



## MUSIC, THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE IN VIKRAM SETH'S AN EQUAL MUSIC

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### ABSTRACT



Music is the strongest element in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*. It acts like a glue holding the story and characters together, and Seth offers the readers a peek in to the works of Beethoven, Bach, Mozart and Hayden, offering a unique glimpse into the world of chamber music. The interpersonal dynamics of the Quartet that influence their performance, their approach and method of rehearsing are also clearly pictured. Throughout the novel we find the novelist sharing an intimacy with music and identifying himself with the characters. Music and Love co – exist in the novel. The protagonist's dilemma in choosing one over the other is portrayed. Loneliness as the only companion the the life of a music composer has been beautifully conveyed. The elaborate process of music – making also find a place in the novel.

**Keywords:** *Music, Love, Music – Making, Loneliness.*

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Literature is the only branch of studies that can deal with any other branch of studies. Various themes have been dealt in Literature, ranging from romance to horror to mystery to science fiction any many more through the different ages. Music has been to the soul for ages, and it too has a long history. But the relationship between music and Literature is rarely dealt with. Many have spoken about music in their works, but not about the relationship. Vikram Seth has dealt with the topic in detail, as he himself is a musician trained in classical music. Stephen Benson in his *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* brings about the relationship between the discourse of music and literature. He states that, "musicology is newly attentive to literature and literary studies is newly cognizant of musicology" (4). Michael has a less laborious pursuit to obtain a rare Beethoven Quintet that he did in search of a Mozart Divertimento:

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 to hear such music – not too much, or the soul could not sustain it- from time to time. (380)

Making music and making love become one of the important themes of the novel. The love story with its traditional structure of meetings, partings, heartbreaks, promises and betrayals is beautifully intertwined with the theme of music in the novel. Vikram Seth emphasizes this when he describes how Michael and Julia after making love are able to work together on music,

One morning, after making love, we tried making music together. It did not go well; we were both too nervous. Later in the week we gave it another try, and were taken aback by how naturally, how responsively – to each other, to the music – we were playing (80).

Music – Making is an important phase before it comes out as a form of music. Music is soothing to the ear, but it is made up to that perfect state through the elaborate process of music – making. Music for Seth is the result of a concerted effort; of the senses and the musculature when the

musician plays, of the musician and the audience, and of the two musicians together. The novel *An Equal Music* expounds the art of music – making and is substantially technical for music lovers. An Equal music provides an in – deep look into the non – glamorous side to music – making. Michael sums it up: "Years of training, long hours, pathetic pay – and being no good for anything else – and having no chance in what you play – you could feel trapped even if you loved it once"(7).

'Love conquers all' is the saying. Michael, in an irrational state seeks to disentangle himself from his 'odd quadripartite marriage'. (14) As he unravels himself from the fugue of the first romance, it is also a fugue that restores him. His tears are washed away by the rain. He loses himself and his individual sorrow, listening to Julia's performance of the 'The Art of Fugue'. But, Love doesn't mean only the intimate relationship with our fellow human being. Love can be also experienced in many other things in life, the pets, the vehicles and so on. In the novel, when the protagonist Michael is frustrated by the loss of his real life girlfriend, Music becomes his most lovable thing. Music is also portrayed as the eternal lover.

How long have we lived together, the two of us: my time in Vienna, the solitary years that followed... It came into my life the same year as Julia. How long we have sung in one voice. How much we have grown into each other. How could anything part us now (175).

I love it (the violin) and it loves me. We have grown to love each other. How can be a stranger hold and sound what has been in my hands so long? We have been together for twelve years. Its sound is my sound. I can't bear to part with it. (69).

*An Equal Music* is a lucid and ambitious attempt to capture the mysteries and sufferings experienced by those in the field of music, through the form of prose. Seth's novel examines the impact of western classical music on the lives and hopes and fears and final, desperate choices of its European protagonists. Music has been presented in this novel as a noble addiction. Seth highlights the problem of being a professional musician. The



problems highlighted in the book are those that are faced in real life- the cost of instruments, the irregular income, the creative tensions of playing in a group and the diminishing likelihood that anyone from a poorer background will ever be able to train as a musician with all the expenses involved. The love, love regained and love lost in the novel also affect the emotion of the individual. Michael was desperately in love with Julia, but unfortunately he had to leave her and loneliness becomes his only companion. This is evident in the words of Michael, "Life settles into bearable aloneness" (56).

The instrument each member plays must be suited to his or her temperament. Thus, Piers, abrasive, demanding, the leader in the group, makes a classic first violinist. Helen, who provides the viola's supporting role, is constantly pouring oil on troubled waters; Billy, genial, brilliant, selfless, eager to please, is the group's cellist, "light and profound; the base of our harmony, the rock on which we rest." (10)

Seth's language of music can convey every minutiae of the art form. The love story pales in comparison. Moving as Julia's meeting with Michael after the performance at Wigmore Hall, it cannot compare with the sublimity of the music that has preceded it, particularly of the arresting encore, the first contrapuntist of Bach's "Art of Fugue". Music and love are inseparable and make a natural corollary in the events unfolded in the novel. The world of music is all embracing. The English, the Viennese, the Venetian, the French and the American characters engaged in the common pursuit of love of music meet, perform and feel together. The life so envisioned in the novel is global, music, therefore, is a potentially unifying a binding force.

The two powerful passions, the one for music and the other for romance gets intricately blended in the novel. Seth tries to work out as to how music can form the theme of a novel and connect not only individuals but also their souls. Michael's life has very little room for anything else other than music. He seems to share his fascination for music with Seth, his creator. Michael teaches music to Virginia, who confesses her love to him but in reality does not

leave any impression on his consciousness as Julia does.

The narrative deals with Michael's passionate relationship with his music, his deeply moving twelve year old attachment to his two seventy year old Carlo Tononi Violin. In "An Equal Music", with the magical world of Beethoven and Bach as background, Seth weaves an impassioned tale of Heartache, longing and the power of music. Music is part of Michael's life. It gives relief to a man when he was in the midst of difficulties. So when we read the novel, we feel the presence of music in its each and every line. Music unites Julia and Michael. The rhythm of their romance makes the novel more musical.

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