



A Song for Every Choir: Hugo Distler's *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch*, op. 19 By Brad Pierson

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Hugo Distler is considered by many to be one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. Alongside contemporaries such as Ernst Pepping and Johann Nepomuk David, Distler helped usher in a new era of music known as the New German Church Music. Motets from his op. 12 (e.g., *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, *Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme*) remain favorites among choirs around the world, and larger works such as *Die Weihnachtsgeschichte*, op. 10, and *Choralpassion*, op. 7, are widely recognized for their contribution to the choral canon. Distler's reputation as a composer is so strongly associated with these pieces that many of his smaller works, especially his secular music, are relatively unknown outside of his native Germany.

The music of Hugo Distler is not immediately associated with accessibility. The pieces that rank among his most popular can be quite difficult, even for more experienced ensembles. Further, the immediate

association with sacred music may deter public school teachers from considering Distler's *oeuvre* as a resource. This article aims to introduce the *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch*, op. 19 (published by Bärenreiter, BA1515) to choral conductors and to highlight several pieces representative of the collection. A complete table of titles and voicings is also provided.

High Quality and Accessible

Among the most enduring and important musical contributions of Hugo Distler are the forty-eight motets of the *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch*. These secular works remain highly popular in Germany to this day and, for American choral conductors, represent a vast array of under-performed but wonderful pieces. The music of this set includes pieces for male, female, and mixed choirs with a range from unison to eight-part voicing, and the collection has been referred to as Distler's "most beautiful and liberated work."² Pieces such as *Wanderlied* sound similar to the English madrigals of the late sixteenth century, and it is precisely this sort of rhythmic movement within the text and its connections to German folk music that drew Distler to

the poetry of Eduard Mörike:

As a choral composer, what attracted me to Mörike is that he was the first within the 19th century, and in modern times is the only one to use such unexampled rhythmic power and freedom of movement, and ... the old German folk song ... [which] can combine well with the intimate subjectivity and full character imprint in each case.³

The pursuit of high-quality repertoire is a constant concern among conductors and music educators. Reading sessions at conventions that cater to specific ensembles or age groups demonstrate the demand among teachers for new ideas about music that suits their ensembles. For many directors, the challenge of finding repertoire that is both challenging and representative of varied musical eras is very real. This is especially true for those conducting at the junior high level, those with smaller or unbalanced choirs, and those with non-auditioned ensembles. The music of Distler's op. 19 provides an excellent resource for ensembles of all types. Through both text and com-

positional techniques, connections can be made to a wide variety of already popular musical styles and composers, making these selections versatile pieces to program.

Whether one conducts a select, auditioned SATB choir; has a smaller, unbalanced SAB high school ensemble; or directs a men's or women's choir, the *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch* offers a piece that will suit any ensemble well. The three books in the collection contain pieces in a range of voicings (Table 1). A complete table of the pieces included in the *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch* can be found at the end of this column. Not only are the pieces appropriate for specific voicings, they are accessible to choirs with less experience. This is not to say that the pieces are

easy or without challenge; however, these challenges become much simpler when viewed through a more informed lens.

Der Gärtner (The Gardner)

One major point of appeal of the works of op. 19 is the huge variety within the collection. Not only is there great musical diversity, which allows for a vast array of moods and sounds, but there are also opportunities for ensembles of nearly any size and experience level. Conductors often find themselves in a position where they have choirs that are unbalanced, of low experience, or simply small in number. These teachers may struggle to find music suitable for their ensemble while maintaining musical integrity and challenging their singers. *Der Gärtner* is one of the many unison pieces included in op. 19. Its brevity allows for it to be shown here in its entirety (Figure 1).

The music, only encompassing the range of an octave, is quite simple. In typical Distler fashion, bar lines do not go through the staff and so do not obscure the poetic or musical intention. In this way, this small

piece can serve as a good introduction to reading Distler's music. The instructions indicate that the piece should be sung as a canon, and because of this, it can be a nice introduction to harmony for younger singers. While the description indicates that the canon is sung by soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices, Distler includes several caveats in the foreword to the work that allow for flexible realization.⁴ He suggests, for example, that transposition of the pieces is possible when necessary (although he does state that it should only be used in "exceptional cases" so as not to affect the character of the piece).⁵ He also advises that in most cases, equal voice parts can be used rather than those voices indicated.⁶ The simple pastoral poetry of *Der Gärtner* is well suited to singers of any age, and while the additional challenge of singing in a foreign language may be daunting to some singers, the straight-forward nature of the piece makes it quite accessible. It should be further noted that despite its simplicity, the beauty of the melody makes this a nice inclusion for choirs of advanced skill levels. Several other similar unison

Voicing	Frequency
SA	4
SAA	1
SAB	4
SATB	10
SSA	2
SSAA	5
SSAATB	2
SSATB	4
SSATTB	1
TB	3
TBB	1
TTB	2
TTBB	6
Unison (Canon)	3

Gemächliche ♩.

Der Sopran beginnt; es antworten der Alt im Kanon im Einklang, Tenor in der Oktave, Baß in der Oktave. Jede Stimme singt einmal alle Strupphen durch.

1. Auf ih - rem Leib - ro - lein, so wei wie der

Schnee, die schön - ste Prin - zes - sin reit't durch die Al - lee.

Figure 1. Hugo Distler, *Der Gärtner*, Op. 19, mm. 1–8.
Bärenreiter, 1939. BA 1516 Public Domain

pieces are featured in the collection, including *Auf dem Spaziergang* (*On the Walk*) and *Suszens Vogel* (*Darling Bird*).

Wanderlied (Wandering Song)

The work of the madrigalists of the Renaissance has become standard repertoire for choirs in America. In fact, many high schools even feature madrigal ensembles of which this music is the hallmark. Conductors seem to be drawn to the simple harmonies and basic polyphony that these pieces offer. “Fa-la-la” sections present fun, rhythmic music that students greatly enjoy, and *Wanderlied* appears to be Distler’s ode to this style.

This piece is written for SAB. The tessitura for the sopranos and altos lies comfortably within their range, with the altos never singing lower than middle C and the sopranos never higher than the E, top line of the treble staff. The baritone range extends from C3 to D4. The text is set as two verses, each followed by a section of “fa-la-la,” a short “chorus,” and a final “fa-la-la” section. The opening of the verses is set homophonically and primarily in 2/2 time. The basic outlining of the B^b major tonality is quite straightforward (Figure 2).

Meter changes throughout compositions are typical of Distler, and here that includes bars of 3/2 within the verse and a move to 3/4 for the chorus section. This provides added challenge for the singers but

is not dissimilar to meter changes in modern editions of Renaissance pieces (such as in *Since Robin Hood* by Thomas Weelkes and *El Grillo* by Josquin des Prez). The intervals of the “fa-la-la” sections are made simpler by having the female voices simply outline an F major triad and the baritones similarly either outline this chord or move in stepwise motion (Figure 3).

The simplicity of the piece makes it readily accessible to middle school choirs or to those high school choirs struggling with small men’s sections and/or balance challenges. The challenge of learning German is mitigated by Distler’s treatment of the text. As in all of his work, the close relationship between text and music is ever present, and the language is set such that important

Straffe, nicht schnelle ♩ .

1. Ent - flohn sind wir der Stadt Ge - drän - ge,
2. Man la - gert sigh am Schat - ten - quel - le,

Figure 2. Hugo Distler, *Mörke-Chorliederbuch: Wanderlied*, mm. 1–5.

♩ = ♩

Fa - la - la, fa - la - la,

la, fa - la - la, fa - la - la, fa - la - la!
la, fa - la - la, fa - la - la, fa - la - la!
fa - la - la, fa - la - la - la - la - la, fa - la - la —, fa - la - la!

Figure 3. Hugo Distler, *Mörke-Chorliederbuch: Wanderlied*, mm. 44–50.

A Song for Every Choir: Hugo Distler's

words or syllables naturally fall on stressed beats or longer note values. It has been suggested that this is a “direct result of word-painting,”⁷ a reflection of the Renaissance influence. Its clear relation to madrigals makes for simple programming, as it would pair well with many similar sounding pieces. Within the collection, *Handwerkerlied* also includes “fa-la-las” and *Schön Rotraut* similarly includes “ha-ha-has.” *Vorspruch* offers a similar feel in its “*musikanten*” section and would be a challenge for more advanced groups. The constant repetition of words in this section, similar to the Renaissance “fa-la-las,” is a hallmark of Distler’s works, and he

utilizes this technique to create intense rhythmic activity without obscuring text.

Der Feuerreiter (The Fire Rider)

For choirs who are able to tackle more challenging repertoire, one of the most exciting pieces offered in the collection is *Der Feuerreiter*. Distler masterfully crafts a haunting sound to pair with Mörike’s poem about the “hellish light” of the fire at the mill and the Fire-rider as he gallops furiously through the town. While the harmonic language of this piece is significantly more challenging than that of those previously dis-

cussed, it does feature several aspects that make it quite teachable. First, each verse begins with all voices in octaves. The effect of this unison becomes increasingly powerful as the story unfolds (Figure 4). As the location of the action is revealed, the back and forth of “*hinterm Berg*” (“beyond the hill”) works similarly to the “fa-la-las” previously discussed, albeit with a much darker and more ominous aesthetic (Figure 5).

In considering these portions of the music, one has a clear roadmap for presenting the work to singers in a way that makes the challenging harmonic language of the music more readily accessible. Splitting at times

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into six parts, this is certainly one of the more difficult pieces in the collection but one that is sure to excite singers. The piece would work well both as an opener and as a closer for a program and will bring a wonderful sense of drama to a concert.

This collection also contains several more challenging pieces that work well for larger or more experi-

enced ensembles. A director looking for a piece that would be fitting for a larger choir that can sing in eight-part voicing but has a less experienced men's section might consider *Lebewohl*. This work includes beautiful lyric lines and close harmonies within the women's voices while lim- iting the men to a repeated chordal statement well within the grasp of

the average high school ensemble. *Die Tochter der Heide* features several "ha-ha" sections and familiar madrigal-like rhythms, but in addition to a six-part split, it also extends the bass range to a low E. These pieces will push ensembles toward more difficult repertoire through their challenging harmonies and intricate rhythmic relationships.

The musical score for the first four measures of 'Der Feuerreiter' is shown. It features six vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and two additional parts. The lyrics are: "1. Se - het ihr am Fen - ster - lein dort die ro - te Müt - ze wie - der? Nicht ge - heu - er mu es". The music is in 3/8 time and features a mix of eighth and quarter notes.


Figure 4. Hugo Distler, *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch: Der Feuerreiter*, mm. 1–4.

The musical score for measures 15-19 of 'Der Feuerreiter' is shown. It features six vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and two additional parts. The lyrics are: "gellt: Hin - term Berg, hin - term Berg, hin - term". The music is in 3/8 time and features a mix of eighth and quarter notes.

Figure 5. Hugo Distler, *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch: Der Feuerreiter*, mm. 15–19.

Conclusion

The music of Hugo Distler stands out for its rhythmic tenacity and unique harmonic language. Though much of his music is quite challenging and might only be considered for advanced choirs, his *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch* provides us with an outstanding collection of secular music that is accessible to a wide variety of ensembles. The quality of the poetry, having also been famously set for solo voice by Hugo Wolf (*Mörrike-Lieder*), is well established. While some of the music shares similarities with madrigals of the Renaissance, the harmony will set it well apart from the music of that era. Distler's allowance for changing keys or substituting voice parts when possible gives the conductor a great deal of freedom in making this music suitable for his or her ensemble. The sheer number and variety of works makes it

an excellent choice for the developing choral program. 

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NOTES

¹ This article was also published in the Ohio Choral Directors Association

Bulletin, *OCDA: News*, Vol 36, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 13-18, under the title “Repertoire for Developing Groups: Hugo Distler’s *Mörrike Chorliederbuch*, op. 19.” Additional translation work of the German translation was provided by Tim Cloeter, editor of *OCDA: News*.

² George Edward Damp, “The Achievement of Hugo Distler (1908-1942) with Emphasis Upon the *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch*” (master’s thesis, Cornell University, 1966), 7.

³ Hugo Distler, *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch—Erster Teil: für gemischten Chor*, Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1961.

⁴ A translation of the foreword is available in Brad Pierson, “Hugo Distler (1908-1942): Recontextualizing Distler’s Music for Performance in the Twenty-First Century” (doctoral thesis, University of Washington, 2014), goo.gl/8EX7fg.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John M. Cantanzaro, “A Study of the Schütz *Saint Matthew Passion* and the Distler *Choral Passion*” (master’s thesis, California State University-Fullerton, 1979), 19.

Complete List of Works in *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch*, op. 19

Title	Voicing	Book
Agnes	TB	3
An Philomele	TBB + Soloist	3
Auf de, Spaziergang	Unison/Canon	1
Das verlassene Mädlein	SSAA	2
Denk’ es, o Seele	SATB	1
Der Feuerreiter	SSAATB	1
Der Gärtner	SSAA	2
Der Gärtner	TTB	3
Der Gärtner	Unison/Canon	1
Der Knabe und das Immelein	SATB	1
Der Liebhaber	TB	3
Der Tambour	TTBB	3
Die Soldatenbraut	SSAA	2
Die Tochter der Heide	SSA	2
Die Tochter der Heide	SSAATB	1
Die traurige Krönung	SATB	1
Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag	SATB	1

Mörrike Chorliederbuch, op. 19

Complete List of Works in *Mörrike-Chorliederbuch*, op. 19 (continued)

Er ist's	SA	2
Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens	SSAA	2
Frage und Antwort	SATB	1
Frage und Antwort	TB	3
Gebet	SA	2
Gebet	SSA	2
Handwerkerlied	SSATB + Soloist(s)	1
Jägerlied	SAA	2
Jägerlied	TTBB	3
Jedem das Seine	SATB	1
Jung Volker (Gesang der Räuber)	TTBB	3
Jung Volkers Lied	TTBB	3
Kinderlied für Agnes	SATB	1
Lammwirts Klage	TTB	3
Lebewohl	SSATTBB	1
Lieb in den Tod	SSATB	1
Lied eines Verliebten	TTBB	3
Lied vom Winde	SSAA	2
Mausfallensprüchlein	SA	2
Nimmersatte Liebe	SSATB	1
Ritterliche Werbung	SATB + Two Soloists (Either T or B and S or A)	1
Schön Rohtraut	SAB	1
Sehnsucht	SAB	1
Storchenbotschaft	SATB	1
Suschens Vogel	SATB	1
Suschens Vogel	Unison/Canon	1
Um Mitternacht	SAB	1
Verborgenheit	SA	2
Verborgenheit	TTBB	3
Vorspruch	SSATB	1
Wanderlied	SAB	1