An Equal Music Short Guide

An Equal Music by Vikram Seth

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Characters

The novel's central character and narrator is Michael Holme, a professional violinist working in London as a member of the moderately successful Maggiore Quartet.

This ensemble—comprising Michael, Helen, Billy, and Piers—is at the center of Michael's life in the present. However, Michael is troubled by old wounds and unfinished business, and his relations with the other members of the Maggiore are disrupted as he battles the ghosts of his past, to whom Michael is bound in another, informal quartet: Mrs. Helen Formby, the woman who introduced the young Michael to classical music, became his first teacher, and gave him his rare Tononi violin; Carl Kaell, the formidable teacher whose demands and expectations appear to have precipitated some kind of breakdown during Michael's time as a student in Vienna; and Julia (McNicholl) Hansen, a concert pianist and the object of Michael's obsessive desire, whom he left when he fled Vienna, and with whom he pursues an ill-fated affair in the novel's present time.

To varying degrees, the significance of these secondary characters is restricted to their significance to Michael, who is very much at the center of the book. It is his search for "an equal music"—peace, contentment, freedom from the emotional turmoil that haunts him—that the novel details. Some characters—Julia and Mrs. Formby, for instance—are drawn more fully than others, such as Piers, Helen, and Billy. One key figure, Carl Kaell, enters the novel only through two brief letters and Michael's unhappy memories of him. Ultimately, though, all of these other figures simply dot the psychic landscape through which Michael journeys, and it is the narrator himself who demands our most careful attention.

Michael suffers from a depression that appears to date from a crisis in his past—a breakdown of sorts (the novel never makes the circumstances entirely clear; even to Michael "the darkness" of this period is "still almost inexplicable") that drove him to London from Vienna, suddenly ending both his troubled relationship with his teacher, Carl Kaell, and his apparently fine one with Julia McNicholl, the woman he continues to regard as the love of his life. At the novel's outset, Michael is frozen in that ten-year-old moment, still in London, his chosen city of exile (situated metaphorically between Vienna and his home, the northern town of Rochdale in rural Lancashire), and still desperately longing for a woman whom he has neither seen nor spoken to in a decade. While he recognizes the absurdity of his present situation, he is unable to see a way out: "Am I," he asks himself, "with such inane fidelity fixated on someone who could have utterly changed (but could she have? could she really have changed so much?), who could have grown to hate me for leaving her, who could have forgotten me or learned deliberately to expunge me from her mind"[?]. Seth's novel depicts Michael's movement out of this emotional paralysis toward a partial (but, for him, apparently sufficient) resolution.

Although they do not know each other, Carl Kaell and Mrs. Formby occupy the place of surrogate parents in Michael's life— they are his parents in music, whose roles in the novel are of greater consequence than that of his one surviving real parent, his father, a

retired butcher still living in Rochdale. Along with his father, Mrs. Formby is one of Michael's few remaining links with the rural Lancashire landscape of his youth, whose shaping influence on him is far greater than he would allow. Having fashioned himself into a Londoner of sorts, he is irritated by Julia's habit of pointing out the Lancashire dialect that still speckles his speech—evidence of the provincial, working-class origins his own mother encouraged him to eschew as a child. Yet, despite his determination to cut himself off from Rochdale, and despite the disdain of his fellow musicians, who divide the world into central London and everywhere else, he recalls the northern landscape with a Wordsworthian nostalgia: "Sometimes I would walk on the tops, sometimes just lie in the grassy hollows where I could no longer hear the sound of the wind. The first time I did this, I was held by surprise: I had never heard such silence before. And into that silence after a minute or two fell the rising song of a lark." It is Mrs. Formby who shows the nine-year-old Michael the way from the lark's song to music: she plays for him a recording of Ralph Vaughan Williams's "The Lark Ascending" and reads the lines from the poet George Meredith that inspired Vaughan Williams's composition; she takes him to his first concert, which he recalls years later in vivid detail, and becomes his first instructor on the violin.

Wiser than Michael seems to recognize, Mrs. Formby tries to act as a sustaining link between Michael and his roots, encouraging him to return to play in his home town, an invitation he finally accepts only after her death, when he plays a part of "The Lark Ascending" at her grave.

Unlike his relationship with Mrs. Formby, Michael's relationship with Carl Kaell is a vexed one, broken off suddenly with Michael's departure for London ten years earlier, but persisting unpleasantly in Michael's imagination. Underlying Michael's hostility toward Kaell is his sense that he has disappointed his teacher by failing to achieve the solo career of which the older man believed him capable. Michael appears to have suffered a breakdown during a concert in Vienna, for which he blames Kaell. "When I came apart at the concert," he recalls, "it was not because I had been ill, or because I had not prepared what I was playing. It was because he had said I would fail, and I could see him in the audience and knew he willed me to." A decade later, the gruff blessing Michael receives, in what probably his final letter from Kaell, is still more of an irritant than a balm: "I burn that this man still should claim the right to bless or blast what I may do or not." Kaell remains present in Michael's life as a bad memory, a bit of unfinished business that remains unfinished. Despite his overwhelming bitterness, though, Michael can still acknowledge that "If I had not met him I would not have brought to life the voice in my hands."

Julia McNicholl is the most fully developed character in the novel other than Michael, and because we see something of the life she leads and the difficulties she experiences beyond Michael's fairly limited scope, her presence in the novel serves to reveal him in a less than flattering light— to highlight his capacity for selfishness and cruelty. In the ten years since Michael's sudden departure from Vienna, Julia has married and had a child. She is also growing increasingly deaf, a condition that will end her career in the not too distant future.

Her deafness recalls that of Beethoven (to whom she alludes in her letter to Michael telling him of her impairment) and makes her another of this novel's suffering artists, along with Michael himself and also Piers, whose relationship with Alex, a founding member of the Maggiore, has left him so emotionally scarred that, years later, no one dares mention Alex's name in Piers's presence. Since she wishes to pursue her career for as long as possible, Julia's impairment is a carefully guarded secret—which does not prevent Michael from revealing it to Piers and thus to the London musical community in general almost immediately after he learns of it himself, dealing Julia a devastating blow. Nor is he very sympathetic to Julia's concerns about how their relationship will affect the lives of her husband and son. While his love for Julia is obviously genuine, his behavior toward her is frequently obsessive, selfish, and laced with cruelty. His fixation on his own need for her is so great that in the end he can barely see her need to be free of him.

Social Concerns

Vikram Seth's An Equal Music tells the story of a doomed love affair involving two professional musicians living and working in London. This setting allows readers a glimpse into a small and exclusive world that few of us will know and affords Seth an opportunity to consider the place of music in the lives of those who produce it, dwelling on the daily routines, struggles and negotiations that lie beneath the music the rest of us hear. More important, though, is the novel's consideration of the role music may play in all our lives, offering a means of experiencing a powerful, if only momentary, escape from the self into a joyful and communal experience.

The characters in the novel inhabit a very insular world—comprising, for the most part, other musicians, professional agents, critics, and audiences. The novel's central character, Michael Holme, is particularly self-absorbed. However, he appears to find in music a momentary release from the demons that haunt him.

Techniques

For the most part, Seth relies on the cluster of techniques we have come to call "realism." The characters, settings and situations are all presented in such a way that we might expect to encounter them in presentday London. However, the world of this novel is on occasion subtly and artfully distorted by a narrator whose perceptions and disclosures are not always entirely trustworthy. Michael's reliability is called into question by the fact that he appears far more troubled than he is willing or able to acknowledge much of the time. The man we meet as the novel opens is an emotionally stunted one, clinging to a numbing routine as a means of escape from his own tormented thoughts. Like some latter-day J. Alfred Prufrock, he measures out his life in croissants, returning each week to the same bakery to purchase seven, six of which are consigned to the freezer for the remaining days of the week. He takes solitary walks in Hyde Park to gaze into the Serpentine ("As yesterday, as the day before, I stand until I have lost my thoughts"). He persists in an affair with one of his students, Virginie, a woman he neither loves nor apparently cares very much about, because he simply cannot be bothered to end it. When the young woman in the bakery remarks, prompted by his perpetual humming, that he must be a happy man, Michael stares at the poor woman "with such incredulity that she looked down." The song, by Schubert, about a desperate man "who stares upwards/And wrings his hands from the force of his pain," is far more suggestive of Michael's emotional state than the woman could have discerned.

Considering the overwhelming impact his breakdown in Vienna has had on his life, it is remarkable how little he has examined its causes, choosing instead to refer vaguely to "the darkness" of this time, which remains, even to him, "inexplicable."

Clearly, though, his neurosis persists into the present in the form of his depression as well as the disturbing attacks he experiences. We see Michael have what appears to be a bout of claustrophobia while shopping with Julia. Later on he has some sort of panic attack during the intermission at one of the Maggiore's performances. Michael tends to downplay these incidents and probe them as little as possible, masking his problems with vague references to "the darkness" or "the interval," much to the frustration of Julia, who has suffered much as a result of one of Michael's earlier flights from his problems. He vigorously rejects the word "breakdown" and uses "depression" only once, but not even he actually believes that all is well. In the midst of his attack during the concert interval, as one of his colleagues is assuring onlookers that such a thing has never happened before, Michael acknowledges to himself that "it has happened, it is happening, it will happen."

It would seem, then, that Michael presents a carefully composed version of himself to the world, rather than appearing as the troubled figure he truly is. He remarks at one point to Julia that he enjoys reading John Donne, the poet from whom the novel's title derives, because, he says, "I find him relaxing late at night." Most readers familiar with Donne's often abstruse and challenging poetry would share Julia's bewilderment at this remark—which turns out to be untrue. Later, in the midst of his breakup with Helen, Michael explicitly avoids "the unsettled Donne," choosing instead "the sage

Wodehouse" to soothe his mind. Such deceptive self-revelations raise questions about the accuracy of his perceptions in general. It seems, for instance, that the largely unflattering picture we see of Kaell in the novel is distorted by Michael's antipathy toward him: both Julia and Wolf (another student acquaintance from the Vienna days) feel that Michael was unduly impatient with his teacher. Throughout, Seth provides us with just enough evidence of Michael's shortcomings as a narrator to suggest that we ought not to trust his account entirely, but rather to see it as the expression of a distressed man.

When Seth published A Suitable Boy in 1993, many of the book's reviewers commented on its very traditional nature, comparing it with the work of nineteenth-century novelists such as Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy, or with that of an early-twentiethcentury traditionalist like John Galsworthy.

An Equal Music too harkens back to conventions of what we have come to see as "traditional" narrative works, particularly in its use of coincidences as a plot device. Michael's ghosts are raised by a series of coincidences: as the Maggiore Quartet plans a trip to Vienna—his first since his sudden departure ten years earlier—he receives a letter from Carl Kaell, his first in years, and realizes that his former teacher is dying. At about the same time, he learns of a littleknown work by Beethoven, an arrangement for string quintet of an earlier piano trio that had been Julia's favorite piece. His pursuit of this piece of music leads him back to Julia herself: while seeking out a recording of the Beethoven quintet, he catches a glimpse of Julia in London's busiest thoroughfare, Oxford Street. Finally, Michael's awareness that he will soon be parted from his beloved Tononi violin (an extremely valuable instrument that Mrs. Formby will bequeath to her grand-nieces) conjures memories of his earliest, life-changing encounters with classical music under her guidance in the northern, working-class world of his youth.

Themes

The novel's central theme is suggested by its title, which Seth has taken from a sermon by the early seventeenth-century English poet and churchman John Donne.

A passage from the sermon, in which Donne describes the entry of the redeemed Christian soul into heaven, serves as the epigraph to the novel: And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, 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 hopes, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity.

Unlike Seth, Donne is speaking only indirectly of music. His "one equal music" is a metaphor for perfect peace, contentment, harmony, balance—a state to be attained in the heavenly realm, but only dreamt of by those bound to the earthly one.

In Seth's novel, music itself is the subject, and the focus is very much on this world, in which musical pieces have to be written, practiced, recorded, bought, and paid for.

However, the allusion to Donne's sermon is appropriate because An Equal Music also suggests that music offers needed sustenance to the mortal beings who engage in all these mundane activities that together bring music into our lives. Implicit in Donne's reference to "one equal light" and "one equal music" is the suggestion (informed by Platonism) that the many and unequal lights and musics of our world—visual art, music, poetry—afford glimmers of a perfection that exists elsewhere. In Seth's novel, music allows its players and listeners brief but splendid moments of transcendence and communion they cannot otherwise know. The novel's most intense and lyrical moments come during musical performances, such as this description by the narrator, Michael, of a performance by the Maggiore of a Haydn quartet: Our eyes are on our music; we hardly glance at each other, but we cue and are cued as if Haydn himself were our conductor. A strange composite being we are, not ourselves anymore but the Maggiore, composed of so many disjunct parts: chairs, stands, music, bows, instruments, musicians—sitting, standing, shifting, sounding—all to produce these complex vibrations that jog the inner ear, and through them the grey mass that says: joy; love; sorrow; beauty. And above us here in the apse the strange figure of a naked man surrounded by thorns and aspiring towards a grail of light, in front of us 540 half-seen beings intent on 540 different webs of sensation and cerebration and emotion, and through us the spirit of someone scribbling away in 1772 with the sharpened feather of a bird.

Seth emphasizes the pedestrian and material elements that come together in the moment of the performance—from the quill pen of the composer to the workings of the inner ear that permit the music to be heard and the brain cells that permit it to be responded to, but by doing so he manages to convey something of the marvelous nature of music, which must run this material course in order to exist, but which in the

moment of its making appears unbound to any physical thing. The whole—the created music—is vastly greater than the sum of the commonplace parts of which it is made.

Thus An Equal Music is a novel about music itself, but also about music as a means by which moments of harmony may be attained in a tumultuous world. The book is full of variously damaged and tormented individuals: the narrator, Michael Holme, is still very much in the grip of an emotional crisis that abruptly halted his studies in Vienna a decade earlier and parted him from the woman he loves; Julia, Michael's lost love, must contend with the encroaching deafness that will soon end her career as a concert pianist; Piers, another member of the Maggiore Quartet, has been left deeply scarred by a broken relationship with a founding member of the ensemble, Alex.

Paradoxically, music is presented in the novel as both the balm that soothes the pain of living and the product of that pain. For each of these individuals, their sometimes unhappy lives and the joyous music they make are inextricable from each other. Even the most shattering experience of Piers's life, his severed relationship with Alex, is bound up with one of the most positive, the founding of the Maggiore Quartet.

When Piers says of belonging to a quartet that "It has so many different tensions mixed in with its pleasures," then, he points out how those moments of pleasure are bought with days, weeks, months and years of often difficult endeavor—and the novel insists that neither pain and pleasure nor the material and the transcendent can be fully separated. Thus An Equal Music intersperses ecstatic moments of musical performance with the mundane business that must underlie such moments: long practices, dealings with agents, negotiations with record companies, encounters with overly enthusiastic fans, difficulties in juggling personal and professional responsibilities.

Michael values the Tononi violin he plays in the most idealistic fashion ("I love it and it loves me. We have grown to know each other. How can a stranger hold and sound what has been in my hands so long?"), yet he also knows that it is valued in less ideal terms by the market for rare instruments, which will place it beyond his means when its owner, Mrs. Formby, dies and bequeaths it to her grand-nieces. He knows, too, that as a working-class child who found his way into the world of classical music, he is in part an accident of history, the beneficiary of an educational system that has since lost the funding that made his early musical education possible. However heavenly the music he might make, it must always begin on the ground.

Adaptations

An abridged audio recording of An Equal Music read by Alan Bates is available from Bantam Books-Audio.

Key Questions

Discussions of An Equal Music are likely to center on Michael Holme himself—his largely unexamined anxieties and his struggle to cope with them—and on Julia's struggles with her growing deafness, with her conscience, and with Michael. Readers might also consider, though, what the minor characters in the novel contribute. How, for instance, do the other three members of the Maggiore compare with Michael? What are the circumstances of their lives, and how does music function for them? Also worthy of attention are Michael's remaining friends and family in Rochdale—not only Mrs. Formby, but Michael's father and Auntie Joan. What roles do they play? Finally, there is much to be said about Seth's portrayal of music as a kind of medicine for the sometimes painful business of living. Is it enough of a consolation? Will Michael eventually be simply happy?

1. In his review of An Equal Music in the New Yorker, David Denby says that while Michael "is meant to be a sympathetic example of egotism and romantic receptivity . . . one feels trapped in his melancholy self-absorbtion." Is Michael a sympathetic figure? Do you think Seth intended him to be such? Does the novel offer evidence to the contrary?

Does Michael love Julia, or is he merely obsessed by her?

2. Helen says at one point of musicians, "We're stunted. Totally stunted. Like athletes." Does the novel bear out this unflattering assessment about its musicians?

3. The novel ends with Michael's leaving Julia's performance of Bach's "The Art of the Fugue" during the intermission— with the piece only half-finished. Is this an appropriate ending to their relationship? Why or why not? Does the novel achieve a satisfactory degree of closure?

4. After her death, Mrs. Formby's nephew remarks that she gave her executor the address of Michael's family's butcher shop—the family home that was torn down years earlier, as she would have known perfectly well. The nephew takes this act as a sign of senility, but it would appear, on the contrary, that she is in command of her faculties and is sending Michael a message. What do you think she is hoping to tell him? Does he get the message?

5. Michael appears to be moving toward a resolution of his emotional crises by the end of the novel, but there is no sense of reconciliation with Carl Kaell. Why is this relationship apparently beyond redemption?

6. Robert Ross describes Piers as "a bitter and offensive homosexual who has lost his lover and whose characterization borders on the homophobic." Do you agree with this assessment? What function does Piers serve in the book?

7. Michael's membership in the madcap Water Serpents, who meet at dawn in Hyde Park to swim in the Serpentine, might seem at odds with his general character. Why does Seth make his narrator a Water Serpent?

8. During one of his visits to Rochdale, Michael's elderly Auntie Joan, an otherwise very minor figure in the novel, provides us with a glimpse into her character when she remarks, apparently out of the blue, that she never forgave Maggie Rice, a girl who tripped her up at the Whit Friday races when she was seven years old. What is the significance of this long-harboured resentment in the context of the novel as a whole? In what other ways is An Equal Music a novel about memory?

9. While Stanley Holme remains largely peripheral in the novel, Seth does devote some space to detailing the relationship between Michael and his father. How does the pattern of that relationship fit into the novel as a whole?

Literary Precedents

It has been said, famously, that "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture;" nonetheless, Seth is hardly the only writer to have attempted the dance. One of the more striking formal experiments in a novel noted for its formal experiments is the "Sirens" episode of James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), in which the novel's central character, Leopold Bloom, pauses in his wanderings through the streets of Dublin to lunch at the Ormond Hotel, where a few of his fellow Dubliners are gathered singing opera arias and Irish songs. The episode is densely packed with musical allusions, but, more remarkably, it attempts to mimic the very structure of a canon or fugue, so that the action unfolds according a logic that is more that of music than of conventional narrative fiction. Perhaps attempting to follow and even top Joyce is Anthony Burgess's 1974 novel Napoleon Symphony: A Novel in Four Movements, which is Burgess's attempt to give, in his own words, "symphonic shape to verbal narrative"—the shape being that of Beethoven's Eroica symphony, thought to have been dedicated originally to Napoleon. Responses to the book have been mixed (even Burgess himself has acknowledged that it was, from the start, a "mad idea") but it is, at the very least, a curious and ambitious experiment in musically-inspired narrative technique.

Related Titles

Vikram Seth has produced a remarkably diverse body of work over the past two decades. An Equal Music was preceded by four collections of poems and one volume of translations of Chinese poetry; a travel book (From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet, 1983); a children's book (Arion and the Dolphin, 1995); a novel in verse, set in contemporary San Francisco (The Golden Gate, 1986); and a novel set in northern India during the 1950s (A Suitable Boy, 1993)—a sprawling story of an arranged marriage among middle-class Indians that drew comparisons with the works of John Galsworthy and Jane Austen (and which has the distinction of being, at some 1,400 pages in length, the largest single-volume work published in English in nearly two and a half centuries).

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