

Chris Walton

**Winfried Lüdemann: *Hugo Distler: Eine musikalische Biographie*. Augsburg: Wissner-Verlag, 2002. *Collectanea musicologica* No. 10. ISBN: 3-89639-353-7**

Distler is not a name to conjure with in the English-speaking world. Inasmuch as his name is known today at all, he is usually bracketed together with all the other German Hindemith acolytes of the 1930s and 40s who spent their time writing motoric, wrong-note, neo-Baroque organ pieces, Protestant motets and concerti grossi. As so often, this is a gross simplification. In the German-speaking world, Distler retained a certain degree of fame as one of the principal renewers of German Church music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has now been accorded a major study (in German), over 500 pages in length, the result of some twenty years of research by Winfried Lüdemann of the University of Stellenbosch.

Hugo Distler was born in Nuremberg in 1908 and studied at the Leipzig Conservatory from 1927 to 1931, where his teachers included Carl Adolf Martienssen and Hermann Grabner. In 1931 he became an organist in Lübeck, in 1937 a lecturer at the Stuttgart Conservatory, and in 1940 at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. Not long afterwards, he was appointed conductor of the Cathedral Choir there. In the late 1930s, Distler seems to have just managed to avoid being classed as a ‘degenerate’ artist by the Nazi authorities. He did, however, become embroiled in the conflict between the Nazi authorities and the Church, and took his own life in late 1942.

There has been a certain degree of debate about Distler in recent years (albeit almost solely in Germany). The picture of him choosing death on account of difficulties with the Nazi authorities, with its implications of active dissatisfaction with the régime, has given way to the image of a generally faithful Nazi Party member, eager to acquiesce to the desires of the State. In his extensive introductory observations, Lüdemann states that a full-scale, objective biography would be a massive, barely manageable task, given the extent of source material that would have to be covered (see pp. 22-3, though a cynic might suggest that twenty years should surely be enough time to do so). For that reason, Lüdemann has decided to concentrate on the music, which is examined chronologically to form (as the title says) a ‘musical biography’. As an admirer of Hindemith, Distler was no friend of atonality (he declared it to be ‘against nature’ in 1940 – see p. 19). He accordingly suffered posthumously on account of the post-War distaste for music considered non-progressive. Lüdemann here pleads in general, but with specific reference to Distler, for the study of that music that was long tainted as ‘regressive’, but which today, in our post-Modern, pluralistic aesthetic climate, need no longer be looked askance at. Lüdemann openly acknowledges that Distler’s oeuvre runs almost exactly concurrently with the years of Nazi rule in Germany. However, he tells us that he has chosen not to write a book on Distler as ‘a composer in Nazi

Germany', as this would be a primarily historical task, and he wishes to place Distler's music centre-stage. Only if Distler found his way to a musical language that transcends its time and place is he worthy of study, Lüdemann believes (pp. 11-12).

The book is divided into three main sections: the musical biography of the composer, a discussion of his style, and a complete work catalogue. There is also a comprehensive bibliography and an index. Lüdemann's analyses in the second section are generally of the empirical kind; neither Schenkerian nor Fortean analytical procedures are suitable, he maintains, because he feels that both would ignore the parameter of rhythm and also the 'semantic' elements of Distler's style.

Let there be no doubt: Lüdemann's book is a formidable achievement, and likely to remain the standard work of Distler's music for many years to come. It has also awakened a desire in the present writer to become more closely acquainted with the music (the excerpts from the Harpsichord Concerto in particular look fascinating). Given that the present writer belonged previously to that happy throng who gladly tossed Distler, along with so many others, onto the crowded second-rate Hindemithian dung-heap, Lüdemann's book has thus, in my case at least, succeeded in making a sceptic willingly change his tune. That said, the author's approach to his subject is not a little problematical. He refuses, for example, to examine the composer's emotional life. 'Respect for the private sphere of the composer and his family' (pp. 255-6) forbids him from investigating the reasons for Distler separating from his wife for several months in 1938-9 – though he then tells us in a footnote that the reason was in fact an affair with a younger woman. In his recently-published study of Hans Schaeuble, a Swiss composer who studied at Leipzig at the same time as Distler and with whom the latter remained on friendly terms, the German author Fred K. Prieberg intimates strongly that a whiff of homosexual scandal with the Hitler Youth was what led Distler to commit suicide. As it happens, he killed himself just shortly after Schaeuble had left Berlin to return to his native Switzerland; Schaeuble was himself gay. If there is any truth in the supposition of Distler's indeterminate sexual orientation, then this would naturally have had an impact on how Distler saw his role in both society and Church (as is well known, the Nazis were, at least superficially, rabidly anti-homosexual). It might also cast new light on how and why Distler regarded atonality as 'against nature' (was he, perhaps, projecting onto others something of which he felt he might be accused himself, albeit in another context?). There is not a hint of any of this in the present book.

More problematical, however, is Lüdemann's treatment of political issues. To his credit, he quotes extensive source material in his book – this is one of its prime strengths. And he does not shy away from quoting those 'awkward' texts that undermine any attempt to portray Distler as a would-be anti-Nazi freedom fighter. Lüdemann is in fact refreshingly honest in matters political. For example: he tells us that Distler indeed joined the Nazi Party, on 1 May 1933; he quotes an article by Distler from 1934 in which the composer writes that the 'cultic oratorio' is the future of music in Germany (p. 101); he states openly that, although there was no particular stylistic change in Distler's music when the Nazis took power in 1933, Distler did begin setting more nationalistic texts (such as his 'Ewiges Deutschland' – 'Eternal Germany', written in 1934; see p. 96); he quotes from a letter of Distler to the Typkes family of

20 September 1939, in which the composer writes that the war just begun is like a ‘great, destructive, cleansing natural event’, and refers admiringly to the ‘purest, most noble will of our Führer’ (p. 320); he mentions Distler’s genuine relief in 1938 at not being classed as ‘degenerate’ on account of his somewhat modernistic Harpsichord Concerto, and also tells us how, when this work was criticised by the powerful Oskar Söhngen, Distler wrote back to him sheepishly that he was aware of the danger of ‘Mannerism’ in his music, and that he was already fighting against it (p. 184).

What *is* disturbing, however, is the fact that all this information is stated baldly, without any real comment or interpretation on the part of the author. Anything political is essentially brushed aside – and in a manner that one could almost call naïve, were naïveté not usually the biographer’s smokescreen to hide his lack of it. To give just two examples: Lüdemann quotes without comment the claim by Distler’s wife that her husband was forced by his bishop to join the Nazi Party – a claim that might be more believable, had the supposed ‘forcing’ occurred in the early 1940s rather than twelve weeks after Hitler assumed power; and with regard to Distler’s Hitler-adulation in the abovementioned letter to the Typkes, Lüdemann quotes Distler’s wife again to explain that the composer knew that the Typkes were passionate Nazis, and wanted to express sympathetic understanding for their beliefs. This is precisely a moment where a biographer should step in to interpret, dissect, deconstruct – but since this is a ‘musical biography’, Lüdemann feels justified in remaining on the sidelines. If biography (thus C. G. Jung, if memory serves) should show a man in his metaphorical underpants, then Distler in this book is portrayed in a deep-sea diver’s suit and a chastity belt.

In asserting the ‘timeless’ values of Distler’s music, Lüdemann is simply trying to find justification for removing it from its historical context. He seems to take little real interest in the fact that Distler had close ties to Peter Raabe, head of the Reichsmusikkammer and (let us be frank) a thoroughly nasty piece of work; or that Distler openly admired Hitler; or that Distler wrote works with unmistakably nationalistic texts; and so on. The copious source material quoted by Lüdemann cries out that Distler’s life cannot be separated from his music, that he was inextricably caught up in the political and social currents of his times (for how could he not be?). But Distler here is a man who is not political, who does not have sex, who in fact really does none of those things that make one a man. He is ‘just’ a composer. This is, in a sense, a biography without a subject. It is a history written as if history did not exist.

How can Lüdemann present all this evidence, and yet ignore it? How can one turn a life-story so obviously and intensely political into an ostentatiously non-political book? In fact, the attempt at a complete evasion of history turns the book into a startlingly ideological statement. By removing time and place from Distler’s life, Lüdemann by default gives a very definite time and place to his book. In decades to come, after future Distler scholars have long moved on, this book will remain an indispensable document for historians of South African music and musicology. Could it, one wonders, have been written anywhere else in the world today, except in Stellenbosch?