Dissonance begins with piano practice. Fifteen-year-old Erwin Hergert is forced to tackle scales and studies for six hours a day by his mother, Madge, who is determined to produce Australia’s first great pianist. To help Erwin focus, Madge has exiled her husband, Johann, to the back shed. Jo is diagnosed with cancer and Madge allows him back inside, but only for long enough to die.

Madge takes Erwin to Hamburg to continue his studies. Erwin prospers in Germany with his new teacher until he meets a neighbour, sixteen-year-old Luise, and finds there’s more to life than music.

Meanwhile, Germany is moving towards war. Late 1930s Hamburg forms the backdrop to an increasingly difficult love-triangle, as Erwin is torn between the piano, Luise and the demands of his love and devotion to his mother. Soon the bombs, real and imagined, start falling. Marriage and parenthood give way to death, and tragedy. Before long Erwin and Madge are drawn into the horrors of a war that leaves little time for music.

Dissonance is a re-imagining of the ‘Frankfurt years’ of Rose and Percy Grainger. This is a novel about love in one of its most extreme and destructive forms, and how people attempt to survive the threat of possession.
Dissonance

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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
Part One
Tanunda 1937

Part Two
Hamburg 1938

Part Three
War

Part Four
Spring 1942
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.’

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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 handlebar 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.’