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Ge Gan-Ru

Fall Of Baghdad: String quartets, nos 1, 4 and 5 (Naxos)

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by Karl Dallas



Chinese composer Ge Gan-Ru

In the middle of the third section of Max Roach's *We Insist: Freedom Now suite* (1960), vocalist Abbey Lincoln stops her superbly serene singing and suddenly starts screaming, accompanied only by the composer's percussion.

I was reminded of this on listening to the first movement of *The Fall Of Baghdad*, the fifth string quartet by Ge Gan-Ru, a Chinese composer whose childhood violin studies were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, during which time he was sent to a labour camp to plant rice.

Entitled *The Abyss*, this piece uses cacophony to portray the horror of "shock and awe" - the bombing campaign described by its authors as "instant, nearly incomprehensible levels of massive destruction directed at influencing society writ large, meaning its leadership and public, rather than targeting directly against military or strategic objectives."

On its first day of the shock and awe campaign on March 21 2003, the United States deployed 1,700 air sorties against the Iraqi capital.

Ge had been living in the US when he wrote *Fall Of Baghdad*, giving the piece an added poignancy - though it has to be conceded that, for all the composer's passion, it comes as something of a relief when the work proceeds to its second movement, subtitled *Music From Heaven*.

Even the final movement, *Desolation*, is more evocative of something greater than despair.

As a naturalistic exercise, it brings to mind Raymond Williams's depiction of the literary naturalism of Zola and his successors as "the tragedy of passive suffering. And the suffering is passive because man can only endure and can never really change his world."

If one compares this almost aleatory opening sequence with the ostinato thrust of Gustav Holst's *Mars* or one of the 20th century's more successful naturalistic pieces *Pacific 231*, Arthur Honegger's evocation of a Swiss steam locomotive, the limitations of Ge's approach become evident.

The second and third movements of the piece are more interesting, not only because they are more satisfying melodically but also because the composer seems to be achieving some kind of synthesis between the avant-gardism of composers like George Crumb and his experiences during the Cultural Revolution, entertaining rural workers with revolutionary songs and dances.

Some of the percussive effects, such as snap pizzicato - plucking the strings so they strike the fingerboard or hitting the strings with the back of the bow - sound reminiscent of the constant clatter of drums and gongs in the music of the Peking Opera.

In total, however, the piece is less successful than the other two on this CD, the most immediately appealing of which is the first, entitled *Fu* (prose poem), which Ge actually started working on before he left China in 1983.

The fourth quartet *Angel Suite*, said to be Ge's response to Christianity, is enlivened by the musical humour of its third movement, subtitled *Gnomes*.

These challenging works are performed with dazzling brilliance by the ModernWorks ensemble led by the cellist Madeleine Shapiro.