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This is the author’s radio script of this article.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 11 August 2012.

After the success of Time’s Long Ruin, his novel based on the mystery of the Beaumont children, Stephen Orr has followed up with Dissonance another bold rewriting of history which, the back cover informs us, is ‘a re-imagining of the “Frankfurt years” of Rose and Percy Grainger.’ Critics who were disconcerted that Orr’s fictional versions of the Beaumont children lived in a different suburb of Adelaide and disappeared six years earlier will be confounded by the fact that his musical prodigy, Erwin Hergert, comes from the Barossa Valley and travels to Hamburg in 1938 with his monstrous mother Madge, whereas Percy and Rose travelled from Melbourne to Frankfurt in 1895.

There are several parallels between the Graingers and the Hergerts, but Orr’s choice of 1938 as the year of their voyage to Germany transforms the dynamic of the story. Madge, headstrong and wilfully blind, cannot conceive that the cradle of European musical culture could become the brutal and dangerous country that Germany was then. She is more worried by Erwin’s attraction to the pretty soprano, Luise, in a neighbouring flat than by Hitler’s excesses.

Madge Hergert must be one of the most appalling mothers in fiction. She forces Erwin to practise for hours a day, motivating him with a combination of corporal punishment and emotional blackmail. She outlawed his father to the shed with no explanation but ‘it’s best’. She drags him away from his peaceful home to a country on the brink of precipitating the worst war in history. She persecutes his girlfriend even after a bomb kills her mother. But whenever Erwin wants to do something she doesn’t like, she’ll say ‘I’ve never asked for anything’.

Erwin is only about 16 when they leave South Australia. He’s already a musical snob, rubbing his school music teacher’s fondness for Sigmund Romberg’s operettas. Strangely, though, he doesn’t correct Luise when she exclaims that the Emperor is her favourite sonata. Actually, there are so many musical blunders in the novel that one might be excused for thinking that the author is not very familiar with musical theory and terminology. This is a shame, since classical music lovers will be drawn to this book, and will find these errors off-putting. There are other strange anomalies. Luise has brown eyes when they first meet, but 40 pages later she has ‘big blue eyes’. The Verlag Publishing Co, where Madge gets a menial job, translates roughly as the Publishing Publishing Co – perhaps a little joke, or perhaps not?

Orr’s prose has an absence of affect which is both a weakness and a strength. The plainness of the style can add to the power of the descriptive writing, allowing the reader plenty of imaginative space. But Erwin is difficult to pin down as a character. While his actions and words are given, we don’t often have access to his thoughts. Growing maturity is suggested when he begins to reject his mother’s outrageous demands and acknowledges that a teacher he had earlier treated with contempt has something to teach him after all. But events overtake him and the novel ends before any of these hopeful signs can develop into definite character traits. The thorny question of antisemitism is handled with some subtlety. Luise is cheerfully carried along by the Nazi rhetoric, while being portrayed in other ways as a fairly normal human being, while the dreadful Madge is brave enough to try and help a Jew who’s being murdered on the street. Erwin is no heroic idealist. He fears for his mother’s safety and tries to draw her away from this dangerous situation. On the other hand, he is appalled that the Reich has banned the music of the Jewish Mendelssohn: his education has been channelled exclusively into the mastery of music, and his opinions of everything else are still being formed.

Dissonance doesn’t have the solid, rounded feeling of Time’s Long Ruin. The characters are too often ciphers, or caricatures, and it is beset by continuity problems and factual inconsistencies. But it is a big, ambitious novel, and there are many engaging scenes and some passages of considerable power.