



# JESSICA DUCHEN

'Summer in Budapest was violin heaven and words bowled out at a rate of knots'

The novelist's love for the violin proved inspirational when she was writing her new book 'Hungarian Dances'

**T**here could, I suppose, be more embarrassing fetishes for a novelist than the sound of a gorgeously played violin. I never could resist it. I tried to learn the instrument for years, but my attempts came to an ignominious end when I fell in love with a violinist. Finally, dear reader, I married one.

So, when I gave my publishers a synopsis for my third novel and my editor returned it with three crucial words – 'Where's the music?' – the violin had to take centre stage.

I started to investigate where different violin-playing traditions were strongest. Most of the greatest 19th-century violin pedagogues and performers were Hungarian – yet while Budapest was nurturing classical giants like József Joachim, Leopold Auer and Jelly d'Arányi, a totally separate tradition existed alongside: the Gypsy fiddlers, with their family bands, their seductive sound and their mesmerising virtuosity. And their tragic history. So my story evolved: a young woman from a family of Hungarian musicians, immigrants to Britain, begins to find her true identity by exploring her hidden past.

Summer in Budapest – the best kind of research trip, and there seemed to be a band serenading me in every restaurant, and a busker fiddling on every corner. It was violin heaven and the words bowled out at a rate of knots. This was the first time I'd written a novel not about something that made me angry (my book *Rites of Spring* was about anorexia) or that I needed to get out of

my system (*Alicia's Gift* was about an overpressurised young pianist), but because of something that sent me straight onto cloud nine.

There were more specific influences, too. Several years ago, my friend Philippe Graffin, a glorious violinist with whom I've worked on several music-and-words projects (we'll be at the Lake

District Music Festival this summer), produced a CD called *In the Shade of Forests*, featuring 20th-century music influenced by Gypsy violin playing. The cover picture shows a little Gypsy girl peering out of a wagon. I was more than halfway through writing *Hungarian Dances* before I realised where the character of Mimi, the

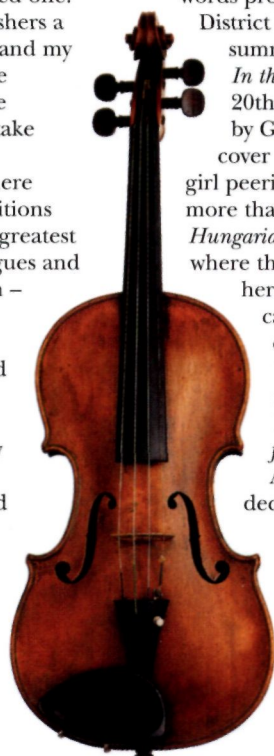
heroine's Gypsy grandmother, came from: she was the child on the front of the disc!

I named a piece by my fictional composer Marc Duplessis *Dans l'ombre des forêts* in the CD's honour. Amazingly, Philippe has now decided to make a new recording of music from my book. Including ever-popular Brahms, Ravel's *Tzigane*, Bartók and some fabulous numbers in Gypsy style, it is released this autumn.

So, perhaps my novel is about wish-fulfilment: even if I can't play the damn violin,

my characters can! And my neighbours needn't endure the sound of my grating attempts any longer. ■

• *'Hungarian Dances'* by Jessica Duchen was published in paperback by Hodder & Stoughton on 24 July. Philippe Graffin's recording of the music from *'Hungarian Dances'* is released on Onyx this September; for more information, visit [hungariandances.co.uk](http://hungariandances.co.uk)



**J**essica Duchen is a novelist and reviewer; she contributes regularly to Classic FM magazine (see her reviews on p.65 and p.67). Send your passions to [classicfm@haymarket.com](mailto:classicfm@haymarket.com)

Jessica's choices



**In the Shade of Forests**  
Philippe Graffin (violin),  
Claire Désert (piano)  
Avie Records AV2059



**Fire Dance**  
Roby Lakatos  
and Ensemble  
Avanticlassic  
1018