

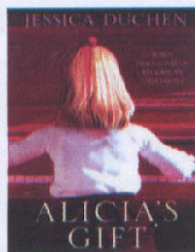
Book review

Alicia's Gift

Jessica Duchen

Hodder & Stoughton

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The double-ranked shelves of paperback fiction in my bedroom are punctuated with six or ten novels that have classical music as a background. Some manage to establish the milieu quite convincingly; others, either through the author's own limited knowledge or through anxiety that the average reader will not understand musician-speak, drop clanger after clanger, putting a symphony orchestra concert in the (recital-sized) Wigmore Hall or having one character tell another that they are about to perform in 'Beethoven's ninth symphony' rather than just 'Beethoven 9'.

Jessica Duchen would never make such a mistake. A pianist herself, married to a violinist in the London Philharmonic orchestra, and author of excellent biographies of Fauré and Korngold, she is

also a very experienced music journalist – a feature-writer for the *Independent*, *Classical Music* and *BBC Music* among others and founder-editor of *Piano* magazine, who has interviewed countless performers and teachers in a range of disciplines, and counts many of them among her friends. Duchen brings all this inside knowledge to her second novel, and it shows.

Her heroine Alicia Bradley demonstrates extraordinary musicality and an attraction to the piano from infancy. From the moment she has her first formal lesson at the age of three her mother Kate dedicates her life to nurturing her talent, a project which increasingly begins to dominate the lives of the Bradley family, which also includes dad Guy, editor of a Manchester daily newspaper, and elder brother Adrian, a boy who it seems has no particular talent for anything. The ramifications of Kate's and Alicia's single-mindedness provide one thread in the plot; the tensions and mutual dependence of their relationship another; and a third deals

reviewed by **Clare Stevens**

with all the wider issues of how best to educate a gifted child and lay the foundations of a solid career. Issues such as the exploitation – both artistically and sexually – of beautiful young girls by unscrupulous teachers, the effect of competitions and the corruption that lies at the heart of the judging process of some of them, and the manipulation by the media of performers' public images are explored along the way.

The story races to a dramatic climax as every romantic novel must, with plenty of clues to what is going to happen and a smattering of red herrings. As she did in her first novel, *Rites of Spring*, Duchen skilfully balances the conventions of the genre with the authority of a writer who really knows her subject. I felt I knew her characters intimately and was walking with them into their houses and offices, into concert halls and across the Derbyshire moors and dales. *Alicia's Gift* is a wonderful read. But make sure you keep the Kleenex handy when you tackle it.