

Art-Religion for a Global New Age

In late summer 2000, the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart presented four newly written settings of the Passion of Christ. Commissioned from a quartet of internationally-known composers, the terms of the project, titled “Passion 2000,” called for each composer to select a canonic gospel and write the setting in his or her language of origin. The composers were Sofia Gubaidulina, Osvaldo Golijov, Wolfgang Rihm, and Tan Dun.

While Passion 2000 was partly undertaken to mark the millennium, organizers were vigilant about emphasizing the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death as the project’s true impetus, and the new Passions as an answer to a question they posed in the program book: “what meaning does Bach’s work have for today’s composers, and how do they think about questions of religion, Christianity, Passion and resurrection?” In this paper, I focus on Tan’s response, the *Water Passion After St. Matthew*, in which Bach’s “meaning” is drawn from long discursive traditions of Bach the universal and Bach the spiritual healer. I argue that Tan updates these tropes for a postmodern, globalized era, translating the “free-floating of piety” (Applegate 2005) that informed the 1829 performances of Bach’s *Matthew Passion* into a New Age musical universalism. I place Tan’s emphasis on music as a boundaryless, borderless practice into dialogue with New Age music and political thought, and with post-Cold War fantasies of economic globalization as liberation and renewal.

Drawing on interviews with Tan, reviews of his work, Bach historiography, and theories of globalization, I argue that *Water Passion* is “after” St. Matthew by way of its various translations: of religion into spirituality; of the national into the global; and of the Passion into the Resurrection with which Tan, alone of the Passion 2000 composers, ends his piece.