

An experiment in reception and conception: re-texting Bach's *St John Passion* for Good Friday 2005

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In January 2005, Hans-Jörg Hahn, cantor of one of Stuttgart's Protestant churches, approached us as directors of 'Ha' Atelier' – Workshop for Philosophy and Art in Berlin with a challenging request: he asked for poetical substitutes for the lyrical parts of *St John Passion*, scheduled to be performed on the forthcoming Good Friday in his church. The idea was to keep the scriptural and choral text intact (the recitative parts of the evangelist and the *dramatis personae*, the *turba* sections of the choir, the chorals, and the opening and closing choruses) and to replace the eighteenth-century poetical parts, sung by soloists in the aria and arioso sections. As the new texts could not fit the original ones equimetrically, a reader was to recite them immediately before the performance of the related section, which would then be performed instrumentally, while visually accompanied by the new text (projected on a screen). The texts should ideally come from various traditions – Jewish, Muslim etc. – and emphasise humanist values, which are inherent to the original texts.

Although we were somewhat sceptical at first, our preliminary ideas found resonance with cantor Hahn. So we set to work and found nine different texts for nine (out of ten¹) lyrical parts of the work, ranging from the biblical texts (OT) to Else Lasker-Schüler, touching the medieval Jewish poet Yehuda Halevi and the sufi poet Dschalaluddin Rumi. We also included some verses from the *Isa-Upanishads* and from Nietzsche's *Gay Science*. Our textual choice was guided by the following considerations: 1. 'affective' affinity (following the baroque aesthetics that allowed for such replacement, provided that the replacing text belongs to a similar emotional category); 2. related ideas – theological or the like, allowing for philosophical twists; 3. rhythmical similarities with the original text or with the music itself. We did not expect always to meet all three conditions.

¹ The penultimate arioso 'Mein Herz' was left as it is.

² Michael Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's 'St John Passion'* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

We worked intuitively, and as it turned out, our choices were largely in accordance with cantor Hahn's sensibilities.

The performance took place as planned two months later on *Karfreitag* afternoon, in the church. It was received as a success. We had expected some resistance; after all, there was clearly a sacrilegious element in such a performance. Whereas the replacement of 'Zerfließe mein Herz' with Lamentation's 1:1 6: 'For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed' fits the world of the original Good Friday liturgy, Nietzsche's '...Where is God? He called, I will tell you! We have murdered him, you and I', which we substituted for 'Consider, how his blood-tinged back, in all aspects is just like the sky' (NBA 20/BG 32) directly worked against the alleged murderous plot of the Jews killing Christ, thereby substituting one blasphemous tradition for another. The congregation in Stuttgart grappled with the change, with the mitigation of the work's anti-Jewish impact, calling into question its sanctioned message, while leaving the music untouched.

We never spoke at length with cantor Hahn as to what gave him this idea. It is clear, however, that growing up in Western Germany he felt that one cannot just continue with the performing practices of the old days, without expressing, at least from time to time, what happened in between. Claims of the kind voiced by Michael Marissen in *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's 'St John Passion'*² relating to Bach's own relative weakening of the anti-Jewish elements in St John's gospel and its related hermeneutics are themselves of some scholarly value. However, this does not seem to be effective enough, especially in Germany, to communicate publicly a contemporary sensibility for the anti-Jewish spiritual stance forcefully transported in Bach's great passion works. One could say that a similar purging of anti-Jewish elements took place when the Second Vatican Council revised some of the Catholic liturgy of Good Friday in 1965, especially the *improperia* part. But the performance of the *St John Passion* in Stuttgart's Protestant church on Good Friday 2005 did it differently: it acknowledged that this teaching, which has been coined in Christian culture for a millennium, and most powerfully so in Bach's Good Friday Passions, cannot be changed; on the contrary, it can only be asked to reveal its antisemitic plot even more clearly for the listener to cope with it more consciously. The harsh chromatic parts of the turba choirs of the Jews during the trial of Jesus are heard with all their poignancy. Our practice of projecting substitute Jewish, Muslim and 'secular' texts upon Bach's music, while the original texts are perpetually and perceptually missing, aims to provoke a rethinking of the hostility garbed in the original plot of the passions. In this way Bach's music is meant to provide all listeners with a spiritual and experiential mainstay, conflating past and present, religious and humanist, 'Jewish' and 'Christian' values.