

## AN ANALYSIS OF VIKRAM SETH'S AN EQUAL MUSIC

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**Abstract**

*Vikram Seth is an Indian English writer who is among the most prominent names of authors who have colonized the fictional space of the West. In this novel, he explores the supreme artistic achievement of the West – Classical Music – and weaves it into a poignant love story of heartache and loss.*

**Keywords**

*Music, Love, Quartet, Classical.*

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In remarks intended for Goethe, Beethoven once observed, “Music, verily, is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life... Tell him to hear my symphonies and he will say that I am right in saying that music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend.”<sup>1</sup> On this premise Seth bases *An Equal Music*, comprehending that writing about an artist is incomplete without exploring the intricacies of his art. The backdrop of the novel is the enchanted, romantic world of Vienna and Venice, and the subject is Western Europe’s supreme cultural achievement: classical music.

*An Equal Music* is an insular work, involving a man, a woman, a quartet, a violin, and the cities of London, Venice and Vienna. At its heart, it is a love story that takes a determined look at the darker passions like unhappiness and obsession, and addresses difficult issues about love and life in the process. Michael Holme, the narrator, describes himself as “irreparably imprinted with the die of someone else’s being.”<sup>2</sup> This someone is Julia McNicholl- his fellow music student in Vienna ten years ago and the one true love of his life. Owing to an irreconcilable war of wills with his stern teacher, Karl Call, Michael leaves Vienna, and unintentionally, Julia. By the time he recovers, two months have elapsed, and Julia, hurt beyond redemption, is lost to him forever. Now the second violinist in a string quartet, Michael spends his days listlessly, with only music providing an emotional anchor and in effect, any meaning to his life. His loneliness is emphasized in several pathoses—inducing descriptions and is punctuated by accounts of his tormented past, haunting him, making him yearn for answers, for absolution. Into this chaotic world, Julia steps in again, inadvertently at first, and purposely later, when she goes backstage after a performance. Unable to resist the power of their past they come together again, but this time under the shadow of Julia’s marriage and her hearing loss: but for a brief magical time when they escape to Venice, everything seems possible. Ultimately, however, the perfection that they achieve in making music together somehow eludes them in their love.

This story is then a reworking of the Greek legend of Eurydice and Orpheus. In it, Eurydice dies of snakebite on their wedding day. Orpheus, the greatest musician in the world, refuses to accept her death and descends to the underworld, where he sings so persuasively that Hades allows him to take back his bride, only to lose her again due to lingering doubt and weakness. *An Equal Music* reiterates this parable of love lost and almost regained by the power of

music, the desperate bid to revive a dead romance against all odds, the subsequent anguish of heartbreak, and the agonies of accepting loss.

Love, however, is not the sole theme: in fact, music usurps love's place as the driving force that pulls the reader along irresistibly. There is some kind of music on every page: it even insinuates itself into the love story, providing the ethereal framework over which the fragile gossamer threads of the love story are woven. In his famous Norton lectures delivered at Harvard in 1973, composer/conductor Leonard Bernstein sought to establish parallels between the language of music and the syntax of spoken language. In *An Equal Music*, Seth similarly endeavors to make comprehensible and accessible to the reader a world in which music is the theme that unites lives, and as Nordlinger remarks "Every musician will gasp at what Seth has been about to discern and express."<sup>3</sup> Music is what the novel addresses itself to, and though expressing one art form through the medium of another is by its very definition a challenge, those "who have been caught in the spell of music will note with widening eyes that Seth is able to call an extraordinary amount of that experience to the page."<sup>4</sup>

Music and love are thus the two major themes in the novel, which is appropriate, considering that both love and music play on the emotions. It is interesting how Seth weaves the two together to create a canvas on which the passions are so consummately depicted. For the two principal characters – Michael and Julia, music is not merely a vocation, it is their avocation, and it has the strength to tie them to each other beyond the boundaries dictated by social norms, because their love has their music-making as its foundation. For Michael, Julia is not only the love of a lifetime, she is the very essence of his craft. This is why their love, though evident enough on the purely physical level, vibrates with a touch of transcendence that elevates them above anything sordid and contrives to keep them innocent somehow. Julia, in spite of her conflicting loyalties, is as powerless as is Michael to resist sinking into the tangled beauty of their love.

The Michael-Julia relationship is not the only relationship in the novel. The love stories between humans and music, instruments, dead composers, and even the cities in which their music is played - are every bit as interesting. This is why music usurps love's place as central theme. The characters not only love each other for the music they make, but also their passion for and their devotion to their music outlasts their travails and escapades by far. An elderly woman's love for music gives a small town boy his profession and ultimately, the cherished Tononi violin. Schubert is ugly, but kissable nonetheless, for the music he has

made. Michael's relationship with his violin has been realized with a rare insight, and not only Michael, but also all the other musicians empathize majorly with their respective instruments.

The character development in this novel is exceptionally well done. At first glance, Michael, with his idiosyncrasies, his selfishness, hypersensitivity, his weak inner self, is not particularly likable. His mental processes are directed inward, shutting out the view of the world outside, festering in a mire of bitterness, self-resentment, and to a certain extent, self-pity. But these faults are redeemed by his innate goodness, honesty, and above all, by his passion for music and for Julia, a passion that is quite beyond the grasp of lesser mortals. His devotion to his art is distilled out of the nobility of his soul. On discovering Beethoven's opus 104, he tells us, in anticipation of musical ecstasy, "Late tonight, after the rehearsal, I'll come home, light a candle, lie down on my duvet, and sink into the quintet."<sup>5</sup>

For Michael, music serves as a substitute, both for love and religion. The remark that he makes at the end of the novel about the controlling power of music is something he needs as a philosophy, because music takes him out of himself in an inexplicable way. In creating Michael, Seth has created a man with a flaw. This flaw is a mental one, and it manifests itself in Michael's fingers during moments of intense emotional excitement, and in his social isolation. Michael sees the darker side of his own personality with surprising clarity. "... A volatility, a sense of resistance, of skepticism, roughness, impulsiveness, even, at times, of dark panic, almost brainsickness."<sup>6</sup>

In Julia's case, music is as much of a religion as it is with Michael, but other things matter to her as well: her family, and her child. When Michael leaves Vienna, she is truly heartbroken, but pulls herself together to pick up the pieces of her life. Seth leads us to believe that were it not for her deafness, she would indeed have coped quite well. But with her impending loss of hearing (loss of music) and owing to the fact that her affair with Michael is unfinished business, she is drawn to him in an almost hypnotic trance. Both Michael and Julia are very intense characters, and it is in large measure due to Seth's verbal dexterity that the novel accurately conveys a great deal of the emotion it inspires.

Julia's deafness is an angle that evinces Seth's courage in exploring the idea of a deaf musician-about being under the threat of losing music from a life that is dedicated to music. Basing the character of Julia on famous deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie, Seth portrays with great sensitivity the life of a deaf musician, not seeking to make Julia's deafness a metaphor for any other

aspect of the novel but to be taken at face value; it is there, just as it is often there in real life. It is certainly more tragic since she is a musician, but resiliently, she allows her musical instincts to guide her back into proper musical functioning.

Among other noteworthy things in the novel is the depiction of Michael's provincial boyhood at Rochdale in the north of England. The portrayal of a disadvantaged childhood in a decaying and industrialized landscape, the uprooting of human settlements, the ill and aging father fixated on the family cat with the characteristic pathos-inducing loneliness of the very old, the gradual ebbing away of the life-blood of the town – all of it is skillfully delineated. Michael's family, one of the many casualties of the rapid march of industrialization, evokes the poignancy Seth is aiming for, together with other images, like the one of the boyish Michael lying on the Pennine uplands listening to the larks, and that of the benevolent Mrs. Formby, who bequeaths Michael her violin.

Also remarkable is Seth's marvelous sense of place, which entails in this instance the ability to conjure up visual spaces through aural cues. The rising song of a lark evokes the moors of Rochdale, London is represented by the songs of robins in winter and blackbirds in summer, and by pigeons, Vienna is conjured up by the sound of nightingales, and Venice by the music of Vivaldi. Seth thus authenticates the novel by linking the profession of the characters with their sonic perception of the world.

Much of the pleasure that the novel provides is in its detail and unhurried pace. The description of London parks, long walks, the account of the water serpents, London flat-life, the portrayal of the concierge, and long descriptions of Venice and Vienna - all add to the novel's texture rather than to its meaning. Seth's style, which in this novel is deeply evocative and emotional, yet sparse, comes as near to conveying the mercurial moods of love and of music as is possible in words. When music or profound emotions surface, the prose becomes almost musical. Assonance, alliteration, rhythm and cadence, syncopated sentences with short words, and *lento* with long, vowel-filled words – all are used to achieve this effect. When Seth talks of Bach's great, unfinished, mysterious *Art of the Fugue* or when he thinks of Venice or Schubert, it is as if the novel existed in another, higher dimension. The plot is by no means particularly enthralling but in modern writing, it is the style, not the substance that counts. The book acquires literary stature on account of Seth's masterly handling. He gets the music right and the love right too.

There is also a “determined intertextuality to Seth’s writing in this book.”<sup>7</sup> Employed at moments of high emotional intensity, these literary or biblical references seek to create an objective correlative for Michael’s state of mind, which at these times is high-strung and desperate. As the novel draws towards its finale, and Michael sinks deeper and deeper into despair and his suffering intensifies, these references become increasingly frequent and are accompanied by a fragmentation in thought that is reproduced in a stream-of-consciousness manner, moving from past to present [and vice versa] without warning, often mixing up both, conjuring up brilliantly the half-sane and half-fractured state of Michael’s mind. Due to the aforementioned quality, *An Equal Music* is as much a novel about love and music as about a certain inner darkness. It has a melancholic strain that manifests itself in the isolation of the characters, in Michael’s obsessions, in Julia’s deafness, and in a lack of common perspectives.

The conclusion of the novel is even-handed and utterly believable, with Michael holding on, not to Julia, but to a shared memory. When he hears Julia playing, to him “it is a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely. Inexorable, phrase across the phrase, phrase echoing phrase, the incomplete, the unending *Art of Fugue*. It is an equal music.”<sup>8</sup> This moment is a kind of epiphany for him, making him realize that “Music, such music is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and hear such music – not too much, or the soul could not sustain it – from time to time.”<sup>9</sup> In Spanish the word *Fuga* means a “musical composition in counterpoint, based on the use of imitation of a short, but the well-differentiated theme,”<sup>10</sup> and the *punto de Fuga* is the point in a drawing done in perspective where straight parallel lines converge. The ending of the novel thus becomes the *punto de Fuga*, “the point at which in art, straight parallel lines converge, due to perspective.”<sup>11</sup> This is because, at the end of the novel, Michael is alone like he was in the beginning, but there is one important difference: his thoughts have reached a resolution and he is no longer troubled. He has learned acceptance and it has brought him serenity. This change in perspective has enabled him to come to terms with his past, and made the present bearable, and the future promising. And perhaps most essentially of all, he has realized that to be complete is an advantage, not a necessity.

The title of the novel is taken from an apt sermon by Donne, seeking to tie together literary reference, musical experience, and metaphysical consolation. In the epigraph to the novel, the sermon reads, “And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house, they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud or sun, no darkness

nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but one equal music, no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends or beginnings, but one equal eternity.”<sup>12</sup>

Here equal becomes a synonym for the divine, for something that is perfect beyond imagining. The title fits in very well with the spirit of the novel: the music of the masters is an equal music to Michael’s ears, for it enables him to temporarily touch this divinity and gives his soul sustenance to go on. And not only is the music an equal one, but the love, as envisioned by Seth, grows into an equal, perfect love, marked by balance and equability, understanding and acceptance.

To sum up, *An Equal Music* is about the joy of having regained what was thought to be lost forever, coupled with the anguish of realization and denial. It is impassioned and poetic, elegiac and witty by turns, and set against the backdrop of Venice and Vienna, it is a fit stage for the unfurling of a love tale to the music of Beethoven and Bach. Seth’s obvious passion for his subject and his subsequent empathy with it lend this novel an extra dimension. This, together with his talent for words and imagery, and an excellent literary ending haunting, not unlike the fragile beauty of the sonatas played in it, and “resonates in the mind long after the final page has been read.”<sup>13</sup>

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