linken”

Medieval Traits: Use of Mensurstriche and Metric Ambiguity

The fact that Distler used Mensurstriche bar lines in Totentanz has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, and it has already been visually apparent in every musical example in this chapter. Mensurstriche are bar lines that are written in between staves but not through them, resulting in notation that signifies where the bar line should be without actually
vertically dissecting the musical line. In this system true note values can be used, as opposed to needing to use ties across a bar line. In 1934 when this piece was composed, this was a relatively new practice used by German musicologists in critical editions of medieval and Renaissance polyphony. Distler either wanted to send a clear message—“I want this work to be viewed as if it was a piece of early music, so I will make it look like early music”—or he felt that choirs performed differently if they do not see bar lines vertically subdividing the linear phrases. Perhaps he felt that tied notes look and sound different from notes that are not tied, as in two tied quarter notes across a bar line versus a half note. Whatever his exact motivation, one thing is clear: a strong, regular metric pulse is not needed or desired in this work.

_Totentanz_ is metrically ambiguous in three distinct ways: (1) free chant-like passages, (2) “downbeats” are de-emphasized and agogic stress is placed on metrically weak beats, (3) two different simultaneous meters are implied in different voice parts, often resulting in a hemiola effect. In addition to these devices and the use of _Mensurtriche_, Distler rarely goes five measures without changing the time signature—sometimes even changing the time signature every bar. All of these techniques work to obstruct the feeling of a strong metric pulse in a sustained,
consistent, predictable manner. That Distler went to such great lengths to achieve this metric ambiguity is all the more impressive when one remembers from chapter four that the original poetry is metered—six iambic feet per line with a caesura in the middle, with two lines per poem. In other words, the spoken poetry has a clear rhythm and meter: short-long-short-long-short-long (pause) short-long-short-long-short-long (end). In another composer’s hands, this poetry might easily have been set in a completely banal manner, but this is most certainly not the case with Distler’s setting.

The chant-like passages have already been explored with the florid melismas noted earlier, in which Distler notated rhythmic values for the melismas but did so in ways that obscure the meter or constantly alter the way the beat is divided. The second type of metric ambiguity is the de-emphasis of downbeats and the placement of agogic stress on metrically weak beats. Throughout this work, in nearly every single system one can find at least one voice that carries over the Mensurstrich and does not sing on the “downbeat.” Use of this technique utterly pervades the work. Often combined with this, Distler places longer note values on metrically weak beats, such as 2 and 4.

One good example of this is the end of movement 10 (Fig. 16), the Farmer. The text—which may be more apt for a “Gardner” if there was such a character in Totentanz—admonishes that anyone who would like to pick roses in the afterlife must first be pricked by thorns here. The passage shown below contains the words “*die Dornan gnugsam stechen*” (“sufficiently pricked by thorns”). The word “*gnugsam*” (“sufficiently”) implies that to be pricked once will not suffice, but rather one must be pricked many times in order to take effect. The soprano and alto parts in this passage are in parallel fifths but also contribute to a feeling of metric ambiguity. Long note values routinely fall on beats 2 and 4, and twice in this passage the voices have to
carry over the bar line and do not sing on beat 1. Not only do these agogic stresses repeatedly confound the listener’s metric expectations, but the tension in the melodic half steps in soprano and alto as well as the harmonic half steps between bass and alto—the continuous E/F clashes, particularly on beats 2 and 4—aurally “prick” the listener for three and a half bars.

In another example of this effect in movement 1 (Fig. 17), in a segment that can also be described as discant-like and that also includes a long series of parallel fifths in the tenor and bass parts, Distler constantly places the long notes—the quarter notes—in between beats (i.e. on the “and” of the beat). This is also combined with a couple places in the passage where voice parts must carry over the “bar line” and do not sing on beat 1. In this case, the syncopation serves to add an element of excitement to the affect, reinforcing the text: “daß du sie tausendfach bekommst” (“that you may receive it a thousandfold”).

Fig. 16. Movement 10, mm. 13-18; Soprano and Alto carry over the bar line in m. 15 and 16, long note values are placed on beats 2 and 4
Fig. 17. Movement 1, mm. 14-17; none of the voices sing on the downbeat of m. 15 or m. 17, in m. 15 the final quarter note falls on the “and” of beat 4, in m. 16 the quarter notes fall on the “and” of beats 1 and 3, in m. 17 in the Soprano and Alto the quarter notes fall on the “and” of beats 3 and 4.

The final device for achieving metric ambiguity is two different simultaneous meters being implied in different voice parts, often resulting in a hemiola effect. The conflicting meters are not explicitly notated by Distler, but are “implied” through use of these devices: (1) agogic stress, and (2) placement of accented syllables. Two examples of this are found at the beginning of movements 6 and 9.

In the opening measures of movement 6 (Fig. 18), the Merchant, the tenor and bass would appear to have a triple meter feel at the outset, with the stressed notes reinforcing the notated 3/4 meter. However, the soprano and alto, which incidentally are in parallel fourths throughout this passage, are in values that imply a 2+2+2 meter over the tenor and bass 3+3. In addition, at the end of this passage, measures 4 and 5 have a 2+2+2 metric feel, despite the 3+3 notation, owing to the placement of stressed syllables (der Reihe dieser). Therefore, this entire

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298 Distler famously had done this before, in his Die Weihnachtsgeschichte, opus 10. In the chorale variations of Es ist ein Ros’ entsprungen, he routinely used completely distinct notated meters in each of the four voice parts. The Mensurstriche bar lines almost never align.
passage has a hemiola in soprano and alto in measures 1 and 2 and a hemiola in all voices in measures 4 and 5. The text is, “der Reiche dieser Welt” (“the rich man of the world”). Is Distler implying that rich people have everything—even simultaneous meters? Or is he attempting to depict the inherent conflict plaguing every human with extreme wealth—the desire to gather material wealth and the knowledge that it will all be lost someday?

Fig. 18. Movement 6, mm. 1-5; Soprano and Alto have a hemiola in mm. 1-2, all voices have a hemiola in mm. 4-5

The conflicting meters do not necessarily always result in a hemiola effect. In the opening of movement 9 (Fig. 19), which was shown above because of its pervasive parallel fourths, there are two distinct examples of conflicting meters—one that is a hemiola and one that is not. Notated in 3/4 at the outset, another obvious hemiola can be found in measures 2 and 3 in the three upper voices (2+2+2) over the bass (3+3). In measures 4 and 5 there is time signature change to 4/4, but none of the voice parts are actually reinforcing a 4/4 meter. The words “schaut man” are always in a half-note/quarter-note combination, which implies a triple meter grouping. But the soprano starts this triple meter grouping on beat 2 of measure 4, while the three lower voices start the triple meter grouping on beat 3 of measure 4. For the rest of that bar and through
the next bar, the pattern continues—the parts are performing a triple meter pattern but they are one beat out of sync.

![Musical notation](image)

**Fig. 19. Movement 9, mm. 1-6; Soprano, Alto, and Tenor have a hemiola mm. 2-3, mm. 4-5 involve conflicting “downbeat” feels in Soprano versus Alto, Tenor, and Bass**

**Medieval Traits: Open Fifth Cadences**

In the Middle Ages, composers nearly always ended a piece on an open fifth cadence. Even in the late Middle Ages when composers started incorporating more complete triads with the third and may have used triads in less important internal cadences, they still typically chose to use an open fifth for the final cadence. In *Totentanz*, Distler uses several types of chords in final and internal cadences. His use of major triads and quartal chords will be discussed later. As for open fifth cadences, Distler does use them throughout this work, but interestingly, he uses them more often for internal cadences rather than at the end. For example, in several movements, he uses an open fifth at the first major cadence. The are many examples of this, but movements 5 (Fig. 20) and 6 (Fig. 21) are shown below.
Why Distler operates counter to medieval procedures in the case of cadences can only be speculated; however, a plausible explanation can be offered after reviewing the type of poems Distler has set. Recall from chapter four that these are epigrams, and that epigrams are short, satirical statements, usually having a notably witty or unexpected ending. Perhaps Distler felt that the grave subject matter of the poems warranted stark and austere sonorities at initial cadence points, and then when the ending of the poem issues a witty reversal or a new affirmation, he felt that the satisfying closure of epigram warranted the satisfaction of a full major triad. As will be shown later, most movements end on a major triad. However, a few—movements 2 (Fig. 22), 9 (Fig. 23), and 10 (Fig. 24)—end on an open fifth.
Renaissance Traits: Imitative Polyphony

_Totentanz_ also contains several stylistic traits evocative of Renaissance vocal music, including imitative polyphony, phrase elisions, and Picardy cadences. Instances of imitative polyphony resembling Josquin can be found in nearly every movement of _Totentanz_, beginning with the opening measures of movement 1. Uses of imitative polyphony fall under three basic types: (1) all voices enter on a motive, in succession from soprano down to bass, at consistent timing intervals, (2) strict imitative counterpoint beginning with soprano then alto, usually only
delayed by 1 or 2 beats, followed some time later by tenor and bass in a simultaneous entrance that echoes the rhythm of the initial motive but not necessarily the pitch, and (3) one melodic phrase is presented in a voice that is later echoed entirely by another voice, usually an octave apart.

The first and last movements of Totentanz present examples of the first type of imitative polyphony, where all voices enter on a motive, in succession from soprano down to bass, at consistent timing intervals. They are shown below (Fig. 25 and Fig. 26).

Fig. 24. Movement 10, mm. 13-18; All voices on final chord are open E-B

Fig. 25. Movement 1, mm. 1-3; “Laß alles” entrance, all voices, each entrance two beats later
Fig. 26. Movement 14, mm. 9-16; Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass on “keine wahre Ruh” (each entrance three beats later, with Alto and Tenor entering a fifth below the previous voice and Bass entering a fourth below)

The second type of imitative polyphony is more complex in design. It is characterized by strict imitative counterpoint beginning with soprano then alto, usually only delayed by 1 or 2 beats, followed some time later by tenor and bass in a simultaneous entrance that echoes the rhythm of the initial motive but not necessarily the pitch. This is somewhat evocative of the paired imitation of Josquin, except that the lower voices are imitative only insofar as the rhythm. Clear examples of this style can be found in movements 2 (Fig. 27), 3 (Fig. 28), and 7 (Fig. 29).
Fig. 27. Movement 2, mm. 5-7; Soprano and Alto on “Was trotz’st du dann so viel”

Fig. 28. Movement 3, mm. 1-3; Soprano and Alto on “Wann du willst gradeswegs”

Fig. 29. Movement 7, mm. 1-4; Soprano and Alto on “Freund, streiten”
The final type of imitative polyphony is limited to only two voices. It occurs when one melodic phrase is presented in a voice that is later echoed entirely by another voice, usually an octave apart. Rather than being a short motive, these are typically longer phrases that are stated nearly completely before the second voice enters. The second voice typically overlaps the first as the first approaches the end of the phrase. Examples of this style can be found in movements 4 (Fig. 30), 11 (Fig. 31), and 12 (Fig. 32 and Fig. 33).

Fig. 30. Movement 4, mm. 1-3; Soprano and Alto on “O Sünder, wann du wohl bedächtst das kurze Nun,” Alto enters four beats later and a fourth lower

Fig. 31. Movement 11, mm. 6-9; Soprano and Bass on “Man geht nicht mit ihm ein,” Bass four beats later and two octaves lower
Renaissance Traits: Phrase Elisions

Phrase elisions, where one or two voices begin a new phrase or new section while other voices are still ending the previous phrase or section, can be found occasionally throughout Totentanz. The effect is that the music perpetually carries the listener forward. This prevents the piece from sounding like it only consists of short, chopped segments, and given that the poems contain lines of three iambs and a pause, followed by three iambs and a pause, in the hands of a lesser composer this might have been the case. The examples below are excerpted from movements 1 (Fig. 34), 13 (Fig. 35), and 14 (Fig. 36).
Fig. 34. Movement 1, mm. 4-7; Soprano enters on new phrase on m. 5 beat 1 when all other voices cadence

Fig. 35. Movement 13, mm. 5-9; On the downbeat of m. 5, Tenor and Bass begin next phrase while Soprano and Alto are completing the previous phrase

Fig. 36. Movement 14, mm. 1-4; Soprano remains two beats ahead of Alto, Tenor, and Bass, resulting in phrase elisions through the beginning of this movement
Renaissance Traits: Picardy Cadences

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, most of the movements end on a major chord. Out of fourteen movements, eight end with a major chord, six of which occur as a Picardy cadence due to the preceding material being in the parallel minor key. As an aside, of the six remaining movements, three end in an open fifth (discussed earlier), one ends on a unison, one ends on a quartal chord (discussed later), and the final movement cadences on a major sonority but finishes with the soprano alone singing a chant and ending on the sixth scale degree. The Picardy cadences are found in movements 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 11. An analysis of the poems reveal that those are the poems that contain the sweetest reversals or messages that are meant to assuage. For example, movement 5 (Fig. 37) is devoted to the doctor, and the translation of the poem is:

“The best friend and enemy”
Your best friend, your body,
is your worst enemy;
it binds and holds you,
though it always means well.

This movement contains some of the most dramatic and stormy music of the entire work. In ABA form, the middle of the movement (on the text about the body being one’s enemy that binds and holds you) consists of a very fast tempo, marked “Quickly and hastily;” pervasive accents; large, angular leaps; rising sequences; and is marked “Always accelerating and getting louder.” This middle section ends on a clipped and intense Phrygian cadence. But the final phrase, which is slower and in E minor, contains text that acknowledges that your body “means well,” and to reflect this Distler closes the movement on an E major triad.
Fig. 37. Movement 5, mm. 12-15; Final chord goes from E minor to E major

Other clear examples are found at the end of movements 3 (Fig. 38), 4 (Fig. 39), and 11 (Fig. 40), shown below.

Fig. 38. Movement 3, mm. 8-12; Final chord goes from A minor to A major

Fig. 39. Movement 4, mm. 10-13; Final chord goes from F# minor to F# major
One additional movement deserves special mention, and that is the end of movement 8 (Fig. 41)—the movement that focuses on the sailor. The poem, an analogy incorporating ships and the sea, is one of the most poignant of the entire collection:

“The spiritual navigation”
The world is your sea,
the sailor is the Spirit of God,
the ship is your body, the soul
is that which journeys home.

This particular poem may have had special meaning for Distler. Lübeck, historically a very important shipping and trade center, used to be the capital of the Hanseatic League, a medieval confederation of a merchant guilds and towns along the Baltic Sea. The St. Jakobikirche had been the city’s church dedicated to seamen since the Middle Ages. Given how important the shipping trade still was for the city of Lübeck, Distler may have felt a more personal connection to the Totentanz character of the sailor; or at the very least, he may have considered that more of his local audience would feel a personal connection to this character. At the close of this movement, on the text “the soul is that which journeys home,” the modality is somewhat indeterminate. At the outset it feels like it is in B-flat pentatonic, then perhaps G
minor. There is an initial cadence on an open G-D fifth, followed by a phrase that starts to introduce additional flats—A-flats and even a D-flat. With a descending line in the bass that evokes a Phrygian feel, it finally cadences on a G chord with a 4-3 suspension. When the fourth resolves to the third, instead of the expected B-flat, it resolves to a B-natural. This is the only instance of a 4-3 suspension in the entire work.

Fig. 41. Movement 11, mm. 12-16; Final chord goes from G minor/Phrygian to G major

Twentieth-Century Traits: Quartal Harmony

Quartal harmony—that which is based on stacked fourths—can be found in eight of the fourteen movements (3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 14). Typically, this harmony is found at the very beginning of the movement, sometimes on a pick-up note, but more often the first downbeat. An exception to this is in movement 3, where the quartal harmony is found in measure 8, close to the end. The other exception, which will be described in greater detail later, occurs in movement 12. Because of the uniqueness of this type of harmony, all examples will be included below (Figs. 42-48).
Fig. 42. Movement 3, m. 8; Alto/Tenor/Bass beat 2 (F#-B-E), Alto/Tenor/Bass beat 3 (E-A-D)

Fig. 43. Movement 4, m. 1; All voices on the first note (E-A-D)

Fig. 44. Movement 5, mm. 1-2; Soprano, Alto, and Tenor on “Freund” (E-A-D)
Fig. 45. Movement 9, m. 1; All voices on the downbeat of m. 1 (B-E-A)

Fig. 46. Movement 11, mm. 1-5; Alto, Tenor, and Bass on the first note of every bar is a quartal harmony (mm. 1-2 are A-D-G, mm. 3-4 are B-E-A, m. 5 contains three instances of C#-F#-B)

Fig. 47. Movement 13, mm. 1-4; All voices on the downbeat of m. 1 (D-G-C-F)
Movement 12 (Fig. 49), the movement that focuses on the old man, is quite unique. This is the only movement that does not end on a unison, open fifth, or major triad. Instead, the final chord can be described as quartal (C#-F#-B-E-A). The fact that it contains five pitches that are all a fourth apart is also quite interesting, because as shown above, Distler more typically uses only three notes in his quartal harmony. He occasionally uses four notes, but the final chord of movement 12 is the only instance where he uses five. Because of the voicing of the chord, with A and E in the bass, the chord might also be analyzed as an A$^{13}$ chord. Bass and alto contain the root, third, and fifth, with the ninth in the tenor and the thirteenth in the soprano. The other quite interesting detail in this movement is that the cadence that marks the halfway point in the poem (i.e. at the end of the first Alexandrine line) also uses quartal harmony. So the final chord that marks the end of both lines of the poem is quartal. Exactly why Distler makes this unusual and anomalous choice is very difficult to say. One explanation is that Distler may have viewed the old man as having lived longer and experienced far more of life than the other characters, so his music is characterized not by devices used in early music but devices used in Distler’s day by more avant-garde composers such as Hindemith, Schoenberg, and Berg—as if the music, like the
man, was more evolved. Pictured below is an excerpt from movement 12 showing the mid-point cadence (first chord) and final cadence (last chord).

Fig. 49. Movement 12, mm. 5-9; Chord on downbeat of m. 5 is quartal (B-E-A), Final chord is quartal (C#-F#-B-E-A)

Twentieth-Century Traits: Quartal Melody

Used far less frequently than quartal harmony, Distler also occasionally uses the fourth to construct melodies, resulting in quartal melodies. Examples of this can be found in movements 6 (Fig. 50) and 11 (Fig. 51).

Fig. 50. Movement 6, mm. 1-5; Bass in first four measures is entirely in fourths
Twentieth-Century Traits: Excessive Expression Markings

Distler so staunchly emulates historical models that sometimes it seems that the only way to be reminded that he is indeed a twentieth-century composer is the ubiquity of his expression markings. As all modern composers are inclined to do, he is extremely detailed in his instructions; he knows exactly how he wants something to sound and he leaves nothing open to interpretation. The chapter has included many musical examples, and all of them contain information related to tempo, dynamics, articulation, phrasing, and mood. One additional example—the final measures of movement 1 (Fig. 52)—will be considered.
Regarding tempo, Distler indicates that when alto and tenor enter in measure 21 they are to return to the original tempo, which is quarter note equals 69. Four beats later, at the soprano entrance, Distler indicates a change of tempo to quarter note equals 63. In the penultimate measure, he indicates that the tempo should gradually slow down. Regarding dynamics, at the outset of this excerpt, all voices diminuendo. When the alto and tenor enter, they are to be mezzo piano. Beginning with the next entrance, all voices are to change to mezzo forte, and then all are to get quieter at the end. Regarding phrasing, very specific breath marks are given, sometimes rather oddly after only one or two notes, in measures 23 and 24. Finally, regarding mood, the singers are instructed to be “even more calm than at the beginning,” and “solemn.” These instructions are extremely specific and detailed, and mark him definitively as a modern composer.

The fusion of historical and modern features in Totentanz serve to imbue the piece with a certain timeless quality. Just as with the artwork that inspired the music, which juxtaposed the otherworldliness of an emaciated Death and his victims in the foreground with the skyline of a recognizable Lübeck in the background, listeners are caught in a ceaseless cycle of sonorities representing past and present. The listener experiences a feeling of duality of being—remaining firmly rooted in the present time and place while simultaneously being transported to the past to experience death alongside characters from all social classes. What Distler has achieved with this work goes far beyond a mere exercise in historical imitation—he musically captures the Nun der Ewigkeit, the “now of eternity.”
CHAPTER SIX
PERFORMANCE PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS

Totentanz is seldom performed in the United States, which is unfortunate because it is a remarkable work that deserves to reach a wider audience. Though it was composed nearly one hundred years ago, the mystical text has as much potential of connecting with today’s audience as with Distler’s audience, because man’s search for peace and unity in troubled times is a part of the human condition. Since it is not often performed, and since an aim of this study is to stimulate interest in Distler and more frequent performances of Totentanz, this chapter will serve to address issues of performance practice for this relatively unknown work.

Performing Forces

In terms of size of choir, at absolute minimum a choir of twelve voices would be needed, though sixteen would be better. The choral movements are scored for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Divisi occurs only in very rare instances—approximately twice per voice part—and only at cadences for a note or two. For blending purposes, a minimum of three voices per each part would be required, and since divisi is so minimal, having only one or two voices on a part for the occasional split would be acceptable. If additional singers are available, for balance purposes, sixteen voices—four voices per part—would be better to allow equal divisi when it occurs. The work is so delicate in places, it would be most appropriate to keep the ensemble small in number. In the score, Distler frequently uses the following character words: “zart” (“delicate”), “schlicht” (“simple”), and “ruhig” (“quiet”). In one movement that is nine measures long, the voices are labeled piano from the beginning, then in measure 3 Distler writes “recht ruhig!” (“quite quietly!”), in measure 5 he writes meno piano, and in measure 7 he writes “ruhig und zart!” (“quietly and tenderly!”). It would be very difficult for a larger choir to achieve the sound ideals
he is requesting. He also writes frequent tempo changes, including accelerandos and ritardanos, and leaves instructions like “sanft fließend” (“gently flowing”) and “frei!” (“freely!”), which implies a fluidity of beat is desired. These nuances become increasingly more difficult to unify with a larger choir.

It is well documented that Bruno Grusnick’s *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis* was the choral group who premiered the work. In attempting to find out the size of the choir in the *Totentanz* premiere, only the following general information about the choir could be found. The *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis* was founded in 1928 with a group of about twenty people—students, colleagues, and some others he knew of who were associated with the *Jugendbewegung*.299 Within two years it grew to forty members. By 1931, Grusnick added a youth choir, and by 1935 both choirs together had one hundred members, and sometimes as many as 150 members.300 Additionally, Kristina Langlois interviewed Grusnick for a study in 1986, and according to Langlois, Grusnick informed her that the *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis* was “a mixed choir of thirty to forty singers.”301

In terms of Distler’s concept of choral tone, Palmer writes that as a conductor Distler insisted that “solo voices subordinate themselves to the group, working, above all, for a pure blending of the voices.”302 Langlois also writes, “Distler sought a light and transparent tonal

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300 Ibid., 12.


quality in all voices.\textsuperscript{303} Given the prevalence of perfect consonances in Totentanz, it can reasonably be assumed that Distler preferred voices that could perform with a centered pitch and with little to no vibrato. Deffer concurs: “…care should be taken to consider the neo-Renaissance sound ideal for which Distler strove, i.e., a pure, unforced, yet bright tone, with very little vibrato.”\textsuperscript{304} He would certainly want singers to be expressive, but given the large amount of expressive indications he marks in the score, Distler would likely not have tolerated voices with distinct individual color or personalized attempts at expression.

**Dialogue and Solo Instrument**

In Distler’s Nachwort to Totentanz, he writes that the aphorisms can be performed together or separately from the dialogue, and that the dialogue can be enacted or recited. Distler also writes that the dialogue belongs to the aphorisms in such a way that the order cannot be altered. He also instructs that if only the aphorisms are performed, one can choose to perform only a selection of aphorisms. Finally, he writes that the keys must remain in their original because they were intentionally selected for the affect they produce. So conductors have the following choices with regard to performance: (1) perform only some of the choral movements, (2) perform all of the choral movements, (3) perform the choral movements and recite the dialogue, or (4) perform the choral movements and enact the dialogue. The only things that cannot be altered are the keys and the order in which the movements are performed.

Though Distler did not mention the solo flute part because it was not included in the original published version, the solo flute part adds another layer of performance practice to

\textsuperscript{303} Langlois, “Hugo Distler,” 8.

\textsuperscript{304} Deffer, “A Study of Two Motets based on Psalm 98,” 33.
consider. Clearly Distler would not regard this a necessary and integral component of the performance of the work; the first couple performances of Totentanz did not include this element, and it was initially published without the flute part. This might lead one to consider whether Distler preferred the work without the flute part, but of course there is no way to know that. As mentioned in chapter four, the flute part does add some logistical benefit by providing the choir with pitches for each movement, and it effectively provides “scene change” music to allow the audience to reflect on the previous scene and mentally shift to a new character. If money and availability allows, it would be a nice addition to any performance of Totentanz.

Conductors may also want to consider whether it might be acceptable to use another C instrument other than flute. Although the Totentanz painting in Lübeck with which Distler was familiar depicted Death playing the flute, that may not have been the original instrument. The Totentanz in Tallinn depicts Death playing the bagpipes. Bagpipes might not necessarily be an appropriate alternative, but the point to note is that the flute is not the only instrument associated with the Totentanz. In fact, for many centuries, the violin has been associated with the devil. For example, Danse macabre by Camille Saint-Saëns is an extremely well-known musical work that features the violin as Death’s instrument. There was at least one recent public performance of Totentanz in the United States that used the violin as the solo instrument. Resonance Ensemble of Portland, Oregon, directed by Katherine FitzGibbon, performed this work with violin at the American Choral Directors Association Northwestern Division Conference in 2016. If violin or any other instrument is to be substituted for the flute, directors should note that there is one line of dialogue that would need to be changed. Just before the instrument plays for the first time—

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after Death gives his first monologue and before the choir begins movement 2—Death calls out and says “Nach meine Pfeife springen!” “Pfeife” would need to be changed to whatever instrument is being performed.

If the spoken dialogue is to be included, conductors have additional decisions to make. If the choir numbers at least thirteen, then the spoken dialogue could be delivered by members of the ensemble, as there are twelve characters plus Death. Strictly speaking, the Young Maiden is the only female character and all the rest are presumably men. However, there is nothing in the dialogue to prevent a woman from playing the role of the Emperor, Merchant, Doctor, Sailor, etc., and in the spirit of gender equality, there is no reason to not have women play these roles in today’s modern times. For that matter, there is no reason why a woman could not play the role of Death. If roles are recited by members of the choir, he or she should simply step forward and recite their dialogue, stepping back into the choir before singing. Very little staging is necessary with this approach.

In the English edition of Totentanz published by Mark Foster Music in 1970, Malcolm Johns, as editor, writes a preface to the English edition. In it he describes an enacted version:

The cast of twelve characters should be chosen for their ability to portray with clear enunciation their individual parts. The players should be dressed in suitable costume: the doctor in a white coat, the judge in a black robe, the sailor in uniform, etc. One at a time the characters should rise from various places in the congregation and come forward to have their dialogue with Death, and, when practical, leave by a chancel or front exit. Death should be played by a minister, or by a man of imposing presence in a dark robe standing off-center, perhaps with his script on the Bible lectern. The unaccompanied choir should sing seated from their usual chancel position, so that they are an integral part of this chancel play. Any creative lighting, which would enhance this forceful work, should be encouraged.306

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This staging is clearly designed for a performance in a church, but this work could also be performed in a concert venue. In an enacted version taking place on a stage, it might be appropriate to have Death and the instrumentalist remain on stage, in downstage locations opposite one another. When Death calls to a victim, he or she would enter from one side, remain on stage while the choir sings, then perform the dialogue with death and exit on the other side while the instrument is playing. Regarding costumes, as Johns suggests, characters could be dressed in an appropriate costume for their role, either in period costumes or modern dress. Conversely, a minimalist performance might utilize contrasting colors, for example the choir in all black with Death and his victims in all white, or perhaps Death might be wearing another color entirely.

Language

An American choir has three choices in performing this work: (1) perform choral movements and dialogue in German using the Bärenreiter edition, (2) perform choral movements and dialogue in English using the Mark Foster edition, or (3) perform in a macaronic context with choral movements in German and spoken dialogue in English. The German version has the advantage of authenticity, while the English version has the advantage of audience comprehension. Since the aphorisms contain small amounts of text, translations can easily be printed in program notes, which the audience can follow. Given the extreme importance of text to Distler as a composer, there is no doubt that he set certain words in certain ways for very deliberate reasons. Any translated version will obscure those intentions. For example, chapter five noted a passage in movement 1 where the sopranos sing up high “in heaven it is day,” then the basses sing down low “in the abyss it is night,” and then the altos and tenors sing “here it is twilight.” This is clear and obvious text painting. In the English version, the sopranos sing “in
God we find our light,” the basses sing “but sin locks us in night,” and the altos and tenors sing “God asks us to decide.” The original meaning and intent has been lost, primarily because the English translation attempts a poetic verse. When rhyming becomes more important than accurate translation, that is a sure sign to avoid audience vernacular and embrace the original language.

Nevertheless, audience comprehension is extremely important as well, so a macaronic approach would best serve the music and the audience. Spoken dialogue in German would be very difficult for an American audience to follow, and since the verses can be translated on their own, without negative musical impact, it seems a wise choice to have the actors perform the spoken dialogue in English. Either a new translation could be created, or one could use the dialogue in the Mark Foster version. If the latter is chosen, some additional edits may still be desirable. The Mark Foster version updates the character names, which may or may not be preferred. For example, the Emperor becomes the President, the Knight becomes the Manager, and the Hermit becomes the Worthy Man.

Use of Media

Today, multi-media concert events are becoming more popular. There is already a visual component to Totentanz with the enacted dialogue and costumes, but one might also consider projecting images of the Totentanz painting onto a screen before or during the performance. Even though the Lübeck Totentanz does not exist today, there are quality black and white photos of paintings that were taken by William Castelli in between the two world wars. In addition, one can readily access high quality color photos of the Totentanz in Tallinn, which is well

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preserved and is so similar to the Lübeck Totentanz that art historians believe it may have been painted by the same artist. A slideshow of photos of each character in Distler’s Totentanz would undoubtedly enhance the performance.

**Performance Length**

The performance time of this work is variable. The first choral movement is approximately two minutes, the last is approximately two and a half minutes, and all the rest are an average of one minute. By these estimates, fifteen minutes is a suitable approximation of timing for all of the choral movements. If the spoken dialogue and flute variations are also performed, the timing depends on how quickly the actors deliver the lines, but on average they last a minute to a minute and fifteen seconds per interlude. With thirteen interludes, another thirteen to sixteen minutes would be added; therefore, an acceptable estimate for the entire work would be thirty minutes.

**Programming Suggestions**

If Totentanz was performed as part of an All Saints service or an evening Vespers near All Saints Day, it could probably stand alone. If, however, it was part of a concert performance, Totentanz would need to be supplemented with additional repertoire to fill out a full concert program. A logical time of the year to perform Totentanz is late October or very close to All Saints Day, which is November 1. In the United States, this is the time of the year when public interest in the supernatural or macabre is most heightened, because of how Halloween is celebrated here. Also, All Saints Day, immediately following Halloween, is the day when the souls of the departed from the past year are honored in church.

Appropriate repertoire to pair with Totentanz would include any music on a theme of death or remembrance. Leonhard Lechner’s Deutsche Sprüche von Leben und Tod would be the
most logical choice, since it was the piece that directly inspired Distler to compose *Totentanz* and of course it thematically relates. This work is so rarely performed\(^{308}\) that a public performance would be a unique and worthy event. Lechner’s *Deutsche Sprüche* is about eleven minutes in length, is also *a cappella*, and also uses only SATB chorus. Another natural pairing would be any work by Heinrich Schütz. If one wanted to program a longer work, Schütz’s *Musikalische Exequien* is approximately thirty minutes in length. Additional performing forces would be required, as it calls for SSATTB chorus, SSATTB solos, and basso continuo, but being Schütz’s “German Requiem,” it would thematically relate to *Totentanz*. Schütz’s *Selig sind die Toten*, a brief, four-minute long motet for SSATB chorus, would be another wonderful option to fit with the theme and would not require soloists or instrumentalists.

As Distler also had an affinity for other Baroque models, works by Johann Sebastian Bach or Dietrich Buxtehude would be appropriate. One particularly relevant option might be Bach’s cantata number 106, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*. This work requires SATB chorus, SATB solos, basso continuo, two recorders (*blockflöten*), and two violas da gamba, so additional instrumentalists would be required. If period instruments are not available, flute and cello, respectively, can substitute for the period instruments, and of course one flute player would already be on hand because of *Totentanz*. This cantata, among Bach’s earlier cantatas, is only twenty minutes in length and includes only two choral movements, both of which have solo passages. It also includes an alto aria and an instrumental sonatina at the beginning of the work. Because of the relatively small amount of choral movements, it would not place a lot of extra

\(^{308}\) A search for recordings of this work did not produce any published recordings and only one recording on YouTube.
time demands on the conductor and chorus. It was written for a funeral service, and the text is exceptionally appropriate.

Any requiem would be befitting, but one in particular that might pair rather nicely with Totentanz and allow for a non-German composer to be represented on the concert is Ildebrando Pizzetti’s Requiem. This would also provide the chorus with an opportunity to sing in Latin, rather than programming an entire concert of German language works. Pizzetti’s Requiem was composed in 1922, so it is relatively contemporaneous with Distler’s Totentanz. Like Distler, Pizzetti was another twentieth-century composer who was fascinated with early music, and his setting of the Requiem reflects this deep love and influence. With alternating textures of imitative polyphony and homophony, and with many chant-like passages, this work shares some musical traits with Totentanz. The Dies Irae movement even quotes the traditional Gregorian chant for that text. The work is approximately thirty minutes in length, a cappella, and does not require soloists, so additional performing forces beyond that which is needed for Totentanz would not be required. The only caveat is that there is more divisi in this work. One movement is SATB, two are SATBB, one is SSAATTBB, and one movement, Sanctus, requires three choruses—SSAA.TTBB.TTBB. The Totentanz choir would then need to have a minimum of sixteen singers, four voices to a part. This would mean that all of the men would have their own part on this movement, which requires an extreme amount of vocal independence.

If some shorter works were needed to round out the program, some modern English-language songs could be included. There are many appropriate options to choose from, but two possibilities include “In Remembrance” by Eleanor Daley and “In Bright Mansions Above” by Roland Carter. Each of these songs is about four minutes in length, a cappella, and SATB. Both contain text that would beautifully support the theme.
November 1, 2017 will be the seventy-fifth anniversary of Hugo Distler’s death. The music of this singularly talented artist deserves more exposure with American audiences, and there is no better way to honor him than to perform his Totentanz in commemoration.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to provide some basic history of the controversial term “inner emigration” to enable a subsequent discussion on whether the term might in some way apply to Distler and to *Totentanz*. The controversy was instigated by exiled German writer Thomas Mann (1875-1955), who incidentally had been born in Lübeck, but had left Germany in 1933 at the start of Hitler’s reign. An outspoken opponent of Hitler and Nazism, Mann broadcast several speeches during the war, in German, on BBC radio. In May 1945, shortly after the war ended in Europe, Mann published articles in German newspapers discussing the issue of “German guilt” in light of the horrors committed in the concentration camps in the name of German people. Feeling disturbed by what he viewed as a lack of remorse in his people, he contended that all Germans are guilty of war atrocities, and that the entire nation must bear the shame for any acts committed under Nazi rule.

Rather than having the intended effect, these articles prompted rebuttals by some German writers who remained in Germany during the Third Reich, with one writer claiming that for those who were unable to leave, Germany had become one “huge concentration camp” and that most Germans were victims as well. When writer Frank Thiess (1890-1877) published his article entitled “Innere Emigration” in August 1945, in which he “claimed the moral high ground for those who stayed in Germany” over those who left for an “easy life abroad,” he set off an

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explosive debate. The concept suggests that “it was possible to ‘emigrate’ from the evil, Nazi Germany spiritually while remaining inside it physically,” and once a dichotomy was established between “outer” and “inner” emigrants inevitably this led to arguments over the relative worthiness of both responses to Nazism.

For seventy years, the validity of the term “inner emigration” has continued to be disputed. Defenders of the term claim that artists and intellectuals who remained in Germany attempted to obstruct the spread of Nazi ideology by publishing works with covert subversive messages. “Inner emigrants,” therefore, were part of a resistance movement from within Germany’s borders and were courageous in their acts of defiance, which if discovered, could result in banning, imprisonment, or worse. Critics of the term claim that in many cases subversive content was so well hidden as to be non-existent, and that it was a convenient term in the immediate post-war years that enabled guilty collaborators to convince themselves and the world of their innocence.

Though the term “inner emigration” was initially applied to writers, use of the term has spread to other fields, including music. Karl Amadeus Hartmann is one such composer who is perhaps the most undeniable representative of “inner emigration” in music. Born in 1905, he was only three years older than Distler and was a young and promising composer when Hitler ascended to power in 1933. So staunchly did he oppose fascism that he decided in that year that

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311 Donahue and Kirchner, Flight of Fantasy, 14-15.


he would not allow his works to be publicly performed within Germany’s borders. Kater describes what amounts to “inner emigration”:

Hartmann’s silence was only on the outside, however, for he internalized his ideological opposition. In an ingenious and imaginative way he used his creative talents to build up a very private monument of protest against the Hitler regime—by expressing his sentiments in his compositions, including text and music, and striving to get them performed abroad.\textsuperscript{314}

Financially, Hartman was able to survive this potentially career-suicidal move through monetary support provided by his father-in-law. Presumably, this was not an option for Distler.

Paul Hindemith, discussed so thoroughly in chapter three, is another composer associated with “inner emigration,” though his opposition to Nazi fascism was not remotely as overt as Hartmann’s. Even though Hindemith did eventually leave Germany, some claim that prior to his exile he withdrew into a state of “inner emigration,” reflected in amount of unpublished music he composed during this time that contained “resigned, melancholy, or despairing texts.”\textsuperscript{315} Yet despite the popular use of this term among Hindemith biographers and admirers, Michael Kater openly disavows the notion that Hindemith ever exhibited signs of “inner emigration.”\textsuperscript{316} Jost Hermand agrees, describing his behavior as overwhelmingly apolitical: “You would have to be broad-minded to label Hindemith’s conduct as belonging to the inner emigration that developed in the gray area between accommodation and aversion.”\textsuperscript{317}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Kater, \textit{The Twisted Muse}, 234.}
\footnote{Kater, \textit{Composers of the Nazi Era}, 34, 39.}
\footnote{Jost Herman, \textit{Culture in Dark Times: Nazi Fascism, Inner Emigration, and Exile} (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 165.}
\end{footnotes}
Noted Strauss musicologist Bryan Gilliam refrains from using the term “inner emigration”—perhaps deliberately avoiding this contested term lest his message get lost in controversy—but he writes convincingly that Richard Strauss also retreated into a similar state of mind in the mid-1930’s following his dismissal from his position as president of the RMK. A sketchbook of unpublished works from 1935-1936 reveals a change in Strauss’s Weltanschauung (“worldview”), “a nostalgic return to his…German Idealist roots, informed by Goethe and Nietzsche.”\(^\text{318}\) The sketchbook contains some unfinished works for men’s chorus, with poems by Friedrich Rückert that reveal Strauss’s innermost thoughts at the time. One poem, “Friede im Innern” (“Inner Peace”), delivers the message that the “evil force of ‘politics’ might well feed on its own lies and deceptions, but it is ultimately unable to deceive the spirit.”\(^\text{319}\) Another Rückert poem from this collection, “Vor der Türen” (“Outside the Doors”), contains a nihilistic message: “only death can offer comfort for a world-weary protagonist vainly searching from place to place for rest.”\(^\text{320}\) One earnestly wonders whether this text would have also appealed to Distler.

The question that has not yet been posed in English-language Distler scholarship\(^\text{321}\) is, “Was Hugo Distler an ‘inner emigrant?’” The introduction of chapter three quoted Palmer’s


\(^{319}\) Ibid., 583.

\(^{320}\) Ibid., 582.

\(^{321}\) German musicologist Bettina Schlüter has written an article in German entitled “‘Innere Emigration.’ Zum Lebensentwurf Hugo Distlers,” in which she discusses various dichotomies that exist in the life of an artist such as Distler living in a totalitarian state—“poetic” versus “prosaic,” “isolation” versus “integration,” “public” versus “private.” Her article focuses primarily on actions and psychological states, while largely refraining from examining evidence of “inner emigration” in Distler’s music.
The argument fails to convince, as Distler was a church musician by profession; therefore, chorales and motets for the Sunday morning Lutheran worship service were merely products of his work demands, necessary to support his family. On the contrary, works that Distler composed that cannot wholly and strictly be attributed to his occupation—those like Totentanz that are more idiosyncratic among his oeuvre—might more convincingly be regarded as a “resistance gesture,” i.e. the work of an “inner emigrant.” If one is inclined to accept that such a term is a valid label for artists and intellectuals of the Third Reich, a strong case could be made that Totentanz supplies the necessary evidence to earn Distler’s status as an “inner emigrant.”

Parallel arguments from the literary world may help support this claim. John Klapper, noted scholar on the subject of “inner emigrant” writers, explains that, “The dual challenge facing writers of historical fiction in Nazi Germany was to ensure that through its ambiguity the text was sufficiently disguised or camouflaged to satisfy the various layers of censorship, whilst simultaneously making the dissident message comprehensible to the sensitized reader.” This required “the ‘courage’ to write the truth and the ‘cunning’ to spread it among the many…”

He goes on to write,

The historical figure, episode or period itself should be seen by censors as the work’s subject, while at the same time readers should be given sufficiently clear hints about the actual meaning of the text and be allowed to make critical connections with the present… Key to this endeavor was writers’ deployment of deliberate stylistic ‘shortcomings’ (contradictions, ambiguities, exoticisms) as techniques for alerting attentive readers to

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unorthodox messages…specifically addition or removal of information, reordering within texts and substitution of material, the latter featuring parallels, fable, allegory, metaphor, irony, metonymy and polysemy, as ways to invest conformist texts with veiled non-conformist/critical messages, and vice versa.\(^{324}\)

One of Klapper’s four categories for “inner emigrant” historical fiction is “universality of themes,” i.e. when authors use “the past to assert the universal significance of values, often expressly Christian…[to underscore] the timeless nature of certain issues and phenomena and thereby emphasize the transitory nature of the Nazi present.” Christian “inner emigrants” recognize in human history “an eternal cycle of existence…[and] a divine plan of salvation.”\(^{325}\) Perhaps no allegory carries this message more powerfully than the *Totentanz* allegory. Werner Bergengruen’s novel *Am Himmel wie auf Erden* (1940) is an example of Christian “inner emigrant” historical fiction emphasizing universality of themes. Klapper writes, “The message of consolation at the heart of *Am Himmel wie auf Erden* is that man is a metaphysical being, focused on a point outside of history, and there can be no fulfillment in this earthly existence since history will inevitably one day be transcended.”\(^{326}\) One could exchange “*Totentanz*” for “*Am Himmel wie auf Erden*” in the preceding sentence and it would ring just as true.

Once again, Distler’s *Totentanz* would seem to contain all of the elements needed to be the work of an “inner emigrant” by Klapper’s description of the term. The entire work is historical and allegorical. Klapper’s “key” to recognizing that a double meaning is present in a work is the writer’s use of stylistic contradictions, and so many of the unconventional elements of *Totentanz* described in the preceding chapters—the use of mystic poetry, the spoken dialogue,

\(^{324}\) Klapper, “Categories of the Non-Conformist,” 164.

\(^{325}\) Ibid., 165.

\(^{326}\) Ibid., 167.
the solo flute interpolations, the overabundance of medieval musical characteristics, even the fact that it was premiered in a venue other than St. Jakobikirche—would fall under the label of “stylistic contradictions.” The subversive message underlying the work brazenly contradicts the Nazi tenet of racial superiority—that all people from all walks of life will meet death in the same manner. Moreover, the power and material wealth that one accumulates in this life must be abandoned in the afterlife; therefore, it is utterly meaningless to waste so much energy on that which is transient. Finally, the fourth movement, the one devoted to the Knight (Soldier, in modern terms) seems to contain a particularly pointed message to the Führer: “Oh sinner, if you well considered the fleeting now/and then considered eternity, you would not do evil.” Clearly, Nazi censors did not pick up on the double meaning, because this work was published and performed extensively all throughout Germany, earning Distler high praise whenever and wherever it was performed.

Naturally, the claim that Totentanz is the work of an “inner emigrant” attempting to covertly deliver an anti-Nazi message to his audience is wholly speculative. But what is abundantly clear is that something deeply personal compelled him to compose this work, and if vile and corrupt forces from without were not the catalyst, then despairing and disconsolate forces from within were. As has been noted throughout this study, Distler had exhibited a lifelong fascination with death and mortality, and it would appear as though he suffered from bouts of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and perhaps a fear of abandonment stemming from his earliest life. This perspective, therefore, views Totentanz as a symptom for a much more serious pathology. Barbara Distler-Harth suggests that the text for Totentanz particularly resonated with Distler because of his difficult life. She writes, “His spirituality and early experience of suffering clearly resulted in Hugo Distler, as young as he still was, being susceptible to the thought-world
of Angelus Silesius in a phase of extreme, frightening turmoil.\textsuperscript{327} Grusnick agrees that \textit{Totentanz} is a musical manifestation of his preoccupation with death, writing, “But throughout his whole life and work, ‘shivers’ of death always continued to pervade. In the background was his world, and perhaps no work is more revealing to him than the closing chorus from his \textit{Totentanz}.”\textsuperscript{328}

As for the questions brought forth in this study pertaining to Distler’s suicide, his closest friends, colleagues, and family have expressed their thoughts on the subject over the years. Söhngen described Distler’s \textit{Weltangst}—“a weariness with life and human existence.”\textsuperscript{329} Kristina Langlois interviewed Bruno Grusnick, who “recounted that he and Pastor Kühl constantly had the feeling that Distler stood at the edge of a cliff; it was merely a question of which event would finally drive him over the edge.”\textsuperscript{330} Grusnick’s own written words are perhaps even more illustrative:

His life resembled a highly dangerous balancing act by the excessive tensions of his inner self. His closest friends were always worried about his way and have always feared a catastrophe. He did not make it easy for himself nor his friends and his environment. He was not an easygoing man, as gentle and affectionate as he could be. Despite his slender frame, he was a volcano that no one could predict when he would erupt.\textsuperscript{331}

The reason Pastor Kühl’s own words on the subject have never been documented is that his life was also cut short by his own hand; he committed suicide while fighting in the Nazi army in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{327} Distler-Harth, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 195.
  \item \textsuperscript{328} Grusnick, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 23-24.
  \item \textsuperscript{329} Anders, “Hugo Distler and the New Church Music,” 37.
  \item \textsuperscript{331} Grusnick, \textit{Hugo Distler}, 22-23.
\end{itemize}
1944. Nevertheless, these quotes seem to suggest that Distler’s emotional and mental health was highly unstable and that his closest friends and colleagues were aware.

Even if it was possible for someone to diagnose a mental health disorder such as depression seventy-five years postmortem, I am certainly unqualified to do so. However, it would seem that if Distler’s life was a cup, he filled it with thoughts of despair, isolation, abandonment, anxiety, rejection, war, violence, and mortality until it overflowed. The political, cultural, and religious strife brought about by Nazi policy surely helped to fill Distler’s cup to overflowing at a significantly faster rate. Would the cup have filled anyway if Distler had not lived through the turbulence of the Third Reich? Possibly. If he had not struggled with the instability of mental health issues—if, for the sake of argument, it can be accepted that he was indeed afflicted with some manner of mental health disorder—would Distler have still taken his own life out of protest against Nazism alone? Perhaps not. Many tens of thousands of artists lived through the same era and survived either through exile or “inner emigration”—comparatively few chose suicide.

Perhaps the most enlightening dialectic on the subject comes from Barbara Distler-Harth’s biography. She explains that after Distler’s death, the family faced a serious problem—the government was withholding his pension because there were rumors around Berlin that Distler’s suicide was an act of defiance against Nazism. The Minister of Education, Bernhard Rust, wrote to Fritz Stein asking him to investigate these rumors and report his findings. In his report, Stein explained that he himself had notified Distler on the day before his death that his exemption from military service would be granted. He then goes on to write the following:

As for the above issue, I am convinced that Distler's act of despair has no causal connection with his conscription order.

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332 Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler, 333-335.
Detailed investigations have revealed that for many years Distler has suffered from severe mental depression, and already months before his death he had carried suicidal thoughts.

Distler has lived an exceedingly difficult youth; he has worked himself up from the smallest of circumstances with enormously hard work, and probably also with a sustained overburden of his bodily and nervous powers. Of the most delicate physical structure and almost pathological sensitivity, which lacked insulation against the hardships of life, he obviously could no longer cope with the total resignation as a composer and practicing musician, which had overwhelmed him for a year.

As I have ascertained, in the last weeks before his death he ate nothing more than a little dry bread during the day, and in the evening he had to be virtually forced by the housemaid who was looking after him to take something for himself. It is, therefore, without question a total physical and psychological breakdown; from my point of view—and I am convinced that every psychiatrist will agree with me—it is not otherwise possible to explain why a man with such gifts and future prospects as a composer and a choral conductor, who was in fullest ascension, would with clear consciousness voluntarily part with his life.333

Stein makes it perfectly clear—Distler suffered from severe mental depression which directly led to his suicide, and that the conscription order was not a factor. However, Distler-Harth’s commentary on the letter explains that Stein concealed the true reason for Distler’s suicide in order to clear suspicion and help the family receive his pension.334 This could very well be true; it also could be true that Distler’s daughter wished to conceal his depression to prevent a stigma on his memory.

The questions brought forth in this study can never be answered definitively, and no amount of conjecture will serve to clarify the circumstances surrounding Hugo Distler’s suicide. And whether Totentanz was merely the reflection of his troubled soul or a sublimely prescient work foretelling the downfall of Nazi Germany and his own tragic end, this work remains a

333 Distler-Harth, Hugo Distler, 336-337.

334 Ibid., 335-336.
powerful expression of a creative spirit. Hitler is quoted as saying, “Wars come and go; cultural achievements alone survive.” This statement is so irrefutable that its veracity cannot be diminished, even despite the source. Certainly World War II has long since ended, and whatever internal “war” Distler fought against ceased with his death, but Totentanz continues to have life, and through his works Distler’s spirit, artistry, and genius live on.

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VITA

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