

## Tan Dun and Water Passion after St. Matthew

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### Abstract

*Tan Dun created Water Passion after St. Matthew, written to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of J. S. Bach. Not only Tan follows the western tradition to use the texts from the Gospel of Matthew, but he also wrote some texts by himself in this piece, for example, the opening words, "A sound is heard in water, in darkness, the tears are crying for rebirth." This innovation reflects his respect for tradition and oriental philosophy which is there is no beginning and end of life.*

**Keywords:** Tan Dun, Passion, Chinese music

Tan Dun could be considered as one of the most influenced international composers in the 21st century. The world-renowned artist and UNESCO Global Goodwill Ambassador Tan Dun has made an indelible mark on the world's music scene with a creative repertoire that spans the boundaries of classical music, multimedia performance, and Eastern and Western traditions. A winner of today's most prestigious honors including the Grammy Award, Oscar/Academy Award, Grawemeyer Award, Bach Prize, Shostakovich Award, and most recently Italy's Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement, Tan Dun's music has been played throughout the world by leading orchestras, opera houses, international festivals, and on radio and television. Most recently, Tan Dun was named as Dean of the Bard College Conservatory of Music. As dean, Tan Dun will further demonstrate music's extraordinary ability to transform lives and guide the Conservatory in fulfilling its mission of understanding music's connection to history, art, culture, and society.<sup>1</sup>

Tan Dun created *Water Passion after St. Matthew*, written to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of J. S. Bach. The duration of this piece is about ninety minutes, Tan sets this piece with a mixed chorus (minimum six sopranos, six altos, six tenors, and six basses or more (also play water, stones and Tibetan finger bells<sup>2</sup>), one high soprano (requires high E and overtone singing and playing ancient ceramic wind instrument Xun<sup>3</sup>), one vocal bass (requires low C and overtone singing and playing ancient ceramic wind instrument Xun), one violin, one cello, one sampler player (Yamaha A 3000), one sound designer/controller for electronic sound processor (minimum 24 channel mixer and Lexicon Effect Processor are needed), and three percussionists who play a variety of percussion instruments, including small soda bottles, water gongs, water drums, water tube drums, water shakers, Tibetan double cymbals, Tubular chimes, bass drums, and timpani.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tandun.com/about/>

<sup>2</sup> Also called Tibetan tingsha (or Ting-Sha) (Tibetan: རྩ་གཞལ་, Wylie: ting-shags) are small cymbals used in prayer and rituals by Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.

<sup>3</sup> The xun (simplified Chinese: 埙; traditional Chinese: 埙; pinyin: xūn; Cantonese= hyun1) is a globular, vessel flute from China.

Tan Dun follows the western tradition to use the texts from the Gospel of Matthew, but Tan also wrote some texts by himself in this piece, for example, the opening words, “A sound is heard in water, in darkness, the tears are crying for rebirth.”

Tan Dun constructs this piece into two parts, eight movements. Part I: 1. Baptism, 2. Temptations, 3. Last Supper, 4. In the Garden of Gethsemane; Part II: 5. Stone Song (Peter and Judas), 6. Give us Barabbas, 7. Death and Earthquake, 8. Water and Resurrection.

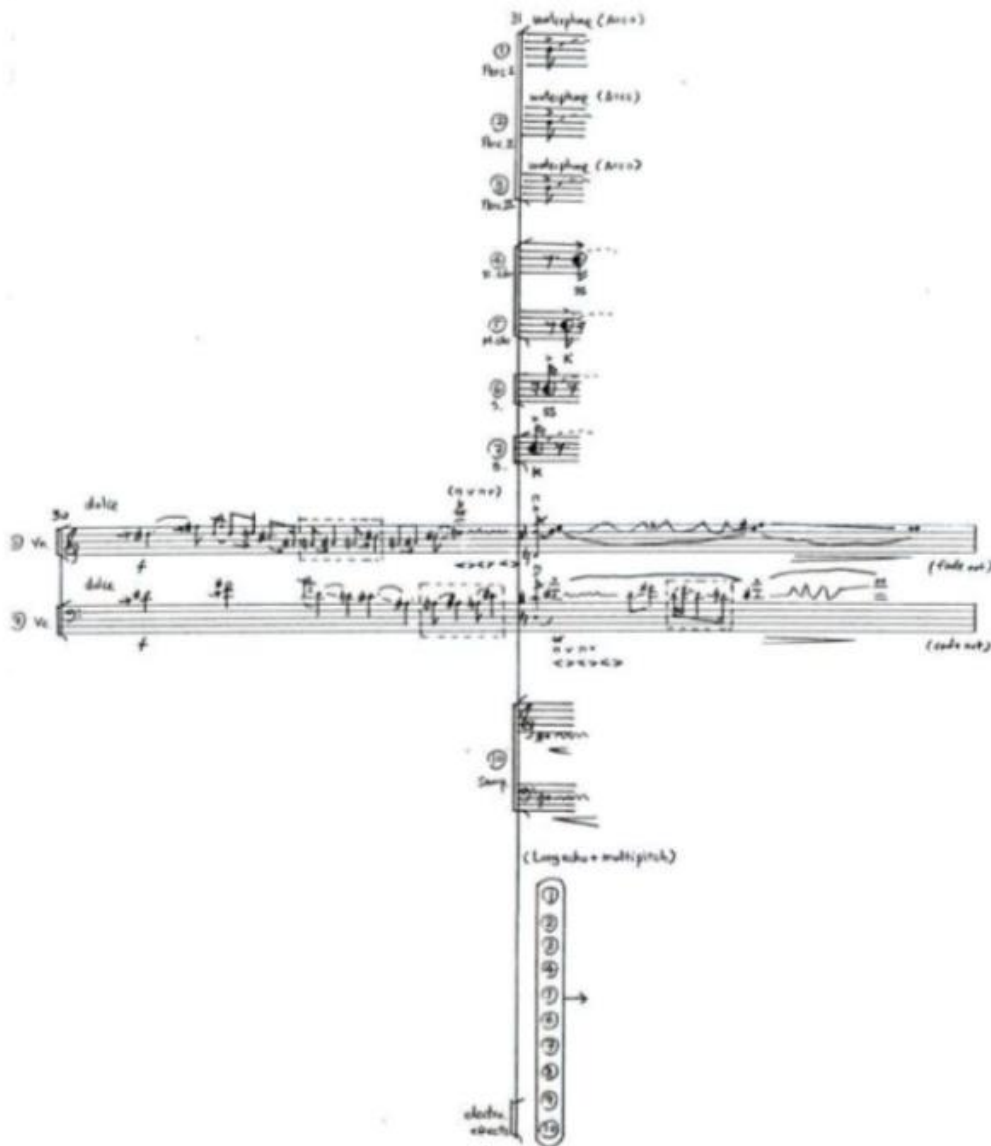
Although it structurally seems like in a western Passion form, there are some unique musical presentations in this piece. Firstly, organic music is one of the most salient features. Tan was the pioneering composer to experiment with organic music ideas, in this piece, Tan employed several organic elements, such as the stone, water.

Second, visualization is another feature of this piece, not only the score presents some symbolized notations, like the circle notation, crucifix notation, but also the arrangement of the stage, Tan arranged seventeen bowls filled with water into a crucifix on the stage.

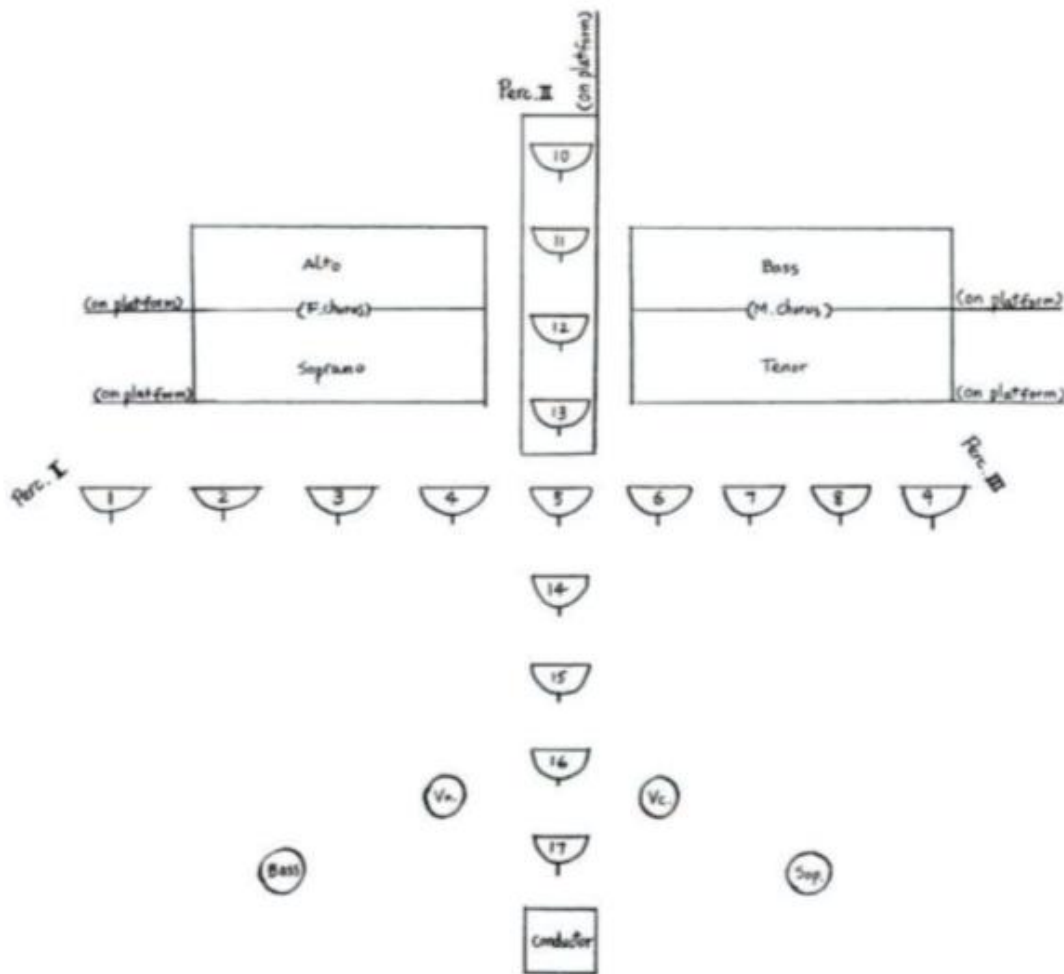
Ex. 1 The circle notation, movement 1, measure 1, M. chorus



Ex. 2 The crucifix notation, movement 1, measure 30-31



Ex. 3 The Chart of Stage Arrangement of Water Passion after St. Matthew



Lastly, Tan used a lot of unconventional instrumental and vocal techniques. For the vocal parts, it has 3 sections, Soprano soloists, Bass soloists, and a mixed choir (sometimes divided into the female choir and male choir), Tan employed a wide range of vocal styles, including overtone, Peking opera, etc. Besides singing, the vocal parts also asked to play some organic instruments (stones and water). And for the instrumental parts, Tan experimented with an extraordinary range of sound effects, for example, the violin and cello asked to combine Asian string instrumental techniques (Chinese Erhu, Chinese Pipa, Mongolian horse head fiddle), they also asked to play microtones, long melismatic melodies and use different tuning systems. The percussion section is the most unconventional part in this piece, instead of some traditional percussion instruments, Tan uses a lot of containers filled with water, and the water phone.

Ex. 4, Overtone Singing, Bass Solo, measure 32-33

Ex. 5, Monk's Chant(Pentatonic melody), measure 62-66



In conclusion, Tan Dun merged the western and eastern ritualization music within the Passion form. Especially with the concept of organic music. Tan Dun said in an interview: *“Organic Music” concerns both matters of everyday life and matters of the heart. These ideas find their origin in the animistic notion that material objects have spirits residing in them, an idea ever-present in the old village where I grew up in China. Paper can talk to the violin, the violin to water. Water can communicate with trees, and trees with the moon, and so on. In other words, every little thing in the totality of things, the entire universe, has a life and a soul.”*

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