

Everything led her to Hungary

Hungarian Dances – we all know the pieces of music Brahms wrote under this title, but now there is a novel as well. Jessica Duchen, author and journalist from England, has adored Hungarian music for long time, and in this book she has put together everything she loves about the Hungarian nation. Gypsy traditions, classical music, heroic accounts of 1956 – set within the story of a Hungarian immigrant family in Britain.

Metropol Hungary had the chance to talk to the writer about her book and attraction to Hungary.

One would not say that it is fashionable to write about Hungarians. How did you choose this topic?

- The idea goes back a very long way. I have always found Hungarians to be really fascinating characters. The first Hungarian I ever met was someone who worked with my father who was a scientist. The second was András Schiff, the great pianist. I was studying piano and when I was 16 I went to a masterclass that he gave. This was 1982 – he wasn't yet a grand maestro, but still in his twenties and fast building his reputation. He was one of the most marvellous musicians I had ever met, so I was bowled over! We have always stayed in touch, and I am delighted that he has read and endorsed my book so enthusiastically.
- I was always immensely impressed by the Hungarian musicians I heard at that time, including Zoltán Kocsis, Desz  R nki and the Tak cs Quartet... They obviously came from a fantastic tradition. And some of my friends who studied music at Cambridge University went afterwards to the Franz Liszt Academy, and came back talking ecstatically about their experiences. Today, my husband is a violinist and he studied with a Hungarian professor in Manchester.

My English editor loves the musical aspect of my novels: the first, *Rites of Spring*, involved ballet and the second, *Alicia's Gift*, was about a pianist. So for my third novel I chose the violin, which is my favorite instrument. And as I started thinking about who plays the violin, the more I read, the more everything led me towards Hungary. The foundation for classical violin playing today comes largely from the tradition developed by pedagogues born in 19th-century Hungary. And at the same time there was this amazing Gypsy playing – two astonishing traditions coming from the same place. That was how I started. I then became more and more fascinated by Hungary in the II. World War and the Revolution of 1956. I have talked to a number of people about their experiences during that time.

Have you built these stories into the novel?

- Some of them. For instance, the heroine's father makes a dramatic escape from the country in 1956, and his journey is partly based on the story of a cellist I know. The novel's version is even more dramatic, however, as someone is shot...

How do you see Gypsy people? They are treated in many different ways, talented musicians, or low profile people who are discriminated against. Have you met them when you were in Hungary?

- I tried to, but there is a language problem; they don't really speak English, and my Hungarian is terrible. The first time I was there I saw a great many buskers around the city. They played beautifully, but I could not ask them the questions I really wanted to ask.
I have the feeling that Gypsies are both the most demonized and the most overromanticised people on earth. They are the last race against whom other people even now appear to think it is OK to discriminate. I think this is terrible, and that they have been locked into a cycle of deprivation. I felt this constantly in Hungary and it made me very sad. Even when I met a distinguished Hungarian music professor and mentioned Gypsies, he said that he thought there was something wrong with their brains. I was really shocked. And then you hear Roby Lakatos, one of the best violinists in the world...

Is the novel a family story, an individual story, the Hungarian story?...

- It contains elements of all of these. The heroine, Karina, is a violinist born in Britain to Hungarian parents; she has given up her career to be a mother and teacher. Karina is very close to her grandmother, Mimi, who was born a Gypsy but was later adopted and became a famous classical musician. Mimi is 91 and for decades has been hiding some terrible secrets about her life. Karina is married to a very English man, but then falls in love with another violinist; he encourages her to find her roots and begin to give concerts again, and this is when she goes to Budapest. The historic story of Mimi and the present-day story of Karina are interwoven. It is an ambitious novel, covering 80 years – I have stuffed a lot into it!

Are Karina's first experiences of Hungary are those which were yours when you first came to Budapest?

- Not exactly; instead, I tried to imagine what it would be like coming to Hungary knowing I have roots there. I visited the city as a tourist and it was wonderful, but different. One fascinating thing for me about writing fiction is trying to experience life through someone else's eyes.

Was your first visit to Hungary because of the book?

- Yes, it was, even though I had wanted to visit Hungary for many years. It was great to have an excuse to go at last!

A CD has been released which is related to the book?

- Yes. My friend Philippe Graffin, the celebrated French violinist, read a draft of the novel to give me some feedback from a violinist's point of view. He has Hungarian roots, is fascinated by Gypsies, their music and its influence on classical composers – and instead of criticizing my manuscript, he decided to make a recording inspired by it.

This is the first time an international classical star has ever made a new CD to match a contemporary novel! I feel very honoured. There are compilation CDs that accompany certain very well-known books, but this album is totally original, and the result is absolutely stunning. Some pieces on the CD are featured in the story, and it captures exactly the right atmosphere. It can be downloaded from the website of the record company, Onyx Classics:
<http://www.onyxclassics.com>.

On your 'Hungarian Dances' website there is a link entitled Explore Hungary.

- I loved writing this book so much that I did not want to finish it! Of course I had to, but in order to keep it going, I put together a website with links, recipes, etc. I hope it will help my readers to understand more about Hungarian culture. (<http://www.hungariandances.co.uk>)

Is there always something about music in your novels? Do you see your future like that?

- Not necessarily. I started my professional life as a music journalist, I love writing about music, but I am not sure it will be in every novel that I write. In my first book, *Rites of Spring*, music was only a background element. But in my next novel, *Songs of Triumphant Love*, the heroine is an opera singer...

Szonja Krezinger