

## MUSIC

# rapid Journeys Lead to Ambitious Works

BY IVIEN SCHWEITZER

ALY all composers have had flattering adjectives hurled at them, but Ge Gan-Ru was actually deemed insane by Chinese after the Shanghai premiere, in *Yi Feng* ("Lost Style"), a rad-detuned cello that uses Western techniques to convey Chinese sounds. Yet Mr. Ge, 55, far worse abuse while growing the Cultural Revolution, survive the brickbats and go thriving, if highly iconoclastic, West.

He has a publicist or publisher achieved the status of expatriates like Tan Dun or Bright Mr. Ge, a gregarious, talkative laughs frequently, prefers to benefits of his long, unconventional success. "I feel I am more mature, and there is more hu-y music," he said over coffee at a restaurant near Central Park. "Serenity and individualism are Mr. Ge's gripping String Quartet of Baghdad" (2007), given a performance by the Modern Ensemble on a new release on the

movement of the work (a homage to George Crumb's 1970 "Black Amplified string quartet") is subtitled — Living Hell — Barbaric Myss — Threnody." It lives up to expectations with a cacophonous, mizzly that subsides into a poignant solemnity, echoed at the end of movement, "Music From Heavensolation," the final section, traditional and avant-garde the strings weep, growl and until the stark conclusion. His set No. 4 "Angel Suite" (also the Naxos disc) is similarly

who lives Saddle River, N.J., a nonmusical family in Shanghai studied violin. Sent to a labor high school during the Cultural Revolution he would rise at 5 a.m., work in fields until around 8 p.m., then returns to practice in secret at a radio station that offered electricity.

He is a respected violin teacher in New York who took on Mr. Ge as a student, overcoming his initial reluctance to register with the authorities. Soon after, he created an ensemble to play Chinese songs, which Mr. Ge arranged both Western and Chinese instruments.

After the Cultural Revolution he enrolled at the Shanghai Conservatory as a violinist, but switched to composition. As the studio opened up, foreign musicians visited, sometimes leaving tapes and tapes. Exposed to 12-Mr. Ge began composing in

It didn't feel right. After experimenting with various idioms he said he felt so he focused instead on the differences between Western and Chinese the vastly different roles of timbre, pitch and dynamics in *Style* was his first work to feature a distinctly Chinese style. Unsurprisingly that the Chinese government a "Butterfly Lovers" ethos (a violin concerto nicknamed the *Concerto of the East*), was harshly criticized.

He has composers in Chinese explained. "The music we listened to, not created by an individual."

Mr. Ge was invited to New York by Chou Wen-chung, a professor at Princeton University. He arrived at Ken-



ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

尼迪 International Airport at night with \$40 (the maximum amount then allowed out of China), a violin, a box of his scores and one suitcase. Speaking little English, he hung around the airport with no idea where to go. (A bystander took pity on him and offered him a bed for the night.)

"I was very naive," he said. "We were not exposed to any commercial things, so I thought it was a great opportunity to study and I never thought about money." After a week of subsisting on bread and water, he eventually found work delivering Chinese food.

"It was very tough, but musically it was even tougher," he added, describing years of disorientation at Columbia while studying for a doctorate. He thought about quitting, but needed his student visa to remain in New York.

In 1989, he and his wife, Vivian Ge, an accordion player whom he met in the labor camp, founded a business, now called Penny Online, which provides information on the market for metals. "I thought in six months I'd be rich and go back to composing," he said, adding, "I was not really interested in business, but if I do one thing I try to finish it." After the company became successful, Mr. Ge began composing again full time around 2000.

He soon wrote texturally ambitious works like "Four Studies of Peking Opera" (2003) for piano and string quartet, in which he evokes the genre with a prepared piano, glissandos and pizzicatos and demonstrates considerable gifts as a melodist. Emotive string melodies are underpinned by percussion from the prepared piano in "Aria," the second movement, which begins in an otherworldly trance and crescendos to a passionate, theatrical climax.

Unlike many of his Chinese colleagues Mr. Ge does not write for traditional Chinese instruments. "To me it's a label," he said, adding that he has lost commissions because of this. He also doesn't "chase big stars" to play his works. "I know if they play my music, it can get more popular, but I look at it the other way," he said. "I have more freedom and can write whatever I want."

The conductor José Serebrier, who re-



MICHAEL DAMES

Top, the composer Ge Gan-Ru at his home in Saddle River, N.J. Above, Margaret Leng Tan performing Mr. Ge's "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong" (2006), a melodrama for voice based on a 12th-century poem. Above right, the CD cover of Mr. Ge's "Fall of Baghdad" (2007).

corded Mr. Ge's "Chinese Rhapsody" (1992) and "Six Pentatonic Tunes" with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra on the BIS label, maintains that Mr. Ge's music is "very approachable."

"He has all the contemporary sounds but done in such a way that are appealing to both sophisticated and unsophisticated ears," he added. His music is "immediately recognizable" and "communicates on all levels."

The colorful, propulsive "Chinese Rhapsody," whose timbre is enhanced by complex percussion, demonstrates Mr. Ge's prowess as an orchestrator. The disc also includes Mr. Serebrier conducting the pianist Margaret Leng Tan in the explosive "Wu" ("Rising to the Heights"). She uses the piano in a conventional manner and strikes and plucks its strings to evoke a Chinese steel zither, creating sonorous timbres within the shimmering orchestral fabric. A coming disc on BIS features a



new work called "Shanghai Reminiscences."

Ms. Tan, a specialist in prepared piano and toy piano performance, also recorded the startling "Wrong, Wrong, Wrong" (2006), a Beijing-opera-inspired melodrama for voice based on a 12th-century poem. She wails and whispers and accompanies herself with an orchestra of toy instruments and gadgets.

Mr. Ge "allows me a lot of creative participation in the projects and challenges my own creative resources," she said, and that reflects "a certain deep inner confidence on his part."

"He's so pragmatic, very Chinese in that sense, very down to earth and yet creates these amazing works," she added. Ms. Tan said Mr. Ge's name has not facilitated his career. "Bright Sheng and Tan Dun are much easier to remember," she said. "In every way he is as gifted as they are and deserves the recognition they have."

"But you know what it's like in New York: you drop off the map and people forget very fast — especially when they couldn't even remember your name in the first place," she said.

During his years away from the music scene Mr. Ge tried to forget about composition, but couldn't. "It's not for fame," he said, "but somehow it becomes a part of you."

## MUSIC

## Intrepid Journeys Lead to Ambitious Work

BY VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

**N**EARLY all composers have had unflattering adjectives hurled at them, but Ge Gan-Ru was actually deemed insane by Chinese authorities after the Shanghai premiere, in 1982, of his “Yi Feng” (“Lost Style”), a radical work for detuned cello that uses Western experimental techniques to convey traditional Chinese sounds. Yet Mr. Ge, 55, who endured far worse abuse while growing up during the Cultural Revolution, managed to survive the brickbats and go on to build a thriving, if highly iconoclastic, career in the West.

He doesn’t have a publicist or publisher and has not achieved the status of expatriate musicians like Tan Dun or Bright Sheng, but Mr. Ge, a gregarious, talkative man who laughs frequently, prefers to dwell on the benefits of his long, unconventional road to success. “I feel I am more free, more mature, and there is more humanity in my music,” he said over coffee recently at a restaurant near Central Park. That humanity and individualism are evident in Mr. Ge’s gripping String Quartet No. 5 “Fall of Baghdad” (2007), given a mesmerizing performance by the Modern Works Ensemble on a new release on the Naxos label.

The first movement of the work (a homage to George Crumb’s 1970 “Black Angels,” for amplified string quartet) is subtitled “Screaming — Living Hell — Barbaric March — Abyss — Threnody.” It lives up to those descriptions with a cacophonous, microtonal frenzy that subsides into a poignant melodic solemnity, echoed at the end of the second movement, “Music From Heaven.” In “Desolation,” the final section, which uses traditional and avant-garde techniques, the strings weep, growl and shudder until the stark conclusion. His String Quartet No. 4 “Angel Suite” (also featured on the Naxos disc) is similarly haunting.

Mr. Ge, who lives Saddle River, N.J., grew up in a nonmusical family in Shanghai, where he studied violin. Sent to a labor camp after high school during the Cultural Revolution, he would rise at 5 a.m., work in the rice fields until around 8 p.m., then walk 45 minutes to practice in secret at a remote water station that offered electricity and privacy.

There was a respected violin teacher in the camp who took on Mr. Ge as a student after overcoming his initial reluctance to risk annoying the authorities. Soon after, camp leaders created an ensemble to play revolutionary songs, which Mr. Ge arranged using both Western and Chinese traditional instruments.

Following the Cultural Revolution he entered the Shanghai Conservatory as a violin major and switched to composition. As China began to open up, foreign musicians occasionally visited, sometimes leaving behind scores and tapes. Exposed to 12-tone music, Mr. Ge began composing in that style.

But it didn’t feel right. After experimenting with various idioms he said he felt frustrated. So he focused instead on the different elements of Western and Chinese music and the vastly different roles of rhythm, timbre, pitch and dynamics in each. “Lost Style” was his first work to feature his newly distinctive style. Unsurprisingly, given that the Chinese government encouraged a “Butterfly Lovers” ethos (a melodious violin concerto nicknamed the “Tchaikovsky Concerto of the East”), “Lost Style” was harshly criticized.

“We don’t have composers in Chinese history,” he explained. “The music we listen to is inherited, not created by an individual person.”

In 1983 Mr. Ge was invited to New York to study with Chou Wen-chung, a professor at Columbia University. He arrived at Ken-



ANGEL FR.



華人作曲  
GE GAN  
Fall of Baghdad  
String Quartets Nos. 4 & 5  
Naxos



MICHAEL DAMES

Top, the composer Ge Gan-Ru at his home in Saddle River, N.J.

Above, Margaret Leng Tan performing Mr. Ge’s “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong” (2006), a melodrama for voice based on a 12th-century poem. Above right, the CD cover of Mr. Ge’s “Fall of Baghdad” (2007).

edy International Airport at night with \$40 (the maximum amount then allowed out of China), a violin, a box of his scores and one suitcase. Speaking little English, he hung around the airport with no idea where to go. (A bystander took pity on him and offered him a bed for the night.) “I was very naive,” he said. “We were not exposed to any commercial things, so I thought it was a great opportunity to study and I never thought about money.” After a week of subsisting on bread and water, he eventually found work delivering Chinese food.

“It was very tough, but musically it was even tougher,” he added, describing years of disorientation at Columbia while studying for a doctorate. He thought about quitting, but needed his student visa to remain in New York.

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