

Wang Lu 王 – Urban Inventory (2018)

Written by bluesever

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Urban Inventory 01 *city park* 3:15 02 *once upon a time, in another lifetime, (dream of the red detachment)* 4:19 03 *gifts of gab* 2:10 04 *two voices of the people* 1:46 05 *tell you softly* 2:48
The Third Sound Ensemble Sooyun Kim - flute Joshua Rubin - clarinet Karen Kim - violin Michael Nicolas - cello Orion Weiss - piano Patrick Castillo - conductor
06 *Wailing* 9:13 Holland Symfonia Hans Leedners - conductor
07 *Backstory* 7:23 Alarm Will Sound Alan Pierse - conductor
08 *Cross-Around* 7:23
Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne Lorraine Vaillancourt - conductor 7:23
09 *Cloud Intimacy* 9:55
International Contemporary Ensemble Katie Schoepflin - clarinet Ryan Muncy - saxophone Kyle Armbrust - viola Daniel Lippel - electric guitar Jacob Greenberg - piano Nathan Davis - percussion Ross Karre - conductor
10 *past beyond* 16:16
Ensemble Intercontemporain Susanna Mälkki - conductor

The title composition with which Wang Lu's debut full length recording begins is in many respects representative of the sixty-seven-minute release. Teeming with life, the five-part evocation of an afternoon in a Chinese city park blends sounds of real-world elements, including pre-recorded conversations, with the playing of an instrumental ensemble. Much like the experience one would have in the park, the music is often turbulent, even at times chaotic and cacophonous, though an occasional moment of calm also arises to ease the impression of vertigo, and dizzying degrees of activity likewise permeate the other five settings on the composer's arresting collection. If Lu's music is anything, it's kaleidoscopic.

Though the acclaimed ensembles that appear on the release, namely Ensemble Intercontemporain, International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), Alarm Will Sound, Third Sound Ensemble, and Ensemble Nouvel Moderne, recorded their pieces in different parts of the world

across a seven-year span, what unifies the material on the release is Lu's distinctive sensibility and the sonic richness of her writing. Now an Assistant Professor of Music at Brown University, she's comfortably ensconced in America. But prior to that she graduated from the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music and grew up in China, and thus her music naturally reflects the influence of both cultures. In her material, elements of traditional Chinese music and contemporary classical music entwine, resulting in music of striking harmonic design and melodic shape.

Traffic, nature, animals, and people sounds intermingle with The Third Sound Ensemble's expressions during the fifteen-minute title suite, a vivid sound portrait that dazzles the senses with its evocation of park activity. The acoustic instruments—flute, piano, clarinet, violin, and cello—weave gracefully in and around the real-world elements, making for a collage that's unpredictable, stimulating, and often disarmingly pretty. With memory-based details also working their way into the presentation, the mass grows dense when sounds from the immediate environment fuse with sounds of a propagandist dance troupe, conversations, and pop singing. If the sound field flirts with cacophony in isolated moments, the piece ultimately conveys affection and nostalgia for the world captured in the piece.

In contrast to the electro-acoustic collage style of the opening work, *Wailing*, performed by Holland Symfonia, hews to a more conventional symphonic line, comparatively speaking. It's as expressive and bold, however, in keeping with a piece designed to evoke the wailing that Lu overheard as a child expressed by Northern Chinese peasants in response to both betrothal and death. Orchestral colour in all its glory is called upon during the ten-minute setting, with horn blasts and glissandi effects deployed to convey the forcefulness of the remembered experience. As clearly different as it is from the opening suite in many respects, *Wailing* shares with it an emphasis by Lu on expressive flourish over standardized compositional form.

An orchestral jazz dimension emerges in *Backstory*, attributable to Lu's writing but also to the sonorities of Alarm Will Sound, the sixteen-member ensemble for which the piece was written. Passages featuring percussion, piano, woodwinds, horns, and strings fluidly overlap, the impression created of elements woozily seeping into one another. Commissioned and performed by Montreal's Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, *Cross-Around* is Lu's attempt to distill into musical form the notion of interaction in all its variegated splendour, be it human, cosmological, or otherwise, and once again instrumental forces are marshaled to convey the complexity of such experience. Here and elsewhere, Lu's combustible material seems less music and more life force, a dynamic energy field rendered into physical form using instrumental means.

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More earthbound in its subject matter, Cloud Intimacy draws for inspiration from the practice of internet dating. In this realization by ICE, Lu references Wagner's Tristan und Isolde alongside ambient sounds of cell phones, cameras, and other noises, and with Dan Lippel's electric guitar, Katie Schoepflin's clarinet, and Nathan Davis's percussion prominently featured, the piece begins to sound a bit like a performance by the Bang On A Can All-Stars. The album concludes with the longest and perhaps most ambitious of its pieces, the sixteen-minute past beyond, which the Ensemble Intercontemporain brings into being with poise and sensitivity. For this composition, she drew upon ceremonial practices associated with Tibetan and Thai rituals and threaded brass sonorities, cymbals, and strings into a shape-shifting design whose scope is as deep and wide as an ocean. Scored for twenty-eight musicians, the piece is emblematic of Lu's approach in the way it integrates multiple strands into a dynamic sound field. Regardless of the differences from one piece to another, the six settings testify to the boldness of Lu's vision and serve as a collective argument on behalf of her vitality as a compositional voice. — Ron Schepper, textura, newfocusrecordings.com

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