



By the author of
Time's Long Ruin

Stephen Orr

Dissonance

A novel

Wakefield Press

Dissonance

Stephen Orr is the author of three novels: *Attempts to Draw Jesus*, *Hill of Grace* and *Time's Long Ruin* (shortlisted for the 2011 Commonwealth Writers' Prize). He has also published a non-fiction volume of true crime, *The Cruel City*. His short stories have appeared in journals and compilations.

By the same author

Fiction

Attempts to Draw Jesus

Hill of Grace

Time's Long Ruin

Non-fiction

The Cruel City

Dissonance

A novel

Stephen Orr



Wakefield
Press

Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067

First published 2012

Copyright Stephen Orr, 2012

All rights reserved. This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

Cover designed by Stacey Zass, Page 12
Cover photograph by Rex Lisman / Getty Images
Designed and typeset by Clinton Ellicott, Wakefield Press
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Orr, Stephen, 1967– .
Title: Dissonance / Stephen Orr.
ISBN: 978 1 86254 945 6 (pbk.).
Dewey Number: A823.4



Government
of South Australia

Arts SA



Australian Government



Publication of this book was assisted by
the Commonwealth Government through the
Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Part One
Tanunda 1937

1

Part Two
Hamburg 1938

107

Part Three
War

223

Part Four
Spring 1942

331

Part One
Tanunda
1937

Chapter One

Here is a house – stone, square and simple – sitting towards the front of a paddock along God’s Hill Road. The paddock is enclosed by a fence of rotten redwood posts – some still standing, some fallen, some held in place by rusted wire that is partly taut, partly tangled through wild ryegrass and thistles as tall as a *Bösendorfer* piano.

In the days before Johann Hergert bought the property at a bankrupt sale it had been covered in vines – but now these were dead, or wild, trained along more rusted wire that ran between more rotten stumps of redwood. Still, every year there were some grapes, ripening through summer, eaten out by birds, shrivelling, dropping, waiting for the rats, rabbits and foxes that were the only livestock on Killalah. The shiraz vines were as old as Henschke’s, as thick as telegraph poles around the base, as virile as lantana, drawing nutrients from the near-perfect soil, feeding leaves that were as green as the Hi-Gloss on Nev Scholz’s seeder – destined to drop in May each year and feed the fat-hen and Salvation Jane of another wasted vintage.

There was music coming from the front room of the house. It was sucked out of an open window, stirred up and filtered by grey lace curtains that fluttered like a flag on a cold Anzac morning. A woman’s voice was counting along to the music – four octave scales on C, then D, up and down, repeated in thirds, and fifths, without a single mistake. The notes were smooth and joined, mechanical, like a Mixmaster changing speed – electricity driving fingers across the keyboard like tappet-heads, producing music that fell out of the

window into a garden full of wildflowers and more weeds, this time growing in carefully cultivated beds.

Erwin's idea. When he was eight his mother, Madge, had presented him with a box of vegetable and flower seeds – carnations and lisianthus, pumpkin, peas and beetroot. But instead of planting these he'd walked along the nearby creek collecting seeds from wild artichokes, daisies, orange harlequins and wood sorrel. He went home and dug irises, pansies and stocks from his father's bed and planted his discoveries throughout the front garden. His father, Johann, appeared from his shed and asked, 'What are you doing, Erwin?' and he replied, 'I'm making it natural again.'

'Leave my delphiniums.'

But Madge opened the front window and called out, 'Leave him be.'

'I will not.'

'Johann.'

Johann fell silent, watching, eventually retreating to the solitude of Goethe on a drop toilet overgrown with wisteria. Madge put her head out of the window and called to her son, 'Not in rows, scatter them, like the wind would.'

Madge was still at her window, counting time in a clear, metallic monotone more precise than any metronome, tapping an arthritic bamboo stick on the lid of their old iron-framed piano – a stick that Erwin had felt across his knuckles a thousand times in the years since he'd started lessons at the age of four.

An F natural instead of F sharp. Whack! 'Sorry, Mum.'

'Key of C-sharp, Erwin, what are you doing?'

'I know . . .'

There was no point arguing. Mother was right. Such a simple thing – F natural in the key of C-sharp.

'Back to your scales. One, two, three . . .'

She was right. It would get him there – it already had. The certificates on the wall above the piano proved it. 'Tanunda Eisteddfod, Pianoforte, First Prize.' 1929, 1930, 1931 . . .

Madge had run out of wall. She'd hung the rest in the kitchen, taking down Johann's Silesian farmscapes and painted plates.

'Leave them,' he'd argued.

'We have no room. We have to encourage our son, don't we?'

Back on the drop dunny, the smell of wisteria was strong in his nose.

As Madge counted she looked out across a valley. She saw smoke from other cottages nestled in the folds of hills or beside stands of old peppermint gums, and felt contented. There was a rhythm and precision to nature – the piano proved it, music proved it, freeing itself from scales and singing serenades to slow-flowing creeks and symphonies to the human will. Here was the proof – her son, Erwin. Tall, blonde, faultless – not that it had been easy. A good-looking fifteen-year-old with wavy hair, a high forehead and square jaw. Here was the proof – large, sprawling hands flying over keys, barely touching them to produce precise sounds. The proof – skin as soft as tallow, cheeks blushing red on cold winter mornings.

But to get Erwin this far she'd had to overcome a lot: the Barossa Germans, with their belief that music was all oom-pah and close harmonies, schools full of second-rate teachers, religion, and most of all, Johann.

Madge's mother, Grace, had warned her about him – not because he was German, or a shop-owner, or had a strange leer permanently sculpted across his face – but because he had dark hair and brown eyes. 'Once you open the gate . . .' she'd said, one afternoon as she flicked through the Bray family album. Then she'd looked at her daughter. 'The Hergerts are *German*, are they, Madge?'

'That's what he says.'

Grace looked at the photo of Johann that he'd given Madge.

'Doesn't look very German.'

'They're from Silesia.'

'Ah, the East – perhaps there was a Pole involved.'

But Madge wasn't going to be talked around so easily.
'He's nice.'

'Do we get to meet him?'

'Of course. He's going to take over his dad's shop.'

Grace lifted her eyebrows. At least it was better than a farmer.

'Mum, I'm thirty-three. I want to settle down. I want to have a child.'

'There's more to it than that.'

'I could wait forever.'

Then there'd been a meeting at the Bray's cattle stud: a meal of pork chops and mashed potato, Johann lined up in front of her parents like a Hereford that had just missed out on a prize ribbon.

'Your people are German, Johann?' Grace had asked, as Madge held his arm and stared into his hazel eyes.

'Yes,' Johann replied. 'Magda has told you everything, I suppose?'

'Magda?'

'Yes,' Madge-Magda replied. 'Doesn't it sound so . . . European?'

Meanwhile, her father, Sam, was shaking his head. 'That salt shaker's empty.'

It was an abridged courtship, Madge helping out at the Hergerts' shop, accompanying Johann to Tabor church every Sunday, helping him run the Sunday school (although at this stage she dared not say what she thought about religion), writing him long, romantic poems and polishing his five pairs of boots every Sunday evening.

And then, a few weeks before Madge's wedding, Grace asked her, 'Do you really think you'll be happy with Jo in the long run?' and Madge replied, 'If I'm happy with him for six months, that's all I care about.'

Grace sat forward. 'What do you mean by that?'

Madge couldn't believe she needed to explain. 'Can't you see . . . by then I'll be set.'

‘For what?’

Madge smiled. ‘A baby. A big, bouncy boy.’

Madge and Johann were married in black, and before long everything that Grace had predicted came to be. Jo tired of his new wife and instead of coming home after closing he went to the Tanunda Hotel. But Madge didn’t care – she was preparing for her son. She rested on her back for six hours a day, lying with her bulging stomach facing a statue of Zeus on her bedside table, as if the spirit of the god would infect the child. She played Bach every day because she knew her baby could hear and would absorb the music through sweet, syrupy amnion and an umbilical cord as strong as barbed wire. She prayed to other gods she didn’t believe in: the Christian God, Mohammed and Siddhartha – covering all options, just on the off chance. She massaged her stomach with lavender oil and sang to the boy, walked along dry creek beds so he could hear the clunk of pebbles and smell the oil of gum leaves venting in the late afternoon sun. He would know and love nature. He would worship it, and describe it in music – perhaps even his own compositions.

This is why Jo was at the Tanunda Hotel. There wasn’t much call for him back at their home on God’s Hill Road. Madge had fallen out of love as quickly as she’d fallen in. So now he could pay the bills, and provide, and for that she’d put up with his body odour and Polish eyes and give him the Lutheran respectability he craved.

And when he did come home, drunk, at eleven or twelve at night, she’d be there waiting for him, standing on the porch with her arms crossed. ‘Where have you been?’

‘What do you care?’

At which point she’d get out her horsewhip and threaten him. ‘I’ve made your bed up in the shed.’

‘Be damned, Magda.’

‘Madge!’

It was a dry-stone shed, built to head height so you always entered with a two-inch stoop. Its corrugated-iron roof was

rusted out and blown away here and there, letting in the moon and stars and dew that settled on his face every morning – a shed full of unused machine parts, seized motors, broken tools, bags of fertiliser that had set rock hard, and rats.

‘The shed,’ she said, letting the thongs of the whip fall to the ground.

Jo tried to get past her and she whipped him, again and again, until he retreated. ‘I won’t have a drunk in my house.’

‘Whose house?’

Killalah, cracked and crumbling, sitting alone in the weeds on God’s Hill Road.

Jo staggered back to his Dodge truck, climbed into the cabin, started it and filled the night air with diesel fumes, driving off as Madge called after him, ‘Go on, back to your whore.’

In the form of a bargirl at the Tanunda Hotel, a seventeen-year-old with a plain face, wide hips and an interest in everything he said. ‘It’s time for you to go home, Jo.’

‘Home? To what?’

‘Your wife.’

‘Ha.’

But it was hardly one-sided. Madge had started off baking his bread and washing his socks. Then, one day, there’d been a letter.

Dear Mrs Hergert,

I hear Jo is married now, and I hope you two are happy. He was to marry me once, but then changed his mind. Still, I have his boy, and his name is Andrew, and if he gives you a boy then maybe they can play together. Can you see them running in the sun, shooting arrows, talking fondly about their papa . . .

No return address.

Jo denied it, of course, but people don’t just make up things like that, she argued. So, out with the horsewhip. Let

him rot in the tool shed with the dead possums, she thought.

See, Grace said, when Madge went to see her the next day. Brown eyes.

‘But he seemed so loving.’

‘They all do. It just goes to show, you shouldn’t give them the chance.’

Then she went on to remind Madge how her father George, who’d kept a boarding house in King William Street, would study the register at 8 pm every evening and how, if he found a Leonard or Konigsberg or Hammerstein, he’d pick up a bell and start ringing it, storming up the stairs, knocking on the appropriate door and saying, ‘No Jews here, out!’

‘And he never had any trouble,’ Grace said, handing the letter back to her daughter. ‘I warned you, Madge. Now you’re just going to have to make the best of it.’

The final proof of Jo’s infidelity came on the night Erwin was born. As Jo relaxed in the waiting-room of Willow Pass Hospital, half-drunk, Dr O’Hara (a big man with a handle-bar moustache and a fencing scar across his right cheek) came in, shook his hand and said, ‘It may be a long labour, Mr Hergert,’ to which he replied, ‘No problems, Doctor, I’ve had plenty of practice.’

Words that Dr O’Hara repeated to Madge as she lay on a cold, stainless-steel table. As she thought, Of course, it’s true, everything’s true. As she promised herself never to kiss him again, or smile, or start a conversation – as she grasped the sides of the table and thought about her boy. *Her* boy: the perfect white bundle that was starting to make its way into the world – part Zeus, part Bach, the fingers of Moszkowski and the fire of Paganini, the humour of Chaplin and the heart of Hans Christian Andersen.

He was all this, and more, emerging into lemon-scented daylight with a high-pitched squeal that sounded like Schubert’s *Erlkönig*. ‘What colour are his eyes?’ Madge asked, before his shoulders were even out.

'It's a girl,' Dr O'Hara replied.

'A girl? Nonsense.'

'It looks like a girl. No, no, wait – a boy.'

Madge smiled. Jo stuck his head in the door. 'Can I come in?'

'Out!' Madge screamed. 'Doctor, what colour are his eyes?'

'I can't tell.'

'His hair?'

'Blonde.'

'His eyes?'

'Brown.'

'Look again.'

'No, blue, blue.'

Madge stopped pushing and the boy's legs slid out like a pair of lubricated bananas. She took a deep breath and thanked God (any god) for answering her prayers. The rest she could do herself with a mix of love and discipline, copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and a new piano she'd just bought, charged to Jo and had delivered to God's Hill Road.

Jo stuck his head through the door again. 'Can I come in?'

'No.'

'Is it a boy?'

'It's a boy,' she replied, thinking, Not that you'll ever get your hands on him.

Half an hour later, Dr O'Hara was finished and Madge was resting on a freshly made bed in an almost empty ward, feeding her son from the breast she kept covered from her husband's view.

'Erwin, as agreed?' Jo asked.

'Edward.'

'We agreed.'

'Edward.'

Jo looked at her and his face tightened. 'How will you look after him then, when I've gone?'

Madge adjusted the infant on her tit. 'Is that a threat?'

'It's a fact. We have a mortgage.'