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Passion Music at the Turn of the XX and XXI Centuries, Part II: Tan Dun and Osvaldo Golijov

The *Passion 2000* project, which came about through the initiative of Helmuth Rilling, posed a particular challenge for composers from outside of European culture and different religious traditions. However, the Chinese composer, Tan Dun, and the Argentinian composer, Osvaldo Golijov, met this challenge by composing the *Water Passion* and *La Pasión Según San Marcos*, respectively, and opening up the traditional Passion genre to new perspectives. Both composers began their works with the words of the Gospels and then added in new texts to imbue their works with a more universal message. These interpolations, which refer to twentieth-century tragedies, bring the concept of Christ's suffering into modern times. By adding aspects of their own cultures to their works, Dun and Golijov essentially broke with the tradition of the Passion genre by presenting the events of the Passion contained in the Gospels through the prism of Far Eastern instrumentation and South American rhythms, while still maintaining the power of Helmuth's request. Despite obvious references to Johann Sebastian Bach, these works present an unconventional approach to the Passion genre and open this form of religious music up to new possibilities for communication between the artist (composer) and the listener.

Key words: Passion, Tan Dun, Osvaldo Golijov, contemporary sacred music, *Water Passion*, *La Pasión Según San Marcos*.

When he wrote the *Passion According to St. Luke (Passio et Mors Domini Nostri Jesu Christi secundum Lucam)* in 1966, Krzysztof Penderecki revived the Passion genre in the mid-twentieth century. The

premiere of this work was a great event both in the world of music and religious circles. Penderecki himself emphasized that his “art,” which was deeply rooted in Christianity, sought to rebuild the metaphysical space of man that had been chattered by the tragedies of the 20th century. According to Penderecki, “the only way to save man is to restore the sacred dimension of reality.”¹ This work, which spoke deeply to people through advent-garde means while evoking the musical tradition of Bach emboldened other twentieth-century artists to attempt to create compositions in this genre.

In his *Passion and Resurrection* (1981), Jonathan Harvey revived the choral tradition within the Passion genre. Specifically, he used English translations of medieval passion texts from, among other sources, the collections of Benedictine monasteries. His Passion composition created for soloists, vocal ensembles, and a chamber orchestra harkened back to the earliest traditions in this genre. Although the foreground of his composition is present as a medieval monody, certain parts of his work also contain contemporary atonal sounds.

In 1982, Arvo Pärt attempted to revive the Passion genre in his *Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Joannem*. This work visibly corresponded with the traditional form, which assigned the part of Jesus to the baritone, the part of Pilate to the tenor, and the part of the crowd to the choir. What was new in Pärt’s Passion, however, was his departure from the dramatic approach to illustrate the events of the Gospel. In other words, when he wrote his work, Pärt took advantage of the *tintinnabular* technique, which consists in approaching and moving away from designated tonal and sonic centers. “When I am looking for answers to questions about my own life, music, and work, I draw myself into the sound of a bell...”² The textual strata of Pärt’s Passion is very expressive and refers to both medieval traditions and Renaissance polychoral style. One can hear the responsorial songs in this music, which are accompanied by the vocal layer, and the organ evokes an association with Bach’s music. Echoes of Bach’s work are evident in Pärt’s musical rhetoric, an example of which is his use of *aposiopesis* at the moment of Christ’s death. In many of his works, including *Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Joannem*, Arvo Pärt uses a slow tempo, which gives his listeners the time to

¹ <http://lublin.gosc.pl/doc/3496414.Bladzenie-prowadzi-do-spelnienia> (11.11.17)

² Taken from Arvo Pärt’s interview with Joanna Cieřlik-Klauza, *Wtajemniczenie w trójdźwięk*, report and interview conducted for TVP S. A. in Białystok, November 2003.

contemplate and reflect. He creates a musical space that allows for metaphysical contemplation and deep interior reflection.

John Tavener is another twentieth-century composer who wrote *Fall and Resurrection* in 2000 at the request of the Prince of Wales. In his composition, Tavener tells the story of the life, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ using music that recalls the Orthodox tradition. His work contains two soloists, a soprano, and a bass, each of who share all of the roles between themselves: Eve, the Mother of God, Mary Magdalene, God, Christ, and the Devil. The saxophone accompanies the party that tempts Eve to sin.

Four works were created for Helmuth Rilling's *Passion 2000* project to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Bach's death. In addition to the two Passions created by Europeans Sofia Gubaidulina and Wolfgang Rihm, two others were written by composers outside of Europe: the *Water Passion* by the Chinaman residing in America, Tan Dun, and *La Pasión Según San Marcos* composed by the Argentinian, Osvaldo Golijov. The two latter works will be discussed below.

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Tan Dun – *Water Passion*

One might be surprised that Rilling requested that Tan Dun, who is best known within Europe as a composer of soundtracks for such films as *Hero* or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, to compose a Passion work. Dun's musical idiom is combining a variety of historical and cultural traditions. He does not shy away from the latest techniques, from apparently discontinuous contrasts, just as he provocatively speaks of the connection between everything and nothing, between high art with the banal. His critics do not share the same admiration for Dun as do those who are fascinated by his work. As a musical visionary, Tan Dun seeks to connect the East and the West as well as multidimensional messages. Born in 1957, Dun is no longer a member of the youngest generation of composers. Yet, his professional experience continually intrigues people. While his aim is not to build bridges or seek to establish dialogue between cultures that are worlds apart, Dun has an ability to combine seemingly dichotomous elements into a whole.

Dun wrote his *Water Passion* for a soprano, bass, mixed choir, a solo group of violins, cellos, three sets of percussions, and a Yamaha A-3000 sampler. The solos within the work are very demanding, ambitious, and greatly challenging to the soloists. However, the most difficult task of the instrumental parts is to improvise.

Within his work, Dun draws from a few different written sources. Of the twenty-eight chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel, Tan Dun chose to use only seven. By reducing the content, Dun limits the work to Christ's most important words and omits large parts of the narrative. This approach to the Gospel text recalls the simplicity of Buddhist philosophy. By simplifying the content, Dun intentionally impoverishes the music, thereby drawing the listener's attention to the flowing tempo and the symbolism of the sounds. In this way, Dun avoids traditional musical affects that are characteristic of the Passion genre and relies instead on the language of symbols. The word "water" in the title of his work, therefore, becomes a *leitmotiv* of the historical event being transposed. The symbolic meaning of the work gives it a broad religious and cultural context.

Traditionally, Passion texts open with the narration of the Last Supper. Tan Dun, however, begins his Passion with baptism, which, through water, introduces each Christian into the world of faith. He emphasizes that the symbol of water is very metaphorical and connected with birth, meaning the work of creation, life, death, and passing away. Water penetrates the earth and touches the air. It is an invaluable component of the nature of the world. According to Dun, water is a symbol of the resurrection and, therefore, associated with hope. It is the idiom for the birth of a new world and of a better life.

The Gospel of St. Matthew is starting point for Tan Dun's Passion. There are, however, certain interpolations that create new contexts within the meaning of the work. For example, Dun chose to use selected phrases from the Gospel of St. John. After the seven last words of Christ on the cross, Dun adds another Gospel verse: "I thirst" and "It is finished." In addition, he includes references to verses from two Old Testament books: Wisdom and Ecclesiastes. Also, his own text in the form of seven short verses is included in the literary layer of the Passion. Only the choir sings these verses in parallel fifths. Tan Dun also presents the symbols of peace and purity in the intervals. Moreover, Dun uses parallel intervals in order to refer to historical musical styles, which emphasizes his awareness and appreciation for tradition.

In Dun's Passion, he does not differentiate between the roles of Christ, the Evangelist, and Pilate. The bass sings the part of Jesus, which is differentiated from the musical material because its pentatonic scale is limited. This makes the musical style attributed to Christ closer to the sounds of the Far East. The only place where "Jesus" begins to improvise by singing outside of the pentatonic scale is the moment when Peter denies Him. This is the main scene of the *Water*

Passion. This part begins in the tones of overtone singing, which are accompanied by the solo violin. In the introduction to this part, the play on the vocal resonance corresponds with the violin's improvisation. Gradually, more complex elements in the musical structure are incorporated. For example, an energetic rhythm joins in, which intensifies this key moment in this scene, and the vocal parts are divided between the choir, which musically dialogues with the main characters. When he denies Christ, Peter utters his lines a few times in a very low register. The commentary is reminiscent of the role that choirs played in the performances of Greek antiquity.

In Tan Dun's *Passion*, he uses repeated symbolic interval structures: fifths, which are a symbol for purity, are interrupted with a descending second and a sudden glissando. This figure, which appears many times at key moments in *Water Passion*, integrates the entire work. After Peter denies Christ, another symbolic intermezzo follows, which brings the entire work together as the parts are played on the so-called "water percussion." Bowls of water are placed on the stage in order to create sound effects of water babbling, rippling, splashing, and falling (dripping).

The soprano plays the part of Judas. By giving a woman this part, Dun deliberately strives to create an obvious historical dissonance. At the same time, by writing the part for a woman he shows how the message is universal. Tan Dun, who often uses extremes in his work, is intentionally inconsistent. The difference between Righteousness and Betrayal is like the contrast that occurs in the natural world in the differences between men and women. Dun's rejection of gender also points to the biblical antagonism between the characters. Judas' betrayal is the culmination of Dun's *Water Passion*. This tense moment plays a central role in the musical score. The theme of betrayal (sung by the soprano soloist) accompanies the contrasting shades of the male choir. The tritones that Dun uses in the musical material emphasize the deceit.

Coloring plays an extremely important role in Tan Dun's work. Within the parts sung by the soloists, there are fragments from the edge of the melody and *sprechgesang*; the vocalizations accompany the elaborate techniques that are executed, which leads to tremors, or unnatural vibrations of the voice. Improvisations are often built on Asian sounding scales. Far Eastern sounding vocal excerpts are sung using the overtone singing technique mentioned above, which consists in manipulating the human voice's resonance. Although this is a normal practice in Asian and American countries and particularly in

Tibet, it is very different from Central European traditions. The sound is similar to an Islamic muezzin who calls the people to prayer. Such inter-cultural associations within the context of the Christian Passion broaden the scope of the meaning of the work.

The choir's significant role in this score makes the work particularly dynamic. Usually the choir reacts spontaneously at the moment an action takes place. On a sonoristic level, the choir often screams or hisses. At the appropriate nonverbal sounds, the choir is able to achieve shocking murmuring effects, snoring, laughter, barking, and purring. At other moments, the choir sings in a traditionally harmonious manner. The music of the work is composed with close consideration for the work's content. For example, in the seventh part, the choir sounds particularly scary as it recalls when the crowd chose to release Barabbas instead of Christ. The chaotic sounds at this moment, which are caused by the sonoristic cries of the crowd, come to the foreground. The aggressive sounding percussion instruments emphasize the terror of the situation, while the mournful cello and lyrical violin emphasize the tragedy. Stones were included in the instrumentation; they are both musically and symbolically significant. At the crucial moment when the crowd is asked to choose between Christ and Barabbas, the choir members rhythmically hit together stones taken from the bottom of a river which they hold in their hands. This symbolic stoning of Christ is conveyed through the musical rhythm of the stones clashing together, which is then joined by the sounds of a solo cello and guitars. In this situation, the death of Jesus is inevitable. The choir and soloists sing Christ's final words on the cross: "Eli, Eli lama sabachthani?", which leads to a musical earthquake. Contrasts, topophonic effects, polymetry, polymorphism, and diverse color create a multifaceted chaos that is interspersed with screaming, groans, and seemingly chaotic glissandos. As a reminder, Tan Dun includes an ascending melodic motif in the following parts of the song until the hymn that calls for peace.

A composer of Chinese descent, Tan Dun is particularly sensitive to instrumentation. For this reason, he uses both water percussion and traditional Chinese instruments in the *Water Passion*. In addition, he also uses Chinese ceramic flutes called xun, ocarina, and Tibetan tingsha bells, all of which have been used for seven thousand years during Buddhist prayers. He also includes extensive drum sets to enhance the narrative and move it along. The music for the percussion instruments is often written based on the principles of polyrhythm. The surprising sounds of the water percussion, timpani, gongs immersed

in water as well as the way that they are used make each performance a spectacular show that takes place at the edge of the stage. The lit bowls filled with water create an additional impression, since they are laid out in the shape of a cross in order to emphasize the message's symbolic meaning.

For Tan Dun, including water in the score is as organic to him as a tears and human blood—the environment in which every stage of human existence begins and ends. In many cultures, the simple sound of water splashing is a symbol of hope. Dun composed the *Water Passion* during the period of his work that he termed “organic music” because his works contained organic elements of nature: water, sand, and stone. Topophonic effects also play a role in this part of Tan Dun's creation. Percussion drum sets are placed in various places on the stage. In some parts of his *Passion*, a completely different style taken from entertainment music influences the work. For example, Dun uses bluegrass in his score. Bluegrass is improvisational music that began in America in the 1950's, is influenced by country music and Appalachian sounds, and is played by “battling” fiddles and instruments. These improvised battles are punctuated by vocal inserts, songs, and conversations. The aim of this music is to repeat the virtuoso instrumental parts. This dialogue takes the form of a conversation between the parts played in the *Water Passion*. Both the instrumentation and the form of the work build these dialogues, contrasts, competitions, and clashes of opposites.

In order to remain partially faithful to the tradition of the *Passion* genre, Tan Dun strove to maintain the original structure of Bach's *Passion* in his work. To this end, the choir and solo parts alternate with the choral parts. Dun represents the descent toward death by using different musical sources. Then, symbolically reflecting the event in the surface of the water, the music changes direction, and the narration rises higher and higher toward the sky and the Resurrection. This musical journey is full of hope. When speaking about his work, Tan Dun said that it is like a mirror that reflects many cultures. His *Passion* ends with the following words: “A time to love, a time of peace, a time to dance, a time to be silent,” which sheds a new light on the message of the entire work. This text was written by Pete Seeger and inspired by verses from Ecclesiastes. In 1965, two American bands, *The Mamas and the Papas* and *The Byrds*, popularized this song. Seeger added the words “a time of peace” as a public protest against the Vietnam War. Dun's use of this song serves as an obvious reference to the 1960s, when it served as a kind of hymn that called for freedom and opposed

injustice and warfare. The hopeful ending of Dun's work follows after the horror and Buddhist mysticism contained in the sections that precede it. The ending sheds light on the message of the entire work, which opposes evil, violence, and injustice in the world. Dun strives to help contemporary listeners become interested in Passion themes by associating them with contemporary life and situations.

Oswaldo Golijov – La Pasión según San Marcos

Oswaldo Golijov is an Argentinian composer who is not well known in Europe. He was born in 1961 into an emigrant family. His mother was of Jewish descent, and his father was of Russian origin. The composer's childhood was filled with classical music and traditional Jewish klezmer music. After accepting Rilling's invitation to compose a Passion for the *Passion 2000* project, Golijov thought a long time about what form his work would take. He wanted to create a Passion piece that was different from the European works that already existed. Therefore, Golijov chose to use different form-creating elements, express new emotions, and create an optimistic overtone in his work in order to convey an entirely different message that the inhabitants of South America would understand.

According to European tradition, Jesus' suffering is usually presented in music using dark tones. Golijov, on the other hand, treats the topic of the Passion boldly by illuminating it through the rhythm, color, and the energy of the Latin American temperament. His composition *La Pasión Según San Marcos* is filled with energetic dance, Brazilian capoeira rhythms, and the joy of singing in a group. In his composition, Golijov included brass bands, the accordion, guitar, six violinists, and six cellists, which is characteristic of Latin American tradition. This group is joined by a choir with both male and female solo parts that sing a native Latin American sounding issue.

Golijov decided to approach the main characters of the biblical events in an unusual manner. For example, the solo voices are not assigned to the main characters of the passion. As a result, the main role of Jesus is shared among different performers, including soloists and the choir. Golijov justifies this approach by stating that, since Jesus represents the people, each person can convey His verbal message. In this way, the Word of God is a kind of spirituality that can penetrate each person and, consequently, can be transmitted by any mouth. In Golijov's opinion, the traditional approach of assigning the role of Jesus

to only one soloist impoverishes the message and rejects the symbolic element that he considered the special quality of his idea.

Dance is the basis of Latin American culture. Golijov's entire *Passion* is, therefore, full of carnival rhythms, the flamenco, and other rhythms that convey lively emotions. Golijov illustrates the judgment of Jesus as ever increasingly fast music arises from the silence. The increasing tempo simultaneously builds the tension which, in turn, intensifies and unfolds both the agogical and instrumental layers. This scene culminates in a rhythmic layer that joins with the choral and instrumental sounds, which are almost orgiastic as the members of the choir clap their hands and stamp their feet.

Golijov chose the Gospel of St. Mark primarily because St. Mark defends the Jews. Golijov uses the last seven words of Jesus on the cross. In addition, he emphasizes the Gospel themes that he selected. The text of the composition is divided into thirty-four episodes, the shortest of which lasts only thirty-six seconds. Golijov's *Passion* begins with the Baptism of Christ. The initial story is then interrupted by the last words of Christ on the cross. In addition, Golijov uses Latin poetry and music as well as excerpts from Psalms 113-118. He also draws from Rosalia de Castro's nineteenth-century Spanish poem about the tears that St. Peter shed when he realized his guilt, which is also described in St. Mark's Gospel. This musical moment in Golijov's *Passion* is particularly moving, and the deep expression of Peter's regret aesthetically resembles the most beautiful arias from Handel's oratorios.

Golijov's betrayal of Christ is very interesting. Here he divides the narration, which is accompanied by swinging Cuban rhythms, among four tenors. The choral interludes that help create the texture disrupt the consistent development of rhythmic structures. The rhythmic dissonance in this passage of music serves as a commentary on the betrayal. The dancing layers of polyrhythmicity and the energetic dynamism seem out of place at such a serious moment in the *Passion*. Nevertheless, the rhythm consistently builds up to a powerful climax. Golijov uses music from the samba when Jesus is arrested. In European culture, such music during such a solemn moment is unacceptable. In Latin American cultures and tradition, however, the samba expresses the strongest of emotions. Against this clear rhythmic background, Golijov creates the most direct narrative. Golijov also distinguishes the moment in the narrative when Barabbas is released and Jesus is condemned to death through polyrhythmic and polymetric structures. For almost two minutes only the drums can be heard as they amplify the complex rhythmic structures. During this part, the alternating

tempos and lack of verbal layers focus the listener's attention on the complex texture. Golijov presents the moment of Jesus' death through a magnetic and nostalgic aria by the contralto.

Golijov concludes his *La Pasión Según San Marcos* with a Kadish, a traditional Jewish song for the dead. This part is separated by poly-metric singing (the soloist sings in 2/2 time, while the chorus sings in 6/8 time), which resembles rhythmically irregular Gregorian chants. Choral voices then arise based on a Cuban rhythm. By combining references to Gregorian chant, Protestant sounding choirs, traditional music, and solo arias along with flamenco rhythms, Golijov attempts to create a common space for many cultures and religions to interact. He also, however, harkens to the tradition of Bach by, as he repeated in different interview, imagining how Johann Sebastian Bach would have composed a Passion if he were living in the 20th century in South America.

Although Golijov uses what would be considered a controversial approach to compositional ideas, his work nevertheless fulfills its role to convey the Passion story. In this sense, *La Pasión Según San Marcos* is not only filled with unusually moving and wonderfully lyrical cantilenas, but also enriched with sensual South American expressions that are based on complex rhythms. By employing musical traditions South American dance, Osvaldo Golijov creates new contexts for the Passion story. And, while these elements may not follow convention, they make up an extraordinary work that expresses deep faith and hope for a new life after death.

The way in which composers present contemporary religious music has ceased to be important. In other words, the techniques, compositional methods, and musical style that a composer employs have become secondary, while the message of a composition has become the most important. Music can vary in means and expression; sometimes it is dark and restless, and at other times it is joyful and energetic. As the works of Tan Dun and Osvaldo Golijov demonstrate, the way to tell the same biblical story of the Passion does not always have to be subject to convention and expressed in a somber mood. Rather, the most important aim of Passion works is to guide the listeners to focus on and explore the greatest mystery of faith. Dun and Golijov express the spirit of the times in their unconventional use of multiple methods and means to express completely different moods through heated dance, unbounded joy, and energetic rhythm. Most of all, they reveal that the musical avant-garde has entered into a dialogue with

historical Passion traditions in order to resurrect the memory of the events that occurred more than two-thousand years ago on Golgotha.

PASJA PRZEŁOMU XX I XXI WIEKU – TAN DUN, OSVALDO GOLIOV

Projekt *Pasja 2000*, zrealizowany z inicjatywy Helmuta Rillinga stał się nie lada wyzwaniem dla kompozytorów pochodzących spoza europejskiego kręgu kultury i odległych tradycji religijnych. Niemniej jednak zarówno *The Water Passion* Tan Duna jak i *La Pasión según San Marcos* Osvaldo Goliova otwierają przed gatunkiem pasji nowe perspektywy. Obaj kompozytorzy wychodząc od słów *Ewangelii* nadali dziełom znacznie bardziej uniwersalne przesłanie poprzez dodanie nowych tekstów. Te interpolacje nawiązujące do dwudziestowiecznych tragedii rozszerzyły pojęcie cierpienia Chrystusa na czasy współczesne. Dodając do swoich utworów koloryt własnych kultur, zarówno Chińczyk Tan Dun jak i Argentyńczyk Osvaldo Goliova przyczynili się do złamania tradycji gatunku. Przedstawiają ewangeliczne zdarzenia pasyjne poprzez pryzmat dalekowschodniej instrumentacji i południowoamerykańskich rytmów, nie tracąc tym samym na sile przekazu. To niekonwencjonalne podejście do dzieł pasyjnych, pomimo wyraźnych nawiązań do mistrza gatunku Jana Sebastiana Bacha, otwiera nowe możliwości komunikowania się między artystą a odbiorcą na gruncie muzyki religijnej.

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Słowa kluczowe: Pasja, Tan Dun, Osvaldo Goliova, współczesna muzyka sakralna, *Water Passion*, *La Pasión según San Marcos*.

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