

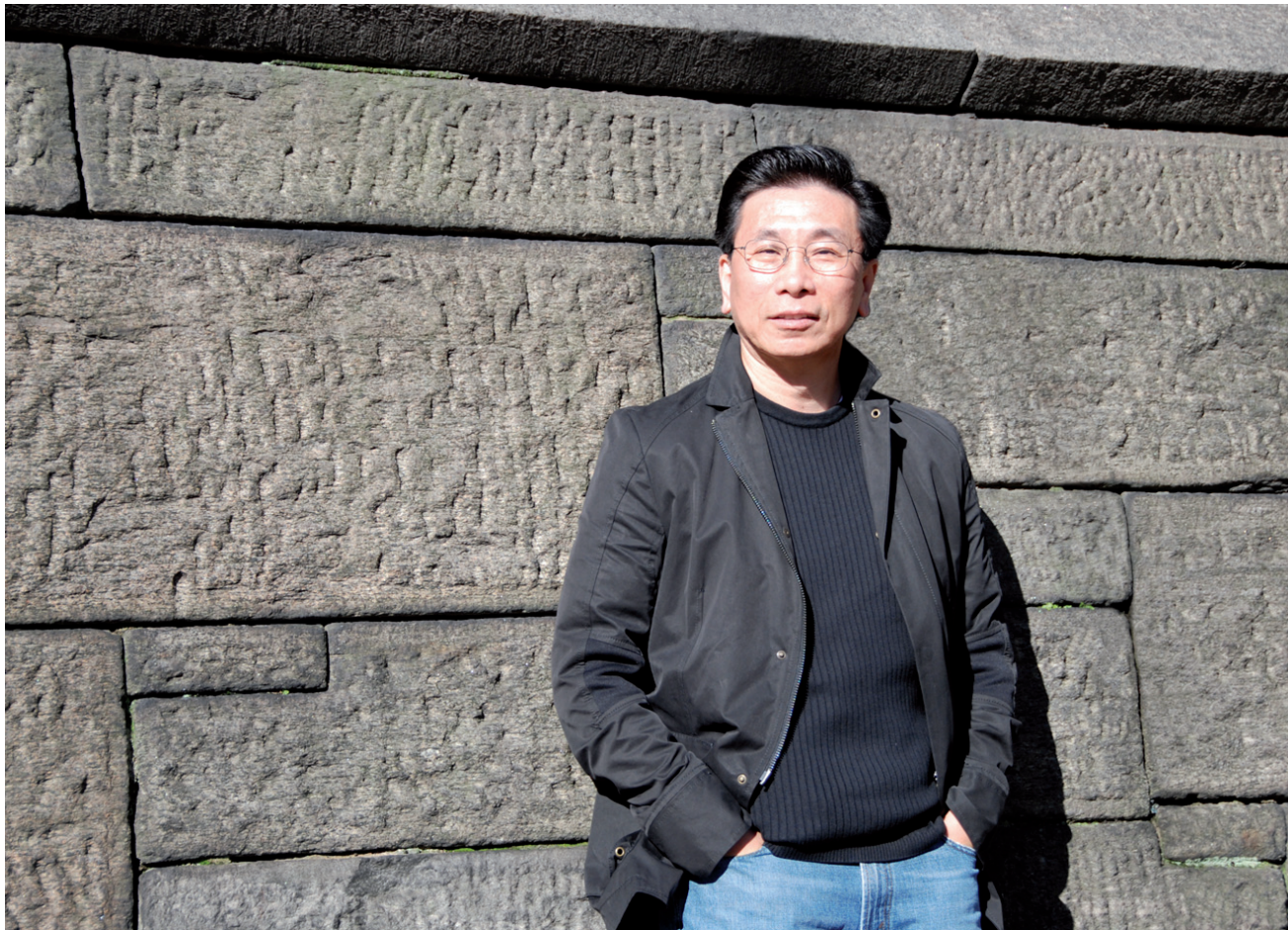


GE GAN-RU

Shanghai Reminiscences

Butterfly Overture

Royal Scottish National Orchestra • Tsung Yeh



Ge Gan-ru (b. 1954)

Shanghai Reminiscences • Butterfly Overture



Shanghai Reminiscences is a work of arrival and departure, or departure and arrival, for Ge Gan-ru – for this three-decade-long resident of Greater New York, for this Western-trained composer's aural memories of (pre-) Cultural Revolution China, and for this émigré's complex dialogue with Chinese and American music, notably the avant-garde and populist elements of the latter.

Music, or the Western music form as a paradigm for the recovery and exploration of one's musical inheritance, memory, and fantasies, did not come easily to Ge as an interest, practice and finally lifetime vocation. When he was born, in 1954, the Peoples' Republic of China was a five-year-old nation, isolated and xenophobic. Ge took violin lessons in his childhood in secret, and his parents protectively muted his sound during his practice to avoid attention. The moment he graduated from high school, at the age of seventeen he was swept into the Cultural Revolution as a *zhiqing* (intellectual youth) – to be sent down to a labour camp to plant rice. Hidden amidst the hardship of farm work, however, was the blessing of romance – he met his future wife – and music: one of the older workers had previously been the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra's concert master, who recognized Ge's artistic talent by offering lessons in violin and music

theory. Thus Ge was well-equipped to enroll, in 1974, in the newly re-opened Shanghai Conservatory, where he studied with Chen Gang, creator of the Chinese-speaking world's most popular classical composition in the modern era, *The Butterfly Lovers*.

With Chen's encouragement at the Conservatory, Ge became acquainted with the Euro-American classical music tradition from Debussy and Bartók to Cage, Crumb, Carter, Ligeti, Partch and Stockhausen. Yet a true horizon-expanding influence arrived in 1980 in the form of Alexander Goehr, the PRC's first official "visiting composer". Goehr would be the first Western composer with whom Ge came into direct and beneficial contact.

The Cultural Revolution's wholesale attempt to destroy the past had also cleared the ground for bold experimentation in re-establishing one's shattered relationship with tradition. It was within this post-Cultural-Revolution vacuum that Ge began to explore his own voice, and the result was his break-out piece *Yi Feng* (1982), which, while translated by the composer himself as "lost style", indeed also implies "legacy", or a "surviving style". Ge's instrument of choice is the cello, a Western "tool". Yet, by tuning it in fourths an octave lower than normal, and conjuring the distinctive pitch, microtonal and timbral characteristics of Chinese music through unconventional ways of bowing and plucking the cello strings, a primal sonic world of Chinese-ness has been starkly evoked. It was mostly for this piece that Ge, then a young professor at the Shanghai Conservatory, was hailed as China's "first avant-garde composer". Yet such an idiosyncratic way of redefining "Chinese-ness" sonically was frowned upon, and political criticism quickly followed.

At that point, however, Ge's music had already caught the attention of another Chinese new music pioneer, Chou Wen-chung, a student of Edgard Varèse, who was then teaching at Columbia University. A scholarship in hand, Ge Gan-ru, aged 29, arrived in New York in 1983, along with a new generation of Chinese

composers – Tan Dun, Bright Sheng, Zhou Long, Chen Yi – who would re-define the international music scene. A year later, the Kronos Quartet gave the première of Ge's first string quartet *Fu*, and commissioned another string quartet *Tao* in 1987.

Unsurprisingly, one of the earliest champions of Ge's music was Margaret Leng Tan, a diva of Asian-inflected avant-garde pianism as developed by the great American innovators Cowell, Cage and Crumb. Ge's first music recording was the 1986 *Gu Yue* (*Ancient Music*), a "piano sonata", written especially for Tan, with its four movements evoking four classical Chinese instruments – gong, qin (*zither*), pipa (*lute*) and drum. Tan called *Gu Yue* "a paradoxical original creation" – sonorities of traditional Chinese instruments were realized through novel demands on the piano, the most archetypical of Western instruments. (Full disclosure: I first became aware of Ge Gan-ru's work in the late 1980s at an Asia Society concert in New York, during which Tan gave an enchanting performance of *Gu Yue*. Almost two decades later, *Gu Yue* and Ge were featured in *Sorceress of the New Piano* (2004), my award-winning documentary about Tan.) As expected, Ge's East-Meets-West musical staging has taken on an increasingly larger and more intricate arena. From *Gu Yue*, Ge and Tan would move on to a larger scale work, *Wu* (*Rising to the Heights*) (1986/1991), a striking piano concerto involving not only various extended techniques that directly played on the piano's strings, but a Western orchestra utilizing Chinese instruments, such as crash cymbals, wood block and *xiaolau* (small Chinese cymbals struck with bamboo).

The various unconventional tonal production techniques on strings and the string piano – *glissandi*, *pizzicato*, and *col legno* in *Yi Feng*, *Gu Yue* and *Wu* – naturally found their way into Ge's *Fall of Baghdad – String Quartet No. 5* (2007) (Naxos 8.570603). What's worth noting is the fact that *Fall of Baghdad*, as a clear homage to *Black Angels* (1970) by George Crumb, one of Ge's musical idols, took on a cultural meaning that transcended mere musical terms. It reveals the evolution of Ge's civic identity as an émigré composer. Underlying the historical parallel between *Baghdad* and *Black Angel* – the 2003

Iraqi invasion and the Vietnam War – is an American identity, even if one can pinpoint the "universal" anti-war message in both works. The said wars were/are concerns more for Americans than for any other people, except perhaps the Vietnamese and the Iraqis themselves. But the latter tend(ed) not to have a similar platform for such artistic expressions, and I am not aware of any Chinese work in any medium, except this composition by Ge, that reveals a reaction to the 2003 Iraqi war.

This quick sketch of Ge Gan-ru's musical and historical journey may be a necessary context to appreciate *Shanghai Reminiscences*, which is in some ways, Ge's most personal and overtly autobiographical work today. *Reminiscences* was commissioned by the Shanghai Philharmonic to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, as well as Shanghai's hosting of the World Expo in 2010. It received its world première on 29th September, 2009 at the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center, conducted by Tang Muhai. This commissioning also led to the fruitful appointment of Ge as a resident composer at the Shanghai Philharmonic since 2012.

According to Ge, he finished *Reminiscences* in a mere three-month period – probably a reflection of this work's long period of "unconscious" gestation. This is Ge Gan-ru's *À la recherche des sons perdus*. His reminiscences are sonic – the noises, chatter, and various sounds, melodic and otherwise, of his childhood in Shanghai. *Prima facie*, there seems to a bit of the – now dated – futurist outlook of celebrating urban modernity in *Reminiscences*. One almost yearns for some *musique concrète* moments in it. Of course, no such sound archive of old Shanghai exists to make that possible. So this is Ge Gan-ru's musical simulation/evocation of his childhood sonic environment. In his programme notes for the work's world première, Ge said that after leaving his native city in 1983, he did not return until 2004. During all those years of exile he felt homesick and had "recurrent dreams of the street scenes and sounds of the old Shanghai". Thus was born the wish that he would one day compose a work to reconstruct his sonic memories, thereby preserving the musical elements of a lost Shanghai.

Shanghai Reminiscences is the realisation of his dream. And, as compared with Ge's earlier work, it is a mellower, more conventional outing from China's "first avant-garde composer". The striking effects of his earlier pieces seem absent here. It is as though, in this piece, Ge's musical language is compelled to depart from his previous engagement with the American avant-garde lineage of Cage and Crumb, in order to engage with the populist vein of Copland and Bernstein. A work like *Reminiscences* inevitably draws upon the vernacular, even though here the vernacular is not so readily apparent for a non-Chinese listener.

The piece opens with Ge's evocation of Jing An Temple, its austere statues of the four warrior gods, its ringing bell and chanting monks. Tracks three to nine are all such sonic evocations of everyday sounds among the city's grass-root inhabitants, as announced by the title for each track: from the cyclist's aural concoction to various pedlars' singsong announcements of their trades. There is also the loving humour of track five – not an exuberant and showy "flight of the bumble bee", but a fly's annoyingly hovering path over a ring-wormed scalp, punctuated by the victim's often helpless slapping of his own head. Ge's buoyant East-Meets-West collaged musical staging arrives in Part One's concluding track (nine), an evocation of a typical, spontaneous, host-less "party" on a summer night in the low-rise Shanghai of yesteryear, when neighbours often congregated in a patio among the back alleys to cool off, with each group bringing its own entertainment – Western violin, Peking opera, Pingtan (Suzhou dialect song), and the folk-tune *Purple Bamboo*.

Such sonic evocation is woven around the coming-of-age story of a violinist (obviously Ge himself). The sweet, uplifting lyricism of the violin's sonic odyssey seems a counterpart of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. In Part Two of *Reminiscences*, it meets Bernstein's *Age of Anxiety*. Underneath the young violinist's Kayser *Etude* in section one is an understated *East is Red*, the Cultural Revolution's *de facto* anthem, which glorifies Mao as the sun-emancipator-chairman of the PRC. The third section,

Revolutionary March, (track 12) also quotes another popular political tune of the time – *The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is Terrific*. Such Cultural Revolution references became almost too touchy for the Shanghai première of *Reminiscences*.

One can imagine the enthusiastic responses to *Reminiscences* at its première, as the middle-aged Shanghai-ese audience members relived their aural memories among those bygone cicadas, flies, pedlars and cyclists. If some of the striking timbral effects of Ge Gan-ru's other works are missing here, they are more than compensated by a warm, affecting, panoramic soundscape that rewards repeat listening, even for a non-Shanghai-ese listener like me. Arrival and departure are probably only an illusive circular passage through time – the one definitely non-illusive fact about *Reminiscences* is that it is dedicated to Vivian Wanhe Ge, the composer's loving and supportive wife. Meanwhile, that passage of life – forward through time and backward through memory – is here coloured by the intangible unfolding of an artistic career. The Chinese childhood evoked in *Shanghai Reminiscence* is captured through the lens of an evolving sensibility steeped in a diverse American musical tradition. In this dialogue with his roots and his chosen home, Ge Gan-ru has enriched the musical culture in both worlds.

Ge Gan-ru chose to supplement his *Reminiscences* by concluding this recording with *Butterfly Overture*, his symphonic tribute to Chen Gang, his beloved teacher/mentor from his Shanghai Conservatory days, and whose musical advice he continues to seek today. Ge has said that for Chen the butterfly is a symbol of "beauty, love, freedom, and an insistence unto death". Here Ge has essayed a piece with more of an emotive tone than usual to mirror his teacher's conventional but assuredly lyrical style in *Butterfly Lovers' Overture* had its première in May 2012 with the Shanghai Philharmonic under the baton of Zhang Liang at the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center.

Evans Chan

Royal Scottish National Orchestra



Photo: Tom Finnie

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra was formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra and became the Scottish National Orchestra in 1950. It was awarded Royal Patronage in 1991. Throughout its history the orchestra has played an integral part in Scotland's musical life, including performing at the opening ceremony of the Scottish Parliament building in 2004. Many renowned conductors have contributed to its success, including George Szell, Sir John Barbirolli, Walter Susskind, Sir Alexander Gibson, Neeme Järvi, Walter Weller, Alexander Lazarev and Stéphane Denève. In 2012 the RSNO welcomed British-Canadian musician and conductor Peter Oundjian as its latest Music Director and Danish conductor Thomas Søndergård as Principal Guest Conductor. 2012 also saw the appointments of two new Leaders, James Clark and Maya Iwabuchi. The RSNO has a worldwide reputation for the quality of its recordings, receiving two Diapason d'Or de l'année awards for Symphonic Music (Denève/Roussel 2007; Denève/Debussy 2012) and eight GRAMMY® Awards nominations over the last decade. Over 200 releases are available, including the complete symphonies of Sibelius (Gibson), Prokofiev (Järvi), Glazunov (Serebrier), Nielsen and Martinů (Thomson), Roussel (Denève) and the major orchestral works of Debussy (Denève). The RSNO is one of Scotland's National Performing Companies, supported by the Scottish Government.

For more information, please see www.rsn.org.uk.

Tsung Yeh



Photo: South Bend Symphony

Shanghai-born conductor Tsung Yeh holds a unique historical position in being the first conductor ever to hold music directorships both of a western symphony orchestra and a major Chinese instrument symphony orchestra. He presently holds posts as Conductor Laureate of the Hong Kong Sinfonietta, Music Director of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, and Music Director of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra (IN). His recent guest conducting appearances have included the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, the Minnesota Orchestra, Rochester Philharmonic, China National Symphony, Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and the Calgary Philharmonic, as well as numerous other orchestras in the United States, Europe, and Asia. In 1991 he was among three conductors chosen for the Conductor Mentor Programme of the ASOL, working with Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He previously held posts as Exxon/Arts Endowment Conductor of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Resident Conductor of the Florida Orchestra, Principal Guest Conductor of the Albany Symphony Orchestra, Music Director of the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra, and Music Director of the Hong Kong Sinfonietta.

Born in Shanghai, now resident in Greater New York, Ge Gan-ru is one of China's foremost composers. Very different from his previous exploration of the Western avant-garde, *Shanghai Reminiscences* is a warm and affecting evocation of "the street scenes and sounds" of Ge's childhood in pre-Cultural Revolution Shanghai, viewed through the lens of his adopted American traditions. *Butterfly Overture* is the composer's symphonic tribute to a beloved teacher from his Shanghai Conservatory days. *International Record Review* described Ge's string quartets (8.570603) as "Nothing short of contemporary masterpieces".



GE GAN-RU

(b. 1954)

Shanghai Reminiscences (2009)

51:42

Part I: My Childhood

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| 1 | I. Jing An Temple | 4:37 |
| 2 | II. Violin Beginner* | 2:01 |
| 3 | III. Bicycle Music | 3:07 |
| 4 | IV. Pedlar's Tune I (Sharpening Knives) | 3:06 |
| 5 | V. Flies Chase A Bald Head | 3:10 |
| 6 | VI. Pedlar's Tune II (Water Melon) | 0:52 |
| 7 | VII. Pedlar's Tune III (Steamed Pork) | 1:05 |
| 8 | VIII. Pedlar's Tune IV (Toasted Gingkoes) | 1:41 |
| 9 | IX. Summer Night's Cooling Party | 6:27 |

Part II: Cultural Revolution – Awakening

- | | | |
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| 10 | I. Growing Violinist* | 2:58 |
| 11 | II. Chaos | 2:40 |
| 12 | III. Revolutionary March | 2:10 |
| 13 | IV. Fantasia* | 3:59 |
| 14 | V. Lament | 7:15 |
| 15 | VI. Awakening* | 6:34 |

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| 16 | Butterfly Overture (2012) | 15:27 |
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*Maya Iwabuchi, solo violin

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

Royal Scottish National Orchestra • Tsung Yeh

Recorded in Henry Wood Hall, Glasgow, Scotland, on 20th and 21st June, 2013

Producer and editor: Andrew Walton (K&A Productions Ltd.) • Engineer: Mike Clements

Publisher: Ge Gan-ru (ASCAP) • Booklet notes: Evans Chan • Cover photograph by Zelin Wang