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by Uncle Dave Lewis

The designation "first Chinese composer of avant-garde music" is such a prescient one that it sets up, perhaps, an unreasonable expectation for Chinese composer Ge Gan-Ru: with every release, one is looking for Ge to come down to earth in some fashion, for worm holes in his silk screen. Ge only seems to come back stronger and better every time, and for the moment it seems as there's no stopping him. Naxos' Ge Gan-Ru: Fall of Baghdad focuses on Ge's cycle of string quartets which of this writing (August 2009) are five in number; this features the group ModernWorks, under the leadership of arch new music cellist Madeleine Shapiro, in the First, Fourth and Fifth of Ge's string quartets. From the first, this disc makes clear that Ge's string quartet cycle is as strong and substantive at least as Nicolas Bacri's; perhaps as much as Bartók's.

Ge's String Quartet No. 1 (1983) is contemporaneous with his well-known cello solo, Lost Style, often identified as the first avant-garde composition to come from China. Subtitled "Fu" (i.e. Prose Poem), he could have just as easily titled it "feu" — French for "fire" — as that's how this remarkable and concise movement begins, like an individual tongue of flame lapping up from a stray branch, ultimately building to a blistering conflagration. String Quartet No. 4 (1998) is subtitled "Angel Suite;" with this piece, Ge provides his take on Western tradition. The atmosphere of the fourth quartet is suffused with late romantic-early expressionist style, particularly that of Arnold Schoenberg. But one would never confuse it with Schoenberg; it's more like Schoenberg as angel and devil in a sort of fin-de-siècle psychodrama scripted by Ibsen, with stage designs by Edvard Munch. Where there have been so many works by Western composers that imitate this general sound only to appear derivative and out of date, Ge has mastered the idiom so well that this not only mirrors it effectively but takes it into another dimension where the image shuttles back and forth between blindingly brilliant colors and hushed, black and white stillness. It is a fabulous piece.

However, for sheer visceral excitement, neither of these quite approach Ge's String Quartet No. 5, "Fall of Baghdad." Inspired by George Crumb's Black Angels, but relating to — ahem — topical events, the opening movement "Abyss — Screaming, Living Hell, Barbaric March" kicks up a fuss that would scare the hell out of Helmut Lachenmann. From there it achieves a sincere and organic dramatic arch made up out of small sections and the string quartet exactly plays out the various parts described — "Bazaar," "Music from Heaven," "Desolation" and so forth. The piece makes use of all kinds of bizarre techniques of tone production, yet never seems to be "about" that; Mr. Ge has picked his program, and he sticks to it. This is perhaps the most impressive string quartet written since Bacri's No. 4, "Omaggio á Beethoven" (1995).

Ge Gan-Ru: Fall of Baghdad is one of the best recordings Naxos has made of anything; it is spit clear, spacious yet intimate and completely three-dimensional. ModernWorks sounds so terrific that their dedication to the cause of new music only is almost to be regretted; one wishes we could hear them do Bartók or Schoenberg. Nevertheless, Naxos' Ge Gan-Ru: Fall of Baghdad, while not for the faint of heart perhaps, will have those who value adventure and an intense musical experience on the edge of their seats, especially listeners who are well acquainted with the quartets of Bartók, Lutoslawski and other first class modern works in the modern tradition and have already concluded that there's no way that relevant, new works in this idiom can be born.