

Stephen Edgar

ANCIENT MUSIC



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Stephen Edgar was born in 1951 in Sydney. In the early seventies he lived in London; on coming back to Australia in 1974 he moved to Hobart where he lived until late 2005. He has since returned to Sydney. He studied Classics and later librarianship at the University of Tasmania. *Ancient Music* (first published 1988) was his second book.

He has since published four more collections, with a fifth due for publication early in 2009. He was awarded the prestigious [Grace Leven Poetry Prize](#) for 2004 and the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal for excellence in literature in 2006. He also won the inaugural [Australian Book Review Poetry Prize](#) for his poem "Man on the Moon".

Also by Stephen Edgar

(previous)

Queuing for the Mudd Club

(subsequent)

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Where the Trees Were

Lost in the Foreground

Other Summers

(forthcoming)

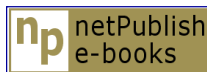
History of the Day

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contact [Stephen Edgar by email](mailto:Stephen.Edgar@btinternet.com).

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Ancient Music

*Sample version with
limited content*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems first appeared in the *Adelaide Review*, *Age*, *Australian Literary Review*, *Island Magazine*, *Mercury*, *Quadrant*, *Westerly* and the anthologies *An Inflection of Silence* and *Poems Selected from the Australian's 20th Anniversary Competition*.

I would like to thank the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding body, for a New Writer's Fellowship during 1986 which enabled me to write a number of these poems.

"Dr Rogers' Report" is based on a letter received by Gwen Harwood from her friend Dr Brian Rogers, recounting in vivid detail a photographic expedition he had taken through Central and South America. The events described and much of the language that describes them are Rogers' not mine. "Li Tsung-ping" is based on a scene in the film *Dersu Uzala* by Akira Kurosawa.

For this PDF edition I have tidied up the punctuation and made a few textual amendments. Most of these amount to no more than the alteration, addition, or deletion, of a word. However, in the case of two poems, "Dr Rogers' Report" and "Building Space", more substantial revisions to the text were made in a few stanzas.

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78s

Even when I was young they were worn out,
Lying like heirlooms that have lost their use
But must be kept.
They were so present, so full of weight,
A solidness that would impress
A child. But those old needles scraped
The music off too soon. Their life was short.

I'd take an album out from time to time,
Its binding faded in maroon or blue,
And turn the heavy
Sleeves, watching in their circles the tame
Dogs fall, the falling dust a cue
For silence. Only one I ever
Heard, *The Thieving Magpie*, its sudden drum-

Roll giving notice of another music,
Peremptory under its ruined sound.
My father never
Played them. Having shut away his stock
Before the war, he'd come to find
That their performance was now over.
And if I felt he'd sleeved away there, disc

By disc, something they harboured of himself,
The two of us could put on obsolescence
As well as they
Could do. All secrets were quite safe
In our technology of silence.
He couldn't speak to me, nor I
To him. We worked for years to perfect that gulf.

The new equipment goes without their speed.
Lying in dust, they still have to be saved,
Memorable
Not in themselves, though still as hard
And weighty, since really they're preserved
In negatives, unplayable,
Unheard, like everything that wasn't said.

Two Crows

As I was walking all alone
I heard two crows' sardonic moan,
And over me their cawing fell
Like a displacing trance or spell,

Until through monochrome vision I'm
Abstracted to a changeless time.
Their caws are speech. I hear one say,
"Where shall we go and dine today?"

"Below us on the grass-grey plain
I see a faceless soldier slain.
What might be colour on his cheek
Is but the smear his gashes leak.

"How many hours did it take
Of dying dreams that soon he'd wake
Elsewhere, till slow degrees of cold
Whited out the lies they told?

"His comrades like ice in the sun,
As though they never were, have gone,
And not a soul knows where he lies
Who is overlooked here by the skies.

"In distant houses coped with cloud
Grey figures watch an empty shroud
But will, before too long, replace
The forgotten voice, the faded face.

“His lady, wasted now from love,
Once more will couple soon enough,
But briefly shamed to find it sweet.
So let us too set down to eat.

“You’ll unstring a shattered thigh
And I’ll peck out a shocked grey eye.
With every strand of his sun-white hair
We’ll thatch our nest when it grows bare.

“None shall find him, but their moans
Hang in the wind that will parch his bones
Forever (listen) when they’re bare.”
I woke. The wind was in my hair.

Understudies

Did Golding get it wrong?

A commonplace of theatre we have all
Heard is the unknown loitering in the wings
Who sweats on another's illness to be strong.
The frailty of genius is the call
That re-embodies the absent role and brings
To bated music a transfigured song.

Choose names to suit your taste. Well, the last reaches
And limits of the common world persist
(I'm ready for the screeches
Of protest — I know, it's nonsense to suppose
They still survive, like thinking ghosts exist
Or saying you believe in UFOs,
The Bermuda Triangle) with tales of creatures,

Not yetis, something of a humbler size,
A human image. Neanderthalers, say,
Peering from Caucasian woods, by a lake
In central Asia, in China loping away
Into hills; stooped in surprise
Beside a dozing scientist who'll wake
To meet his memory in thoughtful eyes,

Or dodging panic-fired shots and gone.
Nonsense. But like a premonition it stirs
Some sense of awe to think such beings move
On our perimeter, in the wings, to don
Like clothes roles that were ours and speak our verse
If, for whatever reason, we should prove
Unable to go on.

The Masked Ball

Unkind distortions with their faces skewed,
Like flounder heads, both eyes squashed to one side
And staring from the frame,
Averse and mad and wide,
Characters in cartoons
Emit their messages. The jokes extrude
Sealed in balloons,
As though to say, "Within this line another game

With other rules applies
Which is at once perspicuous and covert."
It's all at one remove,
Like a scientist who tries,
Experimenting in a vacuum, to prove
Something about the world but yet not of it.

Sole-eyed, the living speakers float ideas.
They can't tell simply what they meant to mean,
Nor can they face each other
With what they would have seen.
The stranger's wanted street
Wearies direction. Confession interferes
With tea. A discreet
Smile has to satisfy the dream-articulate lover.

Their words drift roundly by
To burst in dazzling rumours. The earth becomes
A stage where the stunned crowd
Gapes at myths and the sky
Is lit with riddles. Like magic, lies concoct a loud
Rumbling in the hills and the valley hums.

At the masked ball all fantasy's excused
And facts are made up for. Personae nod
And smile with gold panache,
Lines marshalled like a squad,
And no one dares to start
At the livid face beneath, the mouth that's used
To fall apart
Unspeakably. The room is charged with words that flash

As bright as masks, a script
A genius might have written which, when heard,
Suspends all disbelief,
But who, at home and stripped
Of his pen, is a bore, stammers, wears a private grief,
And never says a memorable word.

Now

The weather says it:
When clouds like swollen sponges
Take up the sky,
Staining the windows grey,
Blanking the mountain
Like news from a censored letter,
And rain is nailed
Home to secure the exits;

Or when it's blue
And hard as a kitchen tile,
Heat framing the town
Like a window, doming the house,
A bell jar emptied
And sealed against the air:

All now, it says,
Nothing is possible
But this, all here
And all immutable.

So illness, love,
The mindless head, the useless
Limbs that leave you
To become the place you lie in,
The woman who recurs
Like an echo, one
Word you go on mouthing
That must mean you.

Each second's tick
Is a drop of time bleeding
From the future,
Striking chimes fall plumb
Like a portcullis,
Leaving nowhere to pace
But the present hour,
Which draws you out at last
From the tower clock,
As Einstein prophesied,
In still extension
That says now for ever.

Last Things

Enough to wind the clock
When time's familiar.
The spring's tension
Will carry out the hours
Mindlessly enough,
If not quite painlessly.

The traffic will seek out
Its destination,
Reasonably enough.
The labelled roads
Were put there just for this.
Movement was called for
And the space was filled:
Those little faces
That have grown and gone,
Those polished surfaces,
Set pieces of the table,
Those pictures that became
A field of vision.

That other face that watched
From the opposite chair
And also now is gone.

The space was filled
Without thought, without notice.
What concentration now
Will restore that concord
Of events and objects?

The shadow-driven cars
Still beleaguer
The highways as the sun
Divides itself among them
For the night, each one urged on
Across the window's space
By the formal twist
Of a hand on the clock's key.

It says, Forget judgement,
Forget heaven and hell,
Small things, the tried diversion
Of an ignorant fear.
Death, yes, will be there
But the other three were here
Already, all along,
Unthought, unnoticed,
Waiting on such sorrow
And lost purpose.
Darkness, silence, nothing,
Each night now they return
And will return
With a patience that bespeaks
All the time in the world.

Slow Motion

Down the line
Continuously added to,
The new cars shine
And move to a completion,
As monitored from above, that drives them off
In perfect time. Slow motion.
Faced with each car at the same stage
Passing, the worker at his station
Can gauge
No change, no movement,
But fixed attendance in a fixed design.

It's like a child two
People love. The constant one
Fails to construe
As altered a growth that locks
Its progress to her own. The distant one
Who seldom sees her wakes
With panic to a change that's exiled
Him in absence. As he looks
The child
Is borne away
From attachments once undone and now untrue.

So shoppers rise
Towards a higher floor, and back
Again crosswise
Those from above descend.
The interlocking steps take on their shift
Of passengers one end
Without disruption and without
Disruption at the other turn
Them out,
Like finished products.
Slow motion. Its impulse forwards, yet it plies

The same ground, night
And day, perfect with practice. Stood
There with feet quite
Still, its progress theirs,
They might abstractedly forget they're going.
But drawing in the gaze
Will show what's passing as they climb
And sink. One checks his watch. This is
The time.
He's thought of something,
Looks back, but is carried onwards out of sight.

Sleeping Beauty

About you like a hall of mirrors shone
Their smiling niceness, turnkey approval which
Was welcoming you at last (so soon)
Into what would look like an iron gate
Behind you, be your world.
Strange then that in this rich,
This gaudy festival that swirled
Around
You like the whirlpool where you might be drowned
Your presence after all was too sedate
To notice now. None of them would
See you, not one.
Amid so much glass, though, you were bound
To be broken up and lost and theirs for good.

You left the hall of mirrors and slipped out
Unnoticed from the braying celebration
In which your life, without a doubt,
Had been, you saw now, slept away so far.
The choice you hadn't guessed
Before, an anticipation,
Drew you lightly off in quest
To explore
The passageways that must have waited for
Your taking, always. Like a faint hurrah
Or protest (too far off to care)
The revel's shout
Was swallowed in your now confessed
Excitement as you turned for the spiral stair.
She was there as you expected, solemn-faced,
Pale and beautiful, calling to your mind

One... but all of this was being erased,
Withdrawing now from substance like the haul
Of a swimmer from the shore
By the insistent bind
Of undertow. This choice, then, or
Where else
To go? For even here, at the castle's
Most secretive extent, all ways met wall.
Your finger inched for her device
(No words to waste;
Eyes locked with eyes, you bartered smiles)
And shivered to the spindle's kiss of ice.

And as you slumped, there briefly welled, then hung
In stasis round you like a frozen wave,
Their distant laughter's chilling song,
Smiling niceness, turnkey approval which
Had welcomed you in trust
To teach you to behave,
In the hall of mirrors you were just
On the point
Of slipping from unnoticed.

Vikings

I

They're here. But they have heard of image now.
Asking for it, the brilliant city reeks
With impatience. They've disowned the dragon prow,
Ridiculous beards are stripped for shaven cheeks.
Blade folds to Parker, cape to pinstripe suit;
Conservatively they are dressed to kill.
And to think the place will buy back what they loot
And have them in and vie to do their will.

An empty frame's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*;
A movement's silent in Tchaikovsky's Fifth;
The King's Men find the play a few lines short:
History. They've been acquired and won't disturb
The show. What's in a name? A surface bought.
Through the mall young artless GI Nazis drift.

II

They were like children, ruthless innocents.
They came on the tide of present appetite.
No more than a squalling toddler can make sense
Of a mother's time and wishes could they fight
Impulse, reflect upon the burning town —
The pillaged treasury, a sacrament
Despoiled, raped women or the men cut down.
They grabbed what glittered in the sun and went.

But what was worse? Havoc, the emptied land,
The corpsefire hill that watched the fading wake?
Or the year they came and stayed? Not in their going
But in persistence was the overthrowing.
The vanquished then forgot to understand
And gave their victors what force couldn't take.

III

Think of the Parthenon. A model's shown
Mounted before it in a gauche excess
Like a cosmetic on that marble bone.
The cachet they would market in her dress,
Lips, sightless scent, fades with each pictured laugh
Faster than in the wind. Her buyers trace
An empty hill in a glossy photograph
Saying "Parthenon" under a woman's face.

The merchants come and take and come and stay.
What's history but a glitter they can't resist
That's rubbed to nothing by their handling? They
Hold a mask that's paid for to be kissed,
Copied from one who doesn't look the same
And has disappeared; but they still make her name.

Xanadu

When Marco floated
Once again alive
On memory's Venice
With his tales and millions
No one credited,
Perhaps he too could believe
That he was lying, that his years
Of eastern service,
In the summer palace,
Under the cool pavilions,
Among intricate jade,
Had richly constructed,
Like an art, a sort of death,
Approaches to perfection through desires
Or dreams, the lies of faith.

For the Shang-tu
Marco walked in boast
Transferred his claim
To a place that no one's
Visited, Xanadu —
The name shifting like a coast
To make unreal with change
The land, him
And his stories. And in time,
Enforced companions,
Hidden from who
They were by law
Of the city mute with myth,
All who live by language
Share Marco's death.

It's the trap of words
That leaves the fabulist entombed,
The stuff of dreams
That takes the dreamer
With it as the pageant fades,
Till Homer is assumed
To the side of Zeus, a learned
Litany of themes,
Some difficult names
And a foreign rumour;
Till Shakespeare avoids
Himself and bides
With his company of ghosts, to look
On speechless while his jokes are explained
And his verse goes blank.

Like copies taped
From copies, the living speech
Is drowned at last
In a white noise.
Sea sighs trapped
In a shell that scarcely reach
The ear, the master voices
Singing from the past
On that changing coast
Awash with dictionaries
And scholia, report,
Word-perfect but
Ever more remote, the view
On the inexorable way that passes
From Shang-tu to Xanadu.

Destiny

It was a simple melody on two flutes,
Brief, meagre, somewhat plodding,
Unembellished,
A slight piece, as I thought, concluding
A side of *La Flûte Indienne*. What the notes
Said of it I forget, except its title,
Destino — Destiny. Destiny?
How did that name get itself attached
To a tune with so thin a
Resonance, that offered so little?

Yet, later, those narrow notes, that solemn fluting,
Playing on, played on the mind,
Thin and cold
As Andean air and its barren ground
That offers so little. And an image was competing,
Now recalled and Indian too, a hall
Of mummies, ancestors,
Trussed and rigid, upright underground, marshalled
There, bearing a bleak justice
That could prove perpetual,

Their dead mouths singing, singing, round and stretched,
Two opposite dry lines of O's,
Two hollow ranks
Of flutelike ceaseless crying that rose
Above hearing, and brought to mind the things you've wished
Never to know, what you hear
In lulls, behind all sounds,
Or when the first bird sings and its little chinks
Gather from the morning air
The whole weight of silence.



Stephen Edgar has been described by Clive James as standing out “among recent Australian poets for the perfection of his craft, a limitless wealth of cultural reference and an unmatched ability to make science a living subject for lyrical verse”.

What is most immediately distinctive about him, certainly among poets of his generation, is his commitment to formal verse “and for showing considerable panache in handling [it]” (Kevin Hart, *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*).