CHAPTER IV
A CRITICAL STUDY OF AN EQUAL MUSIC

The Investigator in this chapter has undertaken a critical study of *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth. Regarding this work, Santwana Haldar, in the paper *A Parallel Structure of Love and Music* states that one is tempted to recall T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quarters* - the joint title of his four individual poems - *Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages and Little Cridding* - which referred to the different attitudes or moods harmonized into a whole (65).

Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* (1999), like *A Suitable Boy* (1993), is centered on an ill-fated love affair. “But if *A Suitable Boy* was a vast opera, *An Equal Music* is a sonata, sublime and melancholy” (Knorr, 1999). This is his music novel, “I have always loved music”, said Seth, “but I’ve tried not to write about it because I loved it so much I’ve always kept it as a kind of preserve. I was trained in Indian classical singing and I learned the tabla and a bit of Indian flute. But I turned to Western Music somewhat late. I did a bit of piano and cello but it’s pointless coming to it at the age I came to it. I have friends who are musicians. I probably have more friends who are musicians than literary people, especially in London.” *An Equal Music* focuses on music and passion, draped in European settings. Much of the story takes place in London, though Vienna and Venice become central as well. Through the eyes of musicians, the reader sees these tours as holy pilgrimages. The novel resonates with Seth’s precise details from the musical history of the cities to the large Campari sign on the isle of Lido, across Vienna from Venice to London.

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. “Seth’s novel is stunning by many accounts, not the least of which is its grafting of the twin bulwark of the European tradition-its verbal and aural inscriptions onto the life of its thirty something protagonists,” suggests Anjana Sharma. She continues, “Seth tells the story of a young man’s growth and
maturation—the loss and partial recovery, Pip-like, of his lost love, and the loss, and more certain recovery of his artistic self” (165).

The story is of Michael Holme, the self-tortured protagonist, butcher’s son from the bleak north of England and the second violinist of the London-based Maggiore Quarter. Michael appears to be curiously and permanently in mourning for his life, for Julia, a woman he deserted in Vienna ten years ago on an impulse and could never track down again, for the destroyed movie houses and the sinister parking lots of Rochdale, for youth and the musical careers that might have been, for the teacher he turned against and who is dying, for the benefactor who may be dying, for the precious Italian violin he doesn’t own and will never be able to buy. In his late 30s, Michael’s life is all music and at the same time all poetical tedium, gloomy walks through London, between rehearsals of the quartet, until he becomes a kind of high class stalker.

I play the line of the song; I play the leaps and plunges of the right hand of the piano, I am the trout, the angler, the brook, the observer. I sing the words, bobbing my constricted chin. The Tononi does not object. I am not transposing his strings quarters. Where a piano note is too low for the violin. It leaps into a higher octave. As it is, it is playing the songline an octave above its script. Now, if it were a viola…but it has been years since I played the viola.

The last time was when I was a student in Vienna ten years ago. I return there again and again and think: was I in error? Was I unseeing? Where was the balance of pain between the two of us? What I lost there I have never come to retrieving.

What happened to me so may years ago? Love or no love, I could not continue in that city. I stumbled, my mind jammed,

I felt the pressure of every breath. I told her I was going, and went.
For two months I could do nothing, not even write to her.

I came to London. The smog dispersed but too late. Where are you now, Julia, and am I not forgiven? (EM 5)

From the pat that Michael is trying desperately to forget surfaces Julia, the love of his life. Their relationship is rekindled by a chance sighting on a bus. Rather than a standard boy-meets-girl story, Seth expertly adds a few external themes to make it more interesting, and develops the characters well. “The novel sets the romance astride the tribulations of Michael’s career as a classical musician,” says Ashini Desai. But *An Equal Music* is not a romantic saga like *A Suitable Boy*. This is a serious and poignant love story. This is the story of Michael for whom music and Julia are an essential and inseparable part of his life. “It is also a story which reveals the “strange, precarious, obsessive, joyous and difficult life led by a professional musician; in this case, Michael, who plays second violin in the Maggiore Quarter, says Ann Skea. The narrative deals with Michael’s passionate relationship with his music, his deeply moving 12-year old attachment to his 270 year-old Carlo Tononi violin; and his intense love for a woman whom he loses twice over:

As for the one I remember, I see her with her eyes closed,

playing Bach to herself: an English suite. Gently her

fingers travel among the keys. Perhaps I move too

suddenly. The beloved eyes turn towards me. There

are so many beings here, occupied, pre-occupied. Let me

believe that she breaths, that she still exists, somewhere

on this chance sphere. (EM7)

Seth explains that if the idea for *A Suitable Boy* germinated from a shred of conversation, it was more of a visual image in “An Equal Music”. Walking
across a London Park on a very wet day, Seth and his companion Phillipe Honore, to whom he dedicates the book, see someone staring at his own image in the water of the Serpentine River in Hyde Park in Kensington Garden. As they wonder about the man, Philippe Honore suggests that he might be a musician, and thereby the idea for the novel took root:

Walking across a park in London on a very rainy day,

I saw someone looking at his image on the southern lake.

I had an inkling that this person would form an important part of my next book. But I did not know anything about his background. I was thinking about his background.

A friend of mine, Phillipe Honore, was walking along with me and I kept wondering why he was staring at the water for (EM 2).

That scene is how the novel begins. N.Vidyasagar commented this way on Vikram Seth. Nearly two decades ago, soon after he published his Tibet travelogue *From Heaven Lake* (1983), Vikram Seth was taken by his publisher to meet Nirad Chaudhari at Oxford. There was music playing when Seth entered Chaudhari’s living room, and Chaudhari asked Seth if he could identify the composer. As Vikram Seth recounts it, “I said, it sounds like Mozart. Nirad Chaudhari’s face lit up. The added, or perhaps Haydn.” “Music to me is deeper than speech,” remarks Seth in the author’s note at the end of the novel. He adds: “When I realised that I would be writing about it I was gripped with anxiety. Only slowly did I reconcile myself to the thought of it.” Anjana Sharma in relation to this says that “gripped with anxiety” is a curiously apposite and unfortunately apt phrase since *An Equal Music* is at heart an anxious book, one where the nerve-wrecked world of the key players spills over to create uneasiness in the reader’s own mind. An uneasiness generated in part only by the novel’s plot line—a dense layering of losses with very few
recoveries—because the narrative sweep and the subject choice leave the reader more than slightly uneasy with exactly what Seth was trying to do when he wove this story, wrote this novel”(165).

Seth’s passion for Western classical music—which dominates *An Equal Music*—is apparent in portions of his verse novel *The Golden Gate* (1986), just as sections of *A Suitable Boy* reveals his knowledge of Hindustani music. “I am an amateur,” says Seth, “but I did once while fairly young, study a bit of tabla, a bit of flute. I studied Khayal for a short while under Pandit Amarnath at Shri Ram Bharati Kala Kendra. But the problem was I could only visit India or about three months at a time as I was studying in England and America.” Western classical music came his way much later, while he was at university in England, “through musician friends who were very interested in composers like Bach and Beethoven.” His brush with his favorite Composer Schubert came later while he was struggling with the 1,400 page magnum opus, *A suitable Boy*.

In *An Equal Music*, with the magical world of Beethoven and Bach 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 (EM 26)

The book’s style demonstrates the remarkable case of poetry masquerading as prose. Right from the first lines itself, as one begins reading the book, the way the lines are written, brings to the mind a very famous baritone voice, drenched in love and longing, reflecting back about his lost beloved. The voice belongs to the famous Hindi film star Amitabh Bachchan
and the film, Yash Chopra’s Silsila, (1981) in which music and lyrics played such an integral role.

One suspects that much of the novel might have been composed first as poetry and then rearranged as prose:

These nights are cool, these days are bright with spring. The low green on the trees has spread right to their tops, and in the part the wide, clear sight that I so much loved of lake and low knoll through nets of bare twigs has been leafed out and curbed. The world is in bloom, and if I am irked or sad it is due to the sense, more strained with the drift of each day, that it is not mine to share. In a few days it will be May, and we will all be on that plane.(EM 207).

The title of the book, feels Makrand Paranjape, “in that sense, might refer to the equal music of Vikram Seth’s poetry and prose” (64). The author, on queried about the title of the book, has answered, from referring to the epigraph from Donne at the beginning to suggesting that the book had as much to do with equable as with equal. An Equal Music therefore is music which has attained perfection; and since “music is the food of love”, it plays a major role in a narrative of love lost and found and finally lost again. The book deals with perfect love, which is marked by balance, harmony, uniformity and tranquility. As Julia tells Michael, “making music and making love—it’s a bit too easy an equation” (EM 56).

Seth’s passion for music, his empathy with it and with the people who create and perform it, reflects through this book, making it totally different to anything else he has written. Michael is a complex, somewhat temperamental young man whose birthplace Rochdale, in the North of England, was once rich in orchestral and choral music. And, although music was never a part of his own parent’s lives, at the age of nine, Michael was taken by Mrs. Fromby to a performance of Handel’s Messiah. “More than anything else,” he reflects, “I wanted to be a part of that noise.” So, he immerses himself in music and with
borrowed instruments he takes a scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Later he gets an invitation to join a master-class at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, and amidst great opposition from his parents, he becomes a professional violinist.

We learn Michael’s story gradually as he goes about his daily routines of teaching, solitary practice and rehearsal, until he gets a fleeting glimpse of Julia-on a passing bus-whom he had once loved and left in Vienna and has been unable to find again since. The search for Julia, their meeting and its consequences, are woven into other larger themes. Music dominates both their lives, providing a counterpoint for every mood and action. And Seth keenly explores the strange dependence, and independence of the individuals involved in the Maggiore Quarter; the terrible dilemma of a musician who suffers almost total loss of hearing and the plight of musicians whose precarious income prevents them from ever owning the finest and the most beautiful of instruments and who, like Michael, may lose their much loved but borrowed instruments at any time. The action moves between London, Vienna and Venice but the real life of the novel is the music-music equated with love and both seen as forming the totality of life’s experience:

Every rehearsal of the Maggiore Quartet begins with a very plain, very slow three-octave scale and all four instruments in unison: sometimes major, as in our name sometimes minor, depending on the key of the first piece we are to play. No matter how fraught our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive our disputes about people or politics, or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it, it reminds us that we are, when it comes to it, one. We try not to look at each other when we play this scale; no one appears to lead. Even the first upbeat is merely breathed by Piers, not indicated by any movement of his head. When I play this I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will, I free my self. (EM 10).
Seth’s first real novel *A Suitable Boy* attracted a huge and enthusiastic public, most of whom had never set foot in India, but Seth writes first of all for the people who know the world he is talking about. “If musicians read *An Equal Music* and say, look, this isn’t really true or something, or you glamorized our world, then I would think that, no matter what glowing reviews I get from the general reader, I would feel that to some extent it’s failed artistically because it’s falsified. Because I tend to write realistic novels, I really think the clearest judgement would be obtained from them. I do not try to make things deliberately referential or obfuscating so the general reader can’t read it. It’s just that the truest judges are those whom I’m describing.”

Realism and reality played a curious part in the success of “A Suitable Boy”, as severe communal violence broke out in India around the time of its publication. When Seth was writing “A Suitable Boy”, the worst of it was yet to come, he said, “I was harking back to the 1950s, and then things had died down for about 20 years. I had no idea that what I was writing about—the attacks of temples and mosques—actually would take place two months before the book—while the book was actually being typeset. They said, how prescient you were, but I was not prescient at all. I never knew something like that was going to happen. Or else they said, you are piggybacking on what’s already happened, but I couldn’t have been blamed for that because it was already written”.

The novel is in the first person narrative, and Seth explains why he chose to write in this mode. First, he understood that it was “notoriously difficult to write about an acceptable art form in an expository way and therefore the only means to get into music through words was to describe the thoughts of someone actually a musician himself. The use of the first person narrative becomes a device to get the point of view of music through the point of view of a musician. Secondly, the idea of telling an intense love story in the first person held a greater appeal to him Kohli, commented in this way:
“The first person here is not the author’s first person. It is the protagonist’s and provides both nearness and distance to the writer to whatever he is narrating. Thirty-seven year old Michael Holden is a second violinist in an English quartet called the Maggiore. Besides playing in the quartet, Michael supplements his income by teaching the violin to a few music students, with one of whom he is having an affair. There is nothing in the relationship for Michael. It was more “through lust and loneliness…and laziness and lack of focus” (6).

Michael is still intensely in love with Julia. And is still desperately obsessed with the one situation connected to this—his own terrible frustrated passion. His passionately imaginative mind moved along in a gloomy haze and only by surrounding himself to the emotional extravagances of sensation could he play at all.

An echo of this nature of almost aggressive awareness can be seen in the writing of Charlotte Bronte—“Imagination is a strong restless faculty which claims to be heard and expressed; are we to be deaf to her cry and insensate to her struggles?’ Bronte’s romantic nature conceived the creative impulse as a demonic force that sways and dominates its possessor—“When authors write best” she argues in a letter to her publisher, or, at least, when they write most fluently, an influence seems to weaken in them which becomes their master, which will have its way—putting out of view all behest but its own, dictating certain words and insisting on their being used whether vehement or measured in their nature, moulding characters, giving unthought-of turns to incident, rejecting carefully, elaborated old ideas and suddenly creating and adopting new ones.

In Section 2.18 Michael relives the reasons for their break-up. While at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, he had an argument with his music professor over what he considered to be Carl Kall’s inflexible attitude towards his own style of playing. Julia accuses Michael of being unable to stand authority—“And God save your heroes if they turn out to have feet of clay” (EM 190). Michael
considers Julia’s defence of Kall as “an unbearable betrayal on her part” (EM 82). He walks out on her, drops his studies and returns to England, where he almost becomes a fugitive. In retrospect, he realizes that there was some truth in Julia’s accusation that he had been very “self-willed”, and unable “to sift a musician’s message from his playing, not his speech” (EM 16). Michael later concedes that “it was as much my younger self, unyielding, unwilling to exchange a mentor for a dictator, or to sidle past a collision” (EM 18). When he tries to renew contact with Julia, she refuses to call back or write, and he realizes that he has lost her through his sudden departure and long silence. He has to live for the next ten years with the painful burden of his loss and foolishness. His life settles down to “a bearable aloneness” only because of his music (EM 56).

In the opening section, Michael’s French girlfriend Virgine asserts that Beethoven had arranged one of his trios (Opus 1, No.3), which was Michael’s favorite, into a clarinet string quintet in C. Minor. Michael becomes determined to track down opus 104. This quest leads him to the library in Manchester where he is able to locate a miniature score. He is also able to locate a recording of the opus issued in 1977, under a Czech label. It is on his way back after this successful mission, that he suddenly spots Julia for a few fleeting moments in a passing bus on the opposite side of the road, reminiscent of a typical Hindi film scene from Bollywood. Exactly like our filmy hero, he pursues her bus in a taxi, but she is gone by the time he catches up with the bus. His passionate love for Julia, which time has failed to subside, is reflected when he sits “under the arrows of Eros, and weeps” (EM 43).

Julia re-enters Michael’s life and the narrative only towards the end of part two, at a performance by the Maggiore at Wigmore Hall “the sacred shoe-box of chamber music” (EM 86). Michael learns that she has been married to an American banker from Boston called James Hansen before nine years. They have a seven-year-old son, Luke. Their love, which apparently never died, is rekindled. But, only with their love affair already underway does Michael
discover that in the intervening decade she has fallen victim to a disease which has rendered her almost completely deaf. Despite her affliction, their romance and music-making both blossom. But, as expected, a time comes, when Julia’s situation becomes unsustainable, and she has to choose between her family and her lover, between ensemble music and a solo career.

“As always with Seth’s writing”, comments William Sutcliffe, “the pleasure is in the detail. His description of the awkward four way marriage behind a string quartet is at once enlightening and touching, teasing out the minutiae of the frustrations, joys and bitterness in four musicians’ entangled lives. Michael’s first suspicion that Julia has a hearing problem comes on page 142, yet, although this is the first dramatic pivot in the first half of the book, we only have to wait until page 149 before a full confirmation of this is given in a letter which gives an entire history of her medical condition” (73).

A quartet is a good subject for a novel, providing sufficient personalities and a piquant mixture of grind and art. The other layers are gay Piers, his disappointed sister Helen, and good-natured, latecomer Billy who likes chocolate biscuits and is in consequence, overweight:

Finally, after an hour and a half we arrive at the second movement. It is dark outside, and we are exhausted, as much with one another’s temperaments as with the music. But ours is an odd quadripartite marriage with six relationships, any of which, at given time, could be cordial or neutral or strained. The audiences who listen to us cannot imagine how earnest, how petulant, how accommodating, how willful is our quest for something beyond ourselves that we imagine with our separate spirits but are compelled to embody together.

Where is the harmony of spirit in all this, let alone sublimity? How are such mechanics, such stops and starts, such facile irreverence transmuted, in spite of our bickering selves, into musical gold? And yet often enough it is from such trivial beginnings that we arrive at an understanding of a work that
An Equal Music is smaller in size than Seth’s A Suitable Boy, but is still quite extensive. In fewer than 400 pages, the author offers us “exquisite complexities, personal and lyrical, while deftly fielding any fears that he has composed a Harlequin for highbrows.” During one emotional high, Michael tells Julia, “I don’t know how I’ve lived without you all these years, only to realize, how feeble and trite my words sound to me, as if they have been plucked out of some housewife fantasy.” In addition to the itch of its love story, one of the book’s joys lies in Seth’s creation of musical extremes. As the Maggiore rehearses, moving from criticizing and impatience to music and perfection, the author expertly notes the joys of collaboration, trust, affinity and creation. “It’s the weirdest thing, a quartet,” one member remarks, “I don’t know what to compare it to. A marriage? A firm? A platoon under fire? A self-regarding, self-destructive priesthood? It has so many different tensions mixed in with its pleasures.”

An Equal Music is a novel in which the length of Schubert’s Trout Quintet matters deeply, the discovery of a little-known Beethoven Opus is a miracle, and each instrument has its own being. Just as Michael can’t hope too possess Julia, he cannot even dream of owning his beloved Tononi, the violin he has long had only on loan. And it goes without saying that Vikram Seth knows how to tell a tale, keeping us guessing about everything from what the Quarter’s four-minute encore will be to what really occasioned Julia’s departure from Michael’s life, or was it in fact Michael who abandoned Julia?. As this love story ranges from London to Michael’s birthplace in the north of England to Vienna to Venice, few readers will remain deaf to its appeals”, suggests Kerry Fried (65).
Towards the end of part three, in a detailed letter to Michael, Julia explains that she is suffering from an auto-immune disease of the inner ear. This implies that the protective systems of her body are treating parts of the inner ear as hostile, and therefore destroying them. She is gradually going deaf with only lip-reading and hearing aids being her companions. But a time will come when the only music she will hear is the music in her mind. Julia has taught herself to watch the movements of other players and to play entirely from memory and imagination. She explains how her mental agony began three years ago and the tremendous support given to her by her husband James, who encouraged her to play again. “Music is the heart of my life. For me, of all people, to be betrayed by my ears was unbearable” (EM 150). Julia admits to Michael that she had been “so hungry to speak of music-and to play it with someone who understands me as I was before all these changes in my life(EM 137). Michael wonders; am I for her a static mark, a reversion to the days when music was for her an actual sense, not merely an imagined beauty” (EM 156).

Michael gets a book on deafness to understand Julia’s problem better. He makes his “first acquaintance with the elaborate chaos that lies behind the tiny drum-skins of my outer ears” (EM 156). Michael becomes increasingly aware of “a world mad with sound: forms rip, trams rumble past vibrating under foot, coffee-cups clink and over the murmur from the busy bar I can hear the peristaltic cranking of-is it a fax machine or teleprinter? What does Schubert make of these noises?” (EM 229). The plain and irony of a fine musician’s encroaching deafness is skillfully presented by Seth:

Voices in a score of languages surround us or, rather, me.

At night, when sight diminishes, sound should take over.

But of all this-the splashing of water against stone, the tweaking of a child’s balloon, wheels bumping down the
steps of a bridge, the flap of a pigeon’s wing, high heels
against the floor of the colonnade—what does she hear?

Perhaps the deep thrum of the engine of a vaporetto;
perhaps not even that. (EM 263)

But Julia cannot reconcile to living in a “dual world which chafe each other” (EM 168), and feels guilty about her acts of deception. She admits to her intense love for Michael but decides to forgo her love for her husband and son. Michael is her past, and she realizes that one cannot live in the past forever “I, of all people, who have a Before and an After, should have known that you can’t relive your life” (EM 325). She ends her relationship in part seven of the novel. “Her choice to opt for her dependable (though unmusical) businessman-husband James over the volatile and moody Michael, and her denunciation of passion for family and social order, is a thematic preoccupation once again repeated from “A Suitable Boy” and The Golden Gate, says Mala Pandurang. (157). Julia’s choice for stability as compared to passed reflects strains of Lata from Seth’s earlier magnum opus A suitable Boy. Lata in A Suitable Boy chose the stable and dependable Haresh rather than Kabir whom she truly loved because with Kabir she felt as if she was being whirled around in a whirlpool. Similarly Liz, in the The Golden Gate, chose a pragmatic Phil over a romantic John because she understood that in the game of life what will last is steady affection rather than a passionate, romantic love relationship. For Julia, James had stood by her—In the worst days when I could hardly recognize myself in the mirror, I saw in his eyes that I was myself. But in Michael’s presence, she becomes “restless and uncertain, afraid and guilty.

Two types of stability one, social and familial, and the other, mental and internal, are depicted in the novel. Also stressed again and again is the fact that attachment to love and music also leads to a sense of order and stability though of a different type, and An Equal Music, in spite of the individual’s sense of loneliness, suggests that.
In *An Equal Music*, Seth takes a conventional romantic plot and renders it new and compelling through the attractive clarity and precision of its prose. One of the most impressive aspects of the novel is the way in which it manages to convey music through Michael’s daily drama and battles as a member of a quarter. The reader is thrown into the lives, whims and chemistries of classical musicians. One would believe Seth himself has toured in a quartet to Venice and bid at auctions for violins. An incredible level of research has been undertaken, and Seth duly acknowledges the contributors. But Seth himself if modest about his musical abilities, yet the fact that he was commissioned to write a libretto, later published as Arion and the Dolphin (1994), for the English National Opera in 1994, suggests he is no novice. However in the book, there are several moments when intense discussions on Schumann and Bach become too tedious for us commoners. The bits of German splattered throughout become rather difficult to understand, where no proper translation is given:

A winter evening in the Wigmore Hall, the sacred shoe-box of chamber music. We have spent the last month practicing intensively for this night. The fare is simple-three classical quartets: Haydn’s opus 20 no. 6 in A major, my most beloved quartet; then the first of the six quartets that Mozart himself dedicated to Haydn, in G major; and finally, after the interval, Beethoven’s steeplechase-cum-marathon, the ethereal, joky, unpausing, miraculous, exhausting quartet in C sharp minor, which he composed a year before his death, and which, just as the score of the “Messiah” had consoled and delighted him on his deathbed, was to delight and console Schubert as he lay dying in the same city a year later.

Drying, undying, a dying fall, a rise: the waves of sound well around us even as we generate them: Helen and I at the heart and, to either side, Piers and Billy. Our eyes are on our music; we hardly glance at each other, but we cue and are cued as if Hadyn himself were our conductor. A strange composite being we are, not ourselves any more but the 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 1722 with the sharpened feather of a bird.

I love every part of the Haydn. It is a quartet that I can hear in any mood and can lay in any mood. The headlong happiness of the allegro; the lovely adagio where my small figures are like a counter-lyric to Piers’s song; the contrasting minuet and trio, each a mini cosmos, yet each contriving to sound unfinished; and the melodious, ungrandiose, various fugue-everything delights me. But the part I like best is where I do not play at all.

The trio really is a trio. Piers, Helen and Billy slide and stop away on their lowest strings, while I rest-intensely, intently. My Tononi is stilled. My bow lies across my lap. My eyes close. I am here and not here. A waking nap? A flight to the end of the galaxy and perhaps a couple of billion light-years beyond? A vacation, however short, from the presence of my too-present colleagues? Soberly, deeply. The melody grinds away, and now the minuet begins again. But I should be playing this, I think anxiously. It is the minuet. I should have rejoined the others, I should be playing again. And, oddly enough, I can hear myself playing. And yes, the fiddle is under my chin, and the bow is in my hand, and I am. (EM 86-87).

The title of the book is derived from one of John Donne’s sermons 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 commission and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity”
(epigraph to the text). John Carrey suggests that Donne’s phase of leave taking
“yields apt meaning” as it brings out the balance between the four instruments
that the quartet aim at, and the unheard music in Julia’s head matching the
sound of her playing. Three stories are braided in “An Equal Music”: thirty-
something Michael’s music, his doomed romance and his violin. First story
has Michael with his idiosyncrasies: wintry swims in the Serpentine, a frantic
search for a long forgotten chamber work by Beethoven, ruminations on the
Angel of Selfridges etc. The second story as mentioned earlier is the
inevitability of separation from Julia that is quite evident to the reader right
from the time the affair is resumed again.

But another separation that haunts Michael does not take place. He
despairs of living a life without his violin, lent to him by the rich widow, Mrs.
Fromby, but from the first mention, through all the worrying and visits to
banks, the reader knows that Michael will not be separated from his dear
Tononi. Mrs. Fromby who is a true lover of music will see to it that a valuable
instrument is left in the right hands, rather than let it waste away by giving it to
her nephew:

Mrs. Fromby:

I know you are dead and cannot read this. I wish

I had known of your stroke.

My life had shelved towards desolation. Thank you for not forgetting
me and for assuming though I did not visit, that

I had not forgotten you.

I will drive to Blackstone Edge at the right time each year.

I will take your violin with me whenever I come up north.

I never asked you where or from whom you bought it.

That history has ended with you.

What little I ever did for you is over, but what you have
done for me will last till I too go.

May something of your memory advise me, when I come
to die, into whose hands I should deliver it.

Both your friend and your fiddle thank you-from
soul and soundpost respectively.(EM 366-367)

The novel has a unique flavour—a strange pungent mingling of wild
romance and domestic realism, of cosmic music and local details. Seth is a
belated romantic who hails from no school, nor has any successive writer
produced a work of similar tang. The two chief characters are drawn with an
unforgettable poetic intensity. An Equal Music links an exciting and romantic
story to a sober and honest realism—a tragic story that ends with an Aristotelian
catharsis for all the players in the drama.

The book narrated in the urgent present, carefully constructed around
dialogue and nuances, is not about sharply constructed characters. For 379
pages the readers experience Michael’s panic attacks, his weeping fits, his
ecstatic performances, his self-doubt, his occasional burst of wit—but the man as
such is not really sketched in flesh and blood. The reader can only recall him
in association to his quartet, his wandering around London, his relationships
with women, his thoughts, his misgivings, etc. An Equal Music is recounted at
a different pitch than The Golden Gate and A Suitable Boy, says Mini Kapoor,
“Missing first the warmth that permeated Seth’s earlier books, the abundance
and the breathlessness. His prose has been pared down for exactness of lives at
a remove from fin de siecle hustle-bustle. Yet, something’s familiar about this
spare new cast: Seth continues to accord his characters a certain dignity that is
virtually extinct in modern writing. That’s what makes this world where a
man worries he will be jailed for stepping on the grass so attractive, so unreal”.

Candida McWilliam, in a fine essay in The Financial Times, says that
“the cruelty of fiction is that its organs may be in the right place, its
complexion excellent, but if it has not breath, it will not move. A Suitable Boy
did move. If one believes that works of art can embody the good, it was a
virtuous book, of enormous length but also of a blessed kind of quiet. It did
not clamour, therefore one paid attention, enjoying the surcease of babble and
garishness that had stirred much of the surface of sub-continental literatures in
English for sometime previously.” She continues, *The Golden Gate*, Seth’s
accomplished homage to Charles Johnston’s translation of *Eugene Onegin*,
was smug, but had every right to be. It caught California’s freedom in its
disciplined rhythms. Like its huge little brother, it withstands repeated
readings.” Seth’s new novel addresses itself to what the author, in an after-note,
says that he holds “dearer even than speech”, that is music. “With his
understanding silence, periods, rhythm and tempo and his obvious attention to
composition, he would seem a fine candidate for this challenge, to which
Proust is one of the few to rise successfully.”

Seth’s instinct for the strange and unfamiliar is quite apparent from the
way he has drawn Michael from the northern working class family. His father,
a butcher, possesses a cat and a television. Michael returns to the small town
of Rochdale on three occasions. His childhood experiences become important
because his desire to escape his past is largely responsible for his present
mental condition. His parents strive hard all day with the hope that their only
child will escape life in Rochdale by opting for higher studies. But, when
Michael is nine years old, Mrs.Fromby takes him to see a concert by “the small
and ailing Barbiolli”. Immensely impressed, Michael decides that “more than
anything else I want to be part of such a noise” (EM 67), and begs Mr.Fromby
to teach him to play the violin. His refusal to go for higher studies leaves his
parents “bewildered and betrayed” and “depraved of a happiness that they were
due” (EM 22). Instead, he goes to a music school in London and becomes a
part of a small, enclosed rarefied world of classical music. Meanwhile,
Rochdale becomes a victim to industrial planning, “it is a town with its heart
torn out” (EM 71). And Michael is determined to cut off links with the
“distressed and constrained ton” (EM 22), now that he has moved into “an
urbane world far outside his ken” (23). And yet he wonders why he mourns for
it so angrily (EM 72). “The warmth of the collective in “A Suitable Boy” has
given way, to the solitariness of the individual,” says Mala Panduarang:

It darkens above us during the quintet, as if the cells of life were dying.
In the skylight above, the grey grows duller, darker. The last glimmer of
the day is extinguished with the slow, grave trio, Noble, brooding,
sorrowful, it helps one bear the world, and all fear of what may come in
the sunless night.

These hands move as those hands moved on paper. This heart beats and
rests as that heart beat and rested. And these my ears. But did he never
hear this played: not once, ever?

Beloved Schubert, in your city I am adrift. I am consumed by past love;
it’s germs long embedded, half-contained, have grown virulent again.
There is no hope for me. I turned away our thousand nights ago, and the
path was closed in by trees and brambles.

I am eaten futile pity. I make too much of much. From one city of
shrunken power and lapsing music I travel now to another. Let there be
some change in my state. Or let me live in a zone where hope is not a
word.

How can I long for what I do not gasp? (242-243)

An Equal Music has been hailed by some reviewers as “the finest novel
about music ever written in English”. Narrated in the present tense by
Michael, the first half of the novel is almost magical, with its melancholic
evocations of London’s Hyde Park, and its descriptions of bracing Saturday-
morning swims in the filthy, freezing water of the Serpentine. Swimming also
leads to some of the odder scenes in An Equal Music, based on Seth’s own
experience as a member of the Serpentine swimming club: “You don’t want to
swallow too much of it, but if you did it wouldn’t kill you. But now we have to
sign all kinds of forms, how we won’t sue anyone if we die,” he said, laughing.
“In the summer, it’s a little-the-algae. It’s actually nicer in the winter, cold though it is. The only slight danger is not the ice but when the ice is just forming, because then you get those little silvers and shards that you can’t always see, and they can tear into you. I love swimming there, the back stroke.”

As in his earlier novel, The Golden Gate in An Equal Music also, there is not an Indian in sight. But Seth does not see this as an issue. All his books are different, one-offs, he says, though there is a sense in which An Equal Music is more of a departure, a risk even. Most of his previous works have been characterized by a wry, humorous, ironic third-person narrative that observes the action from a distance. An Equal Music is told in the first person and the playfulness of the earlier works, the wit and comedy and gentle mocking of the characters, is missing. “It makes for a curiously un-Seth-like book, a book that might disappoint,” says Brendan Bernherd. It would be interesting to note here that, what Bernhard says to be “curiously un-Seth like” might just be another dimension in Seth’s huge repertoire of writing.

But Seth is least bothered by anything. “I am ready or that.” In another interview he said, “I do read my reviews. I know the review you are referring to. It was written by a novelist who, of all people, should know that a first person narrative incorporates the tastes and dislikes of the so-called narrator, not of the novelist. I mean, it is like saying if someone rites an autobiography of a cat, they must have a tail….So I mean, here I am, I’ve written a libretto for a modern composer-not Michael, I, Vikram-written and composed for a modern composer, Alec Roth, wonderful composer and I don’t have any inbuilt prejudice” against modern music. It depends on what it is, really. I go by individual pieces and individual composers, and some I like and some I do not. As far as being a novella stretched out, you could say “A Suitable Boy” was a short story stretched out, or even a haiku. The only thing is, does it work? That’s eventually how one judges a work of art. It’s a very private communication between the writer and reader. If it does not work, the author
Michael is traumatized thinking about a life without his violin and
cannot tolerate the thought of it lying “unplayed, unloved and unspeaking”
(EM 56). With the impending loss of the violin playing in his mind, Michael
is almost on the verge of breaking down under the “ungiving pressure of
thoughts”. He is prone to “moments of dark panic” when things seem to be
stressed out (Such as the attack in Vienna at the Musikverein after the
performance of the Trout, 5.11). But there is a reason for his claustrophobia.
He explains these panic attacks are as a result of something that had happened
when he was a kid. On his sixth birthday, while playing a game of hide-and-
seek he had hid in a fridge. The door clicked shut behind him and he could not
get out until someone happened to come into the room and heard his frantic
screaming. He was rescued in a state of suffocated terror, and that is the reason
why even now he is terrified of a closed atmosphere, be it mental or physical.
And that is the sole reason why he lives where he does at Archangel Court, and
pays a mortgage beyond his income, a place which is way above the ground
level and which has nothing beyond it but the vast expanse of the sky and its
mysterious ways.

When Michael gets into a state of absolute despair, Mrs.Formby’s
solicitor informs Michael that she has bequeathed the Carlo Tononi, circa 1727,
to him. Michael can’t believe his good fortune. “It was lost to me, now is found” (EM 361). Filled with gratitude he asks the spirit of Mrs. Fromby, “What possessed you to repossess me of it, you who were close to death and lacked clear speech? Is it the violin alone you want to give me, or must learn some lesson from the world?” (EM 361). It brings him back to life again. He resumes his routine life and starts playing in an orchestra; learning to live in a “sexless calm” (EM 8.27). He stops behaving like “1 self-centered bastard”, and begins to hear the sound of music again “cracking, rippling, shifting, easing, cracking, sighing, this is not something I have heard before. It is a soft sound, easy, intimate” (EM 376). A few months later Piers re-invites him back to the Maggiore. But the real freedom comes, when on a visit home, he places a white rose on his mother’s grave and then as he plays the unfinished fugue from the Art of Fugue in memory of Mrs. Fromby, his soul is liberate from all bondage. “My hands are not cold, nor my mind agitated. I am in no dark tunnel but in the open moor”( EM 379). Michael’s relationship with his violin is ultimately the most satisfying and intimate one left for him.

A story of love lost, found, and then lost again, the novel ends with “an impassioned invocation of music-not time’s- power to heal all wounds-or at least to make them bearable.” 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 is an equal music” (EM 380). Michael walks away grateful for having had the privilege of hearing such excellent music. He reflects: “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” (EM 381).

Once Vikram Seth, while giving a talk at Seymour Centre of Sydney University, Australia, was asked by a woman in the audience, whether music was a substitute for love or religion for Michael. In answer Seth said, “The
remark that Michael makes about the controlling power of music is something that he needs as a philosophy, a refuge, relaxation and joy. He can’t quite understand the other more formal religion, or religion as deeply felt by Julia.” He again continued, “Music does take him out of himself, in an inexplicable way, and out of getting and spending (consumerism) and the selfishness that a spirit like him is prone to. I don’t think it’s meant as a high sounding sentence, I think basically he believes it. But is it true? That’s difficult to say. Is it enough to hear such music from day to day? Should one not search for happiness? Should one hope not to grieve? These are things that are very natural to our human state.”

L.K.Sharma suggests that the book will test the “English reader’s response to an Indian locating a story in the Hyde Park and peopling it with non-Indians. Vikram Seth writing about Mrs. Rupa Mehra and the English literary society of Calcutta was one thing but capturing the emotions of Julia or the functioning of the Maggiore quartet is another”(23). In response to a question if it was hard to write of English characters as an Indian or to get under “the skin of a character with a different cultural, background,” Seth replies that he couldn’t have done it, if he had not lived in England. He explains: “When you write about someone, you get the information you need. But even then there are only a number of cultures I can enter. I could not write about an Italian fisherman from the inside. I have to know the culture intimately myself. I’d been in England as an undergraduate; I lived there for a number of years… altogether about seven years in a staggered way. And I love western music. So it was not a completely foreign world” Mukherji opined this way. What we see here is that the difference is only superficial. There are basic similarities—the functioning of the mind that is both balanced and yet unbalanced.

For Seth, writing about diverse themes and diverse places is a challenge and an attraction in itself. “I know from an editor’s point of view or a publisher’s point of view it’s easier to slot me into a particular niche. But I
know that I would be bored unless I wrote a book that in some sense was a challenge. And this might mean I vary the form by writing a poem or a play or a novel. Or set the stories in different countries or write in the first person as opposed to the third or in the present tense as opposed to the part or a very long novel as opposed to a short one.”

But one form that Seth has used uniformly in all his three novels is the sonnet form. His affinity for this particular form is quite evident in all his works: “The particular sonnet form I used is a very interesting one. For a start, it’s a tetrameter rather than pentameter form, the rhyme scheme is quite complex, and certain rhymes have feminine endings in fixed places. The result of all this is that it kept me pretty interested as a form. I didn’t get bored with it. And since I owe that particular form to Pushkin, I thought I’d continue the homage in the next two novels I wrote, at least in the form of an acknowledgement or dedicatory poem at the beginning. Because other than those little poetic commonalities between three novels, there isn’t very much that links them.” The link is not through a particular form, it is in understanding, in approach and of attitude-exploring different dimensions of man’s living through complexities of life

“Seth’s artistic goals seem to mirror those of the Maggoire quartet who spurn modern music in favour of the ‘classic’ repertoire against the grain of fashion-obsessed music critics who ignore and patronize their work,” says William Sutcliffe. “Likewise”, he continues, “Seth’s approach to fiction is self consciously anti-modernist.” Although his masterpiece, *A Suitable Boy* was widely acclaimed, much of the critical praise was dampened by a feeling that he book was not quite “serious” and was a little Soap Operatic in tone. Some of this criticism, which could just as easily be leveled at *An Equal Music*, seemed to “stem from the curious belief that clear, unfussy prose is somehow not “heavyweight”. While the baroque, flashy contortions of Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, John Lanchester and the like are regularly slobbered over by literary prize juries, writers like Seth-who's poetry is clarity-are
inevitably passed over. The Arthur Rubinstein, who make it look difficult, are held in higher esteem than the Alfred Brendels, who make it look effortless. The New York Times in one of its reviews greatly eulogizes Seth’s clear style. “He was rightly praised for the fine detail, clear voice and witty style that marked The Golden Gate, and only wishes he had infused An Equal Music with more of those same qualities”.

In the contemporary Indian English literary scenario, the author with whom Seth has always been compared with is Salman Rushdie. There are wannabes aplenty, but these two remain the two most suitable boys of Indian English Literature. The comparison and the competition, in the media, has been more intense, particularly after Rushdie’s book, The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999), got published, around the same time as An Equal Music. Since both books traverse the territory of music, the discordant notes played in the media have been quite jarring. Seth on being queried about this strange coincidence and whether he was worried by the whole thing said, “I didn’t even know he was writing The Ground Beneath Her Feet until we were both in the course of publication. I cannot speak for him, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he did not know either. So there was no way one could avoid it. Anyway, how could he write about classical music unless he was impelled to? And how could I write about rock unless it came from within me?...The idea of our divvying up the field is pretty absurd. Love is a huge subject, music is a huge subject, and the fact that two writers from the same part of the world happen to be writing about it at the same time is not surprising. If we were both Icelandic poets writing verse sagas about the cravat, or the cummerbund, then one might suspect something was going on!”

In a brilliantly penned review, in The Sunday Times of India, April 11th, 1999, Jyotirmaya Sharma suggests that to argue that both The Ground Beneath Her Feet and An Equal Music are about music is to suggest that there is a direct link between Mick Jagger and Bach, or, that Baba Sehgal and K.L.Sehgal are one and the same thing. He opines that “Rushdie’s novel has
the dazzling exuberance, the verbose vanity, the inflated meanderings, and the
cry of confessional anguish that characteristics much of his work. Rushdie
inaugurated the arrival of a new form, an entirely different literary style which
was welcomed by the literati like the appearance of a new comet. The triumph
of the new genre lay in its ability to shock, question the sacred and re-evaluate
values.” In contrast, Vikram Seth’s novel restores one’s faith in the fictional
form. It is a book written with “a bone-bleached economy of expression and
emotion”. As the novel progresses it implores the reader into a “lucid silence”.
There is a “somber magic, a bracing, energizing after-glow that emanates from
its pages.”

*An Equal Music* places Seth in a tradition of modern fiction writers who
have successfully combined a love story and the love of music as part of their
narratives. “Seth’s attempt goes beyond James Hamilton Paterson’s brilliant
but ultimately flawed *Gerontius* (24), but compares extremely favourably with
the novels of Thomas Bernhard”, suggests Jyotirmaya Sharma. Seth’s victory
lies in his ability to create and sustain characters that have no direct relation to
the author’s cultural connections. Hopefully, it marks the beginning of the end
of the expatriate Indian writer’s continuous search for roots and infinite debates
on the impossibility of home coming. This novel announces the ascent of the
self-possessed Indian who rises above the narrow outlook generated by the
modern nation state, yet is deeply immersed in a classical structure. “When
this becomes possible, an appreciation of Bach’s fugues and a Dhrupad aalap at
the same time becomes a reality, without necessarily suggesting a cultural sell-
out. It is a tantalizing thought whether Seth’s achievement is in large measure
due to the love story of Julia McNicholl and Michael Holme in the boo. When
all the narrow walls built by nations and territories collapse, all that will remain
of us is love,” continues Sharma.

Yet still, there are a few dissenting voices among Indians also regarding
this freedom from cultural influences; “Vikram Seth deserves the hype he has
received. There is a compelling lucidity and simplicity in his writing, which is
the hallmark of a greater writer. However, I am sometimes surprised at his ability to write books which have nothing to do with India. I am uncomfortable with this degree of cultural autonomy” Pavan Kumar Varma, bureaucrat-writer in *The Sunday Times* of India, April 11th, 1999 says so. But those types of comments have been very few and far between.

Seth, on being asked about his readers, has said: “It is certainly true that every book has certain ideal readers and certain less ideal readers. And then the general reader who may or may not take to a book” Kohli describes so. Seth accepts that the world of chamber music in *An Equal Music* is a world much different in degree than that of Ustaad Khan teaching Malati a raga in “A Suitable Boy”. “It is actually a situation where you gain and you lose certain readers. There were large chunks and sections in *A Suitable Boy*, which would have been totally incomprehensible to the Western reader. So there is nothing really that can be done about it”. Mann Kapoor in *A Suitable Boy* has heard western classical music, somewhere around three times in his life. He tells Sandeep Lahiri, the SDO of Rudhia, that most people he know would not enjoy it. Lahiri disagrees: “I feel they would. Good music is good music. It is a question of exposure, I feel. Exposure and a little bit of guidance” (ASB 624).

In any work of art it is the variety which matters. Variety and the capacity to sustain variety are both a virtue and power. Seth shows both.

Seth, on the issue of large readership, has said; “A large readership is important. I never expected to get it. I did not write any of the books with that in mind. I do not know what I attribute the popularity to. I suppose I’d have to say, going by the letters I get from readers; it’s the characters in the story. I don’t have a patron or independent means, so it does matter that the books sell. On the other hand, I wouldn’t change a comma in order to get extra readership. The fact is, none of the books have been predictable sellers, and in addition to those books, I’ve written books of poetry and translation which certainly would not enable me to earn my keep.”
“My programme now has a playback setting for piano called expressivo—a few controlled irregularities, and you can hardly tell it’s a computer that’s playing, not a human being. Soon they will perfect it, and you won’t be able to tell. Performers will be redundant for all practical purposes,” says Michael Holme’s colleague on the Maggiore quartet as they go through their warm-up rituals at a practice session. “Nothing could be more out of beat with Vikram Seth’s book than this horrifying vision,” comments Mini Kapoor. “In our cyber age when computers already read out, in a range of accounts but without inflection, lengthy texts and millions of netizens type their way through a hectic social life, it details lives on the periphery, lives that beat to an older rhythm, lives that are calibrated on an alternative scale of human sensitivities and sensibilities.”

Unlike The Golden Gate, which looked at a specific defining moment in contemporary American culture, there is no distancing of the writer from the host society in An Equal Music. Interestingly, An Equal Music has been received much more positively in India than did A Suitable Boy. Almost all the newspapers were vehement in their criticism of the Booker people when it was learnt that An Equal Music did not figure in the final list of shortlisted writers:”…where would Vikram Seth figure in this scheme of things. An Equal Music with its poignant love story between Michael and Julia set against London and Austria hardly throws open a colonial wonderland. So what if critics have hailed it as wonder work: irresistible, tense, deeply moving” (The Times of India, April, 1999). Seth received the Crosswords Prize for best fiction for 1999, and Shobha De has even praised the novel as “a masterpiece” in “The Sunday Observer”, April 1999.

David Davidar claims that unlike most writers of Indian origin, Seth is very honest about his work. He writes only what he believes in, instead of relying on time-tested formulas. Seth has been lauded for “being honest enough to follow his inspiration and to opt for the universality and transcending power of the beauty of music”. For example, namita Gokhle argues that Vikram Seth
“is international and should be appreciated as a writer about human beings, not as a peddler of Indian exotica… Deeply rooted in his specific Indian identity, Vikram Seth is yet a citizen of the world in the best sense…His genius should be evaluated in his control over his material, and in creating a credible world-in-itself which he can cohabit and explore”.

Several of the comments by the critics about the novel can be used on the jacket. “Seth gives the fullest portrait I have ever read in fiction of a musician’s relationship to his music,” says one. Another comment: *An Equal Music* is that most delicate of creatures: a narrative with, at its core, the passion of an art form that lives outside language.” An yet another finds that the book “pleases most in the ravishing refinement of its technique, its sure placing of scenes, and the unerring truth of its portrayal of a small, enclosed social world.” Shyam Benegal, the film-maker, is enamoured by Seth’s “great urbane quality and his incredibly wry sense of humour”, while Mahesh Dattani, playwright, holds Seth in high esteem because he loves “the poetry inherent in his prose” (The Sunday Times of India, April 11th, 1999).

A tour de force of lyrical and emotive writing, *An Equal Music* is an unforgettable tale of love, lost and nearly regained, its events unfolding in the dramatic settings of contemporary London, Vienna, and Venice. Brilliantly interweaving themes of loss, longing, and power of music, Vikram Seth has created a deeply moving story about the strands of passion that run through all our lives. The novel, which portrays wrenching loss, also finds similar echoes in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992), and Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1999), stories where the lovers also find it impossible to be together. Yet, there is something ultimately satisfying in reading about such intense emotion, even if the story ends tragically. Arthur Golden, author of *Memories of Geisha* (1997), has this to say about *An Equal Music*: “Vikram Seth’s accomplishment in bringing not only these characters so fully to life, but the rich ambience of the music as well-so difficult to render in world-is something of a miracle.”
His first novel, *The Golden Gate*, written in a sequence of sonnets, is applauded as a technical triumph, the form of ‘Sonnet’ having been perfectly utilized for conveying the sustained sequentiality, speed, elegance, wit and depth of insight. Vikram Seth is also known as a sharp-tongued social critic. *An Equal Music* is, however, a deviation from his previous novels, both in theme and in technique, Love and music are the two operating themes in the novel which run simultaneously and sometimes merge with each other, yielding a perfect equilibrium. The structure of the novel- it is divided into eight parts and several subparts- is based on a musical pattern that demands a thorough knowledge of the history, range and structure of music. The chapters are marked like musical scoresheets: 1.8-4.19-7.25 etc. And the eight parts of the novel may correspond to the eight tones in the Octave. In the Author’s Note, Vikram Seth expresses his love of music and his anxiety to write a novel about music.

Vikram Seth had the privilege to be initiated into classical music in his formative days. His ‘guru’ Pandit Amrnath was a disciple of Ustad Amir Khan, the great Maestro of Hindustani Classical Music. Later he had the opportunity to delve deep into the intricacies of Western Classical music and his emotional attachment to the world of music increased to its farthest limit. *An Equal Music* displays, in the true sense, a world of music, where the characters, mostly musicians, are found humming the tune or the ‘half-tuneless tune’ of one of the masters like Schubert, Mozart, Haydn, Brahms, Bach and Beethoven. The bliss of this world is suggested in the lines from John Donne quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of the novel. The strong power of Donne’s imagination, coupled with this serene state blessed with ‘equal light’, ‘equal music’ and ‘equal eternity’. The choice of these lines as the motto of the novel reveals Vikram Seth’s psychological insight as well.