

## MUSICAL LOVE THEME OF SETH'S *AN EQUAL MUSIC*

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Seth's *An Equal Music* is a soft love story set to musical notations in Venice, Vienna and London. It centres on the professional life of a string quartet, and musical issues are richly and suggestively explored in it. Almost every relationship between the characters has a professional aspect as well as an emotional one. The novel narrates the lives and hard times of Michael, a violinist and Julia, who fall in love separate, come together again and go away. Julia goes deaf, Michael's music suffers in spite of a substitute love affair with Virginie, Julia gets married and then the two have an extra-marital affair.

Music and Love are 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; obsessive love, lives spent trying to recapture perfection – to the degree that reading the novel does not amount to a mere reading, it becomes an empathic experience by virtue of Seth's brilliant apprehension of it. Like life itself, the novel resounds with the complex and often painful episode of life's events.

But Michael's and Julia's is not the only relationship in the novel. The love stories between human and music, instruments, dead composers, even the cities in which their music is played, are equally gripping and convincing. 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 (outlasts) to their music outlasts their travails and escapades by far. *An Equal Music* is an intimate and internalized story of love and music. Set in the exalted world of European classical music circuit, it is a sensitive novel that has something of the delicacy of a haiku. The book according to N. Sharada Iyer "is a gripping and profound meditation on love, music and the irrevocability of time."<sup>1</sup>

The novel is a beautiful poetic impassioned writing, conjuring up brilliantly the world of Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, of individual heartaches and the familial bonds that tie a quartet. Interweaving with love and music are the themes of loss, longing, loneliness and the strands of passion that run through all our lives. The book is about loneliness, specially the loneliness of an artist.

In *An Equal Music*, with the magical world of Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Schubert and Schumann as a background, Seth weaves an impassioned tale of heartache, longing and the power of music. The lines have music in them. The author has succeeded in turning prose to poetry. The rhythm makes the novel very musical.

*What is the difference between my life and my love?*

*One gets me low, the other lets me go.*

*O Luke, O Luke, rack me no riddles more.* (p.184)

The theme of *An Equal Music* form a parallel structure of love and music. The subject matter is suggested by Julia when she says, "Making music and making love – it's a

*bit too easy an equation*”(p.136). In the life of Michael and Julia however, the equation of music and love is not always easy. Written in the form of a narrative – or rather, in the form of reminiscences by the protagonist Michael – the novel offers a story of a love lost, found and lost again.. The ecstasy of love and the intense suffering for the loss of love are couched in a language which can properly be called the language of music. The musicians who play together are bound by the unseen thread of music, a thread of love and understanding’. To quote Michael, “*The Haydns are glorious; they give us joy. Where there are difficulties, we can understand them - and therefore come to an understanding among ourselves. We love Haydn and he makes us love each other*” (p.11).

*An Equal Music* thus reveals a world of music where the people are supersensitive and are guided by intense emotion, often unaware of the loss and gain in the world of matters Michael is extra supersensitive for whom losing touch with a friend means losing touch, hearing, smell, sight and even ‘taste’ (p.30).

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 likeable. 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.) For Michael, music serves as a substitute, both for love and religion. The remark that the maker 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.

With Julia, music is as much of a religion as it with Michael, but other things matter to her as well : her family, 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 hr 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.

The music and the love complement each other remarkably well. The delicate unfurling of the relationship between Michael and Julia is bathed in the glow of musical reference to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Bach – virtually all the great masters – because their lover has their music making as its foundation, their music serving as a metaphor and possibly as a substitute for their love. The novel celebrates the music of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Even Nicholas Spite, the music critic of the London Review of Book (29 April 1999), *who has been parodied as Nicholas Care in the novel, has, in his hostile review, not been able to point out any lapse in the technical description of the performances in the novel.*<sup>2</sup>

*An Equal Music* is a story of love lost. It ends with “*an impassioned invocation of music – not time’s – power to heal all wounds – or at least to make them bearable*”.<sup>3</sup> Julia is playing the Art of Fugue to a packed hall, her husband and son are there in the audience, listening to her music : “*It is a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely, inexorable, phrase, echoing phrase, the incomplete, the unending Art of Fugue It I an equal music*” (p.380).

Seth's own empathy for classical music gives an irresistible depth of tone to the narrative : "*I am the trout the angler, the brook, the observer*" (p.5), he tells us, as he plays Schubert. The passages describing the making of music evoke a trance-like state that can be actually experienced by the reader. As the Maggiore rehearse, vacillating from impatience with each other to musical perfection, Seth deftly notates the joys of collaboration, trust and creation. Even the technical difficulties encountered by a string quartet in playing certain pieces are explored in depth-as for instance the need to tone down a viola in order to play Bach's The Art of the Fugue.

Music with its entire vicissitudes remained an intriguing factor in Vikram Seth's life ever since he was a child. His fascination for music was indeed unique, that is why he was often attracted to trying hands on flute, cello and bansuri.

Talking about the book in a Note at the end of the novel Seth writes : "*Music to me is dearer even than speech. When I realized I would be writing about it, I was gripped with anxiety only slowly did I reconcile to the thought of it.*"<sup>4</sup> The title of the book is derived from Donne's Valediction describing life after death : "*.... Where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness, nor dazzling but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but one equal music, no fears nor hope, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity*"<sup>5</sup> (epigraph to the text). John Carey suggests that Donne's phase of leave taking "*yields apt meaning*"<sup>6</sup> as it brings out the balance between the four instruments that the quartet aims at and the unheard music in Julia's head matching the sound of her playing. Michael's love for Julia however, is not characterized by the balance, harmony and tranquility marked by that, "*one equal communion and identity*"<sup>7</sup> also mentioned in Donne's Valediction.

*An Equal Music*, pre-emptorily related to music sung, heard, recollected, is the main strand in the novel. It has an inextricable relation with music and there is no doubt that Seth's predilection for music can be traced in almost all his works and it is this feature that makes him a distinct novelist and a great novel to be read and enjoyed. The novel is not only about music but even read like a perfectly structured symphony or song as revealed in these. Memorable lines that leave an impending effect on reader's mind'.

*"Music, such music is a sufficient gift, why ask for happiness, why not hope to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough to live from day to day to hear such music....." (p.381)*

*An Equal Music*, reveals Seth's penchant for music and its symphony. The players are four in number as in a string quartet. They live under inevitable tensions and feuds that exemplify the players' life with despair looming large about their unsettled life, seldom giving them any reason to feel happy about. In the novel, Michael and the three characters each with their problem find playing the string quartet (signifying cohesiveness) often fraught with unavoidable problems. The symphony is finally reached when in the end Michael happily and with greatest satisfaction watches Julia giving a solo performance or going by the title, Michael finally achieves '*An Equal Music*'.

The 'Art of Fugue' has been used symbolically as an important part of the backdrop in which the difficulty of creating beauty in music is mirrored in trying to find beauty and perfection in life.

The concert begins with the first contrapuntal of 'The Art of Fugue'. It stands for symmetry, co-ordination, an intensity that is yet so calm as one either feels or creates. Seth has marvelously erected the flow and rise a fugues and the participants eventually mingling with it

Music at times is personified. Michael reports about Haydn Quartets and Brahms.

*The Haydns are glorious; they give us joy, where there are difficulties, we can understand them ..... We love Haydn, and he makes us love each other. Not so Brahms. (p.11)*

Seth rightly points out the deepening frustration, helplessness of these musicians who have to perform according to their audience's choice and expectation in creating music that must essentially be enthralling, soul everything. The author raises certain pertinent questions regarding the harmony of spirit which is so essential to produce sublimity of Art. Michael, voices this while narrating the rigorous exercise put in by the quartet in bringing in the uniformity.

Music is a very important strand wonderfully woven into the story. It is also an important theme. The significance of music is revealed through Michael, his string quartet, his urge to possess Tononi as also the desires of his companions to perform and rise in their profession along with Julia's deafness who with the support of Michael has finally found her destination, all these situations contribute to the completeness of the novel. Julia performs exquisitely at the end of the novel. The satisfaction that Michael gets out of it is unequalled.

#### References :

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