

# Musical Musings on **War**

*Composers rarely draw on the small forces of a string quartet to evoke the heroic or tragic effects of military conflict. Ge Gan-Ru's Fall of Baghdad is a recent exception to the rule.*

by James M. Keller

When I approach a new recording that might possibly work its way into a "High Fidelity" column, I usually start at the beginning of the CD and listen through to the...no, that's not true. I often don't make it to the end. But the point is, I like to experience the CD as a complete concept, and I have to assume that the performers and producer have designed their program through careful deliberation. As a critic, I reserve the right to bail out at any time; but if I find myself swept up in the performance, at least the first time through I ought to experience it exactly as the performers intended it.

I offer this explanation by way of apology to the remarkable musicians of the string quartet at the core of the new-music ensemble ModernWorks, a group formed in 1997 by the cellist Madeleine Shapiro, who continues as its director. When I removed their new Naxos CD of music by Ge Gan-Ru from its mailing box, I wasted not a moment putting it in the CD player, but—*mea culpa*—I did not listen from start to finish. I went straight to the last work on the program, Ge's String Quartet No. 5 (composed in 2007), the subtitle of which, *Fall of Baghdad*, doubles as the title for the entire CD. This, I thought, could be the piece I've been waiting for, and I couldn't bear waiting to find out.

The most recent decade has been hypercharged when it comes to politics; and I know firsthand that many, many classical musicians have participated ardently in debating the touchstone event of American politics in the international realm—the War in the Middle East and most especially the adventure in Iraq. But where have our composers been? Has classical music become so insulated as an art form that it finds no room to engage current events? Yes, I am aware of a couple of pieces that draw inspiration from these particular headlines, and in both cases they appear to take pronounced exception to recent American policy. I was deeply affected by a composition for string orchestra titled *Baghdad*, by John Kennedy, who

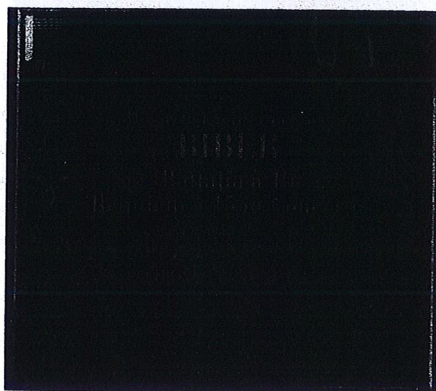




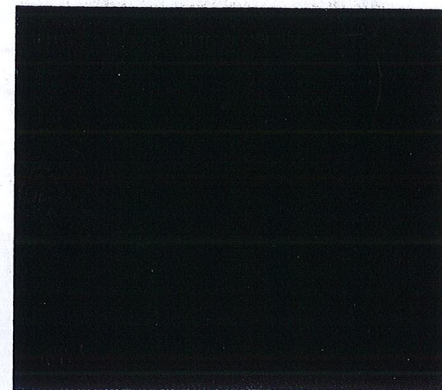
runs Santa Fe New Music and oversees the contemporary-music programming for Charleston's Spoleto Festival USA (which premiered *Baghdad* in 2007). His piece is a threnody, slowly evolving over about a dozen minutes, cheerless and bleak but also beautiful in the unrolling permutations of its shimmering sonorities; and at the very least it provides a worthy backdrop for the contemplation of things most of us don't like to contemplate. I have not heard, but have heard about, another work relevant to the same topic: an orchestral piece by the British composer Richard Barrett titled *NO (resistance & vision part I)*, composed on commission from the BBC and premiered in 2005. It aroused considerable comment, less for the score itself than for the program note the composer authored to accompany it, a meandering essay that, amid strongly stated opinion opposing the American-British campaign in the Middle East and a Marxist evaluation of the relationship of individual musicians to the orchestras in which they play, put forth some reasonable questions: "In what way can an artist's response as an artist have any meaning? Is it enough to make a response in terms of (in this case) a music which attempts to engage its listeners in active participation rather than passive consumption? Is it enough to set the scene for the music by means of a provocative title? (No.)"

But what about chamber music? Doubtless a few Iraq-inspired chamber works have been put forward, but I don't know of any that have achieved the public profile that Ge's *Fall of Baghdad* will through this release. In truth, there isn't much recent historical precedent for chamber music as political commentary, nor indeed for chamber music crafted to depict war. There was a time when battle pieces were reasonably popular, partly as a form of boosterism. (In the days when a prince paid his dragoons out of one pocket and his bassoons out of the other, one could hardly have expected a Kapellmeister

to assess military campaigns in a critical fashion.). Renaissance and Baroque composers often glorified warfare through allusions to Mars, the Roman God of War, a metaphor that served to distract from the human hardships occasioned by warfare. I am always astonished that Heinrich Biber's famous *Battalia à 10*, from 1673 (presumably inspired by the events of the Forty Years War, which had ended a quarter-century before), gave so much play to the moans of the fallen. This much-admired specimen of program music packs no fewer than eight movements into its



running-time of eleven or twelve minutes, and within that span approximately the same amount of time is given over to explicit battle music—a military march and then the skirmish itself—as to the "Lament of the Wounded Musketeers (Adagio)." (I'm not counting as explicit "battle music" the proto-Ivesian quodlibet in which the gathering troops sing a variety of tunes without regard to any rhythmic or harmonic coordination.) Since the lament is the music that ends Biber's piece, it stands as an editorializing capstone; what more typically might have ended with an exaltation of Mars here leaves its listeners contemplating an aural landscape of death and destruction. Long represented in the catalog by recordings of moderate achievement, this interesting piece is currently to be heard in readings by such splendid groups as Il Giardino Armonico (on Teldec Das



Alte Werk) and Jordi Savall's *Concert des Nations* (on AliaVox). The former includes several programmatic works from the Baroque, while the latter is an all-Biber disc that, apart from *La Battalia*, contains the composer's stunning *Requiem à 15 in Concerto*.

One could count Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* as a war-inspired chamber piece, since it surely would not have been written as it was if its composer had not been living at the time in a World War Two detention camp the Germans maintained in Silesia, with his performing forces being limited to a quartet of clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (the last of which was Messiaen's bailiwick). Knowing these circumstances we are likely to hear it as a war piece, but in fact the only violence directly addressed in the *Quartet for the End of Time* is the Apocalypse. At heart, it's not a war piece at all, but rather a musical-theological meditation that is entirely characteristic of its composer.

The great war piece of the contemporary chamber repertoire—and it's not so contemporary any more—is George Crumb's *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* for Electric String Quartet. Crumb maintained that it wasn't intended to depict anything that was specifically bellicose. He later said: "It was only toward the end of the composition of *Black Angels* that I became aware that this piece had pulled in a lot of the very dark currents that were swimming around during this



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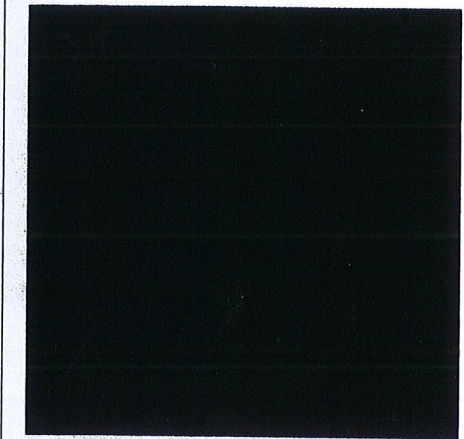
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## High Fidelity



period. I didn't set out to write an anti-war piece. But at the end of the writing process it struck me—and music can do this—that *Black Angels* just pulled in the surrounding psychological and emotional atmosphere." So it is that he dated his score "in tempore belli, 1970," which is to say in the midst of the maelstrom of the Vietnam War.

*Black Angels* is one of chamber music's modern classics, and since it was first recorded, by the New York String Quartet, in 1972 for CRI, it has been often committed to LP or CD, by the Concord String Quartet, Gaudeamus Quartet, Kronos Quartet (which was formed precisely to interpret this work), Brodsky String Quartet, Cikada Quartet (of Norway), Chamber Music Ensembles of the Royal Conservatory of Ghent, Miró Quartet, and Cuarteto Latinoamericano. The Kronos interpretation is a discographical classic, fully up to the standards of excitement regularly associated with that group. But of the bunch one can be singled out as king of the hill: the recording the Miró Quartet made in 2002 under the composer's supervision, for the ongoing Crumb Complete Edition on the Bridge label. Apart from displaying unusual interpretative and technical distinction, this release incorporates a number of alterations born of the composer's evolving experience of this piece. To be sure, *Black Angels* is very much a composition for the concert hall. The four musicians play not only their electric strings but also an array of percussion instruments, not to mention that they also vocalize in various ways. The theatricality of the presentation, from the setup itself to the precise motions required to achieve the necessary sounds, is beyond the reach of an audio CD, even one with engineering as magnificent as Bridge provides. Nonetheless, *Black Angels* can make a huge impact however it is heard, reaching into the depths of private mourning and the terrifying shrillness of out-and-out terror.

So the hurdle was set high for Ge Gan-Ru. It seemed like a reasonable topic for him to fix on; as a child of the Chinese Revolution, he doubtless knows more than most of us do about

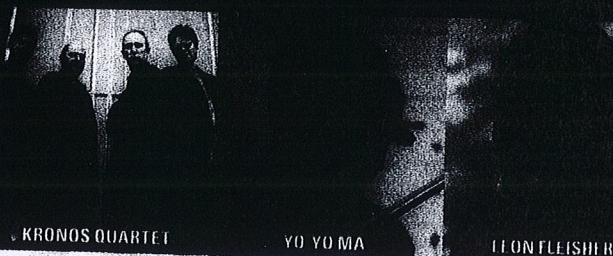


displacement and frustration and being a pawn in a political playing field that assigns little importance to the inconvenience of individuals. So I turned to *Fall of Baghdad* with curiosity and without glancing at the program notes first (since I like to approach new pieces with the least prejudice possible). The work consists of 13 sections distributed among three movements: "Abyss," "Music from Heaven," and "Desolation." "Abyss" opens with a section called "Screaming" and my first thought when it began was that I had somehow put the wrong CD into the player. Four strings playing glissandos *sul ponticello* to emit nail-on-blackboard shrieks, or at least a nightmare of hornet-like viciousness. Wasn't this *Black Angels*?

No, it wasn't, but it was close. Diving into the program note (well penned by Eric J. Bruskind) I was relieved to read that *Fall of Baghdad* "is an explicit homage to George Crumb's...*Black Angels*" and that Ge's intent was to "compose a string quartet that could, on the one hand, pay tribute to Crumb and, on the other hand, record my musical thoughts provoked by the [Iraq] war." This betokens bravery in our time, when many serious composers feel the need to constantly explore entirely original paths. It harks back to an epoch when composers developed and perfected their own voices by mimicking, to a greater or lesser extent, what acknowledged masters had accomplished before. To Beethoven, for example, it made perfect sense to explore musical pathways with Mozart as his guide. So it is that his Quintet for Piano and Winds in E-flat major (Op. 16) is unmistakably pried from the mold Mozart had created for his Quintet for Piano and Winds in E-flat major (K.452) a dozen years before, just as Beethoven's A-major String Quartet (Op. 18, No. 5) betrays more than a passing acquaintance with Mozart's String Quartet in A major (K.464). There is nothing but honor in paying homage where it is deserved.

But Ge does more than that. In *Fall of Baghdad* he creates a work that engages and satisfies the listener on its own terms. It runs about the same length as *Black Angels*—not quite 23 minutes in the ModernWorks performance, as opposed to the Miró's 20 minutes for the Crumb—and to some extent it makes use of the symmetries that fuel the palindromic structure of *Black Angels*. I wish the Naxos recording provided separate tracks to clarify just where the individual sub-sections begin. In most cases a listener has a reasonably good idea about it, but a little extra help from the recording producer wouldn't have hurt. And while we're talking about the nuts and bolts, I would have preferred more vivid sound. The musicians are obviously playing their hearts out, sometimes digging deep into their strings to make astonishing creaks and grunts and wails, but the microphones seem afraid of getting as closely involved as they could. This is very personal music, and perhaps in a live performance the addition of visual stimuli would make listeners feel

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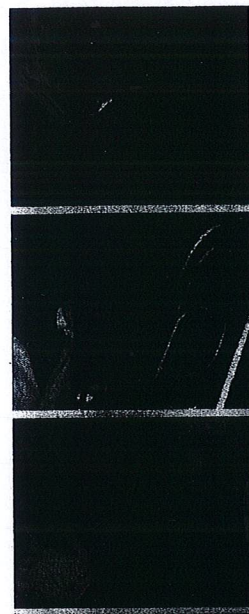
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## HighFidelity

more connected. On the CD, however, we seem to be listening from a slight distance, and the effective is oddly removed. The playing is everywhere praiseworthy; warm applause is due to violinists Airi Yoshioka and Mayuki Fukuhara, violist Veronica Salas, and cellist Madeleine Shapiro.

It's clear from this piece that Ge does not view war in a kindly light. The first movement's subsections make that clear enough: "Screaming" (the opening shrieks), "Living Hell" (one imagines bombs dropping over stern pedal points), "Barbaric March" (wherein Ge one-ups Bartók in his percussive string-quartet writing), "Abyss" (chaotic arcs of sound with an overlay of tapping on the instruments' wood, reaching a point of migraine), and "Threnody" (sudden, subdued sadness, recalling the "Sarabanda de la Muerte Oscura" in *Black Angels*, which also follows a "Threnody"—and Ge also whistles into the wind as Shostakovich was known to do in desolate moments of his late works).

The second movement, "Music from Heaven," makes a nod toward Central Asian musical style, stretching scales microtonally as it wends its way through "Pilgrimage" (mournful and inward), "Bazaar" (picturesque, with melodies weaving above rhythmic plucking), "Caliph's Drum" (much pizzicato and *col legno*), and finally "Music from Heaven" (a high-pitched "Asiatic" melody above a drone, with buzzing asides from the inner voices).

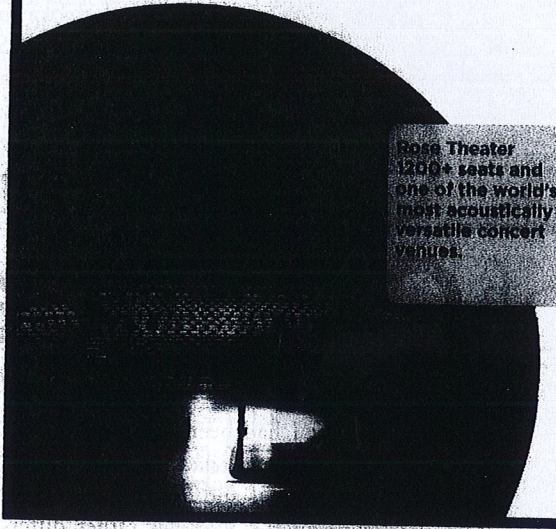
The quartet concludes with "Desolation," beginning with a subsection named precisely that and continuing through "Weeping," "Moaning," and "Keening." (Could Ge have been thinking of the wonderfully mournful title of Bach's cantata *Weinen, klagen, sorgen, sagen?*) "Desolation" paints a hopeless barren landscape, and he follows it with deeply affecting music in "Weeping," mostly invested in a violin that is not afraid to be overtly mimetic. "Moaning" is just that—not something usually taught in cello studios though the instrument proves itself eerily capable. The work ends with "Keening"; but for the cello's monotonous drone, the instruments of the quartet have now become a morass of unhappy sounds, resembling birds or animals perhaps, garbled in texture, dismal in tone. But this descriptive run-through does little to suggest how compelling Ge's narrative is. He has followed his model well and carefully, one benefit being that the sections come across as well proportioned. The individual subsections are long enough to define their emotive purpose but they never come close to overstaying their welcome.

*Fall of Baghdad* is Ge's Fifth String Quartet, and on this CD it is preceded by his First (from 1983), titled *Fu (Prose Poem)*, and his Fourth (from 1998), titled *Angel Suite*. They, too, repay the time spent in listening, and they reveal that *Fall of Baghdad* belongs to a stylistic trajectory that reaches back at least 25 years. While working on *Fu*, Ge emigrated to the United States and began studying composition with Chou Wen-chung at Columbia University. Chou favored serious modernism, and Ge accordingly



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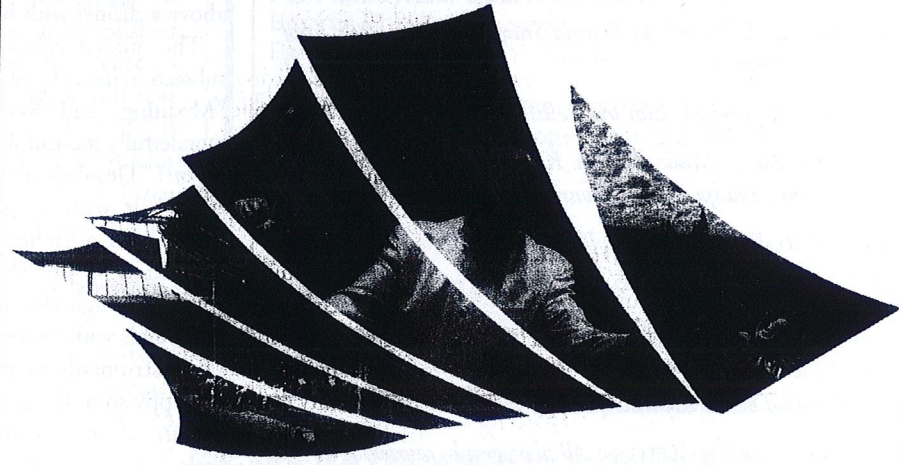
managed to escape the trap of “Chinese prettiness” that has enervated some of his fellow émigrés’ works in recent years. Certainly he is capable of delicacy, but he never strives for mere sweetness. The second and fourth movements of the Fourth Quartet (titled respectively “Gnomes” and “Angel’s March”) again reveal his taste for sardonic Shostakovichism), and the composer points out that same piece’s third movement (“Prayer”) works in a brief nod to Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*. The Fourth Quartet comes across as a fine piece, and I look forward to visiting it repeatedly.

But it is *Fall of Baghdad*, with its urgent message, that calls out for attention. Certainly it’s easier to produce than *Black Angels*, requiring no extra instruments—nor, for that matter, amplification. It accordingly lacks a degree of the variety that *Black Angels* affords, but listening to “just” a string quartet for 23 minutes is in no way a hardship. *Fall of Baghdad* is not going to replace *Black Angels* in the repertoire, but I can think of no reason why it should not take a place as a fascinating and up-to-date successor to that classic.

Crumb’s quartet is deemed a masterpiece for good reasons. Ge’s is awfully good, and I hope it will reach many ears. It might even inspire other chamber music composers to offer their own responses to Richard Barrett’s question: “In what way can an artist’s response as an artist have any meaning?”

James M. Keller is Program Annotator of the New York Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony. His book *Chamber Music: A Listener’s Guide* is in preparation for Oxford University Press.

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