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Musical narrativities: Symbolising intertextualities
and the musical characterization of the Tragic
Hero in “An Equal Music” by Vikram Seth

Autor/es

JAVIER CEBOLLADA DESENTRE

Director/es

JOSE ÁNGEL GARCÍA LANDA

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
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The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999) by putting emphasis on the musical and literary figures through the narrative as a whole, focusing on exploring and defining the musical and literary intertextuality within the novel as well as the symbolism that emerges from some of these elements. Besides, throughout this analysis, the tragic hero's portrayal of his identity as a character by means of musical associations will be reinforced. Hence, the paper proposes an analysis of the intersection between two arts within this fictional novel that deals with music in a highly detailed and realistic way. The alterity of these arts explored, music and literature, not only gives rise to a reconsidering and redrawing of boundaries but also examines in a broader sense the position and functions of these arts along with their power in confronting individuals' inner conflicts. In terms of structuring my analysis, an introduction will be first presented divided in two sections. In the first part a recent inter-discipline of research will be exposed concerning music and literature, and in the second part an attempt to define some of the similarities of these 'two-fields-in-one', Musicology and Literature, will be carried out. A general view of the author and his literary production will be presented in the second part, stating some author's thoughts of criticism towards the particular novel to deal with, *An Equal Music*. In consonance with this, I must highlight that the choice for exploring and analysing Seth's novel is due to the amount and experiential variety of musical content within the novel, and the fact that surprised me the most: the author's achievement in expressing one art form, Music, through the medium of another, Literature; that is, putting music into words. Following the introduction, in the core part of the paper the musical and literary figures will be analysed in depth regarding the symbolic and intertextual references together with the Tragic Hero's portrayal through musical associations. The last part of the paper

will comprise conclusions, where the most relevant aspects previously analysed will be remarked and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between music and language is of fundamental interest to the joint study of music and literature. It is on the limits of these two areas that a new field of research has started to grow during the last decades; a new discipline, better known as Musico-Literary studies, that crosses boundaries between these two different fields. Yet, this is a topic of very much controversy that would require of further discussion due to the fact that has not been settled down yet by academics, and the purpose of making emphasis in the existence of this musico-literary intermediality is limited on this paper; This is defined as intermediality, in terms of dealing with two different fields of study, in which Music and Literature barriers are somehow crossed over and there is a transgression in which both fields are studied at once¹.

It must be mentioned that this new discipline is being dealt with by academics in the areas of Musicology as well as of Literature². ‘From the 1970s onward, a number of musicologists have explored relationships between classical instrumental music and narrative’ (Maus 466), such relations have been present during the last four centuries in the presence of program music, from Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*, in which there are inscriptions within the score describing birds, passing through Edvard Grieg’s *Peer Gynt Suites*, such as “Morning Mood”, evoking an atmosphere in which someone is waking up in the morning of a sunny day, to Vaughan William’s *The Lark Ascending*, another piece of music portraying an impression of this bird’s song and flight.

¹ Werner Wolf’s explanation in Appendix A. Excerpt taken from Werner Wolf’s ‘Musicalized Fiction and Intermediality’.

² For a further discussion in this topic, see Werner Wolf’s article on “The relevance of mediality and intermediality to academic studies of English literature”.

Notwithstanding, what this paper is going to deal with is not program music, but the general reference and allusions to music and its specific references from some real pieces of music within the novel of Vikram Seth, that is, 'verbal music'.

Regarding the similarities and analogies as a way of crossing boundaries, Maus explores in his *Music as Narrative* the idea of music, involving events in a regular order and the existence of musical plots in the following way:

In order to think about relations between literary narrative and classic or romantic instrumental music, one might draw on the study of plot structure or narrative syntax.[...] The Sonata form includes an "Introduction" - "First group" - "Transition" - "Second group" - "Closing group" and so on; some members of the succession are optional, some are not.[...] In the art of music, as in life, motion toward the goal encounters obstacles, reverses, disappointments, and involves great distances, detours, expansions, interpolations, and, in short, retardations of all kinds (3-4).

As this suggests, there is a similar pattern of structure and a logical order. In addition, he continues:

Listeners can hear musical successions as story-like because they can find something like actions, thoughts, and characters in music. [...] Musical events can be regarded as characters, or as gestures, assertions, responses, resolutions, goal- directed motions, references, and so on. Once they are so regarded, it is easy to regard successions of musical events as forming something like a story, in which these characters and actions go together to form something like a plot (6-7).

The allusion to a character-comparison is obvious in Maus's account, and he goes further to claim that the series of events involved in instrumental music should be

treated as behavioural events or actions, so if one ‘begins thinking of musical sounds as actions, rather than just events, the notion of plot or narrative is close at hand’ (7). Regarding this perspective, I suggest to pay attention to the similarity between the function of the receivers, both listener and reader. In the same way a listener experiences a sound as music, through a system of communicative conventions, situations, and genres, the reader will experience words as literature, leading to a comparison between a musical structure of sounds and a story. Moreover, the apparition of characters for the reader is very similar to the apparition of different themes and contrasts within the listener’s mind, and in both cases this will lead to an expression of feelings by means of these devices.

Seaton reinforces Maus’s idea with the following statement:

A musical work can satisfy the two requirements of narrative that transcend artistic medium: plot and voice. Plot is established in instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the definition of character through rhythmic / melodic identities and the articulation of action through harmonic patterns of stability, rising tension, climax, resolution, and denouement. Voice—the narrative persona—is created in various ways, sometimes embodied in musical forms but often, too, in verbal cues, in musical behaviors surrounding the performance and hearing of a work, or in reception (66).

However, there are analogies that differ from music to literature. This is the case of focalization, in which Meelberg suggests that, while the focalization in a literary work is always the same in every reading of the narrative -though it can be interpreted differently by readers, the representation will remain the same-, the focalization in music and the listener’s interpretation will always change with every performance, since there are never two identical performances and therefore different interpretations

as well as focalizations within the same musical work may well occur. ‘As a result, one cannot speak in musical narratology of different performances of the same musical narrative’ and ‘each performance of the same musical piece has to be regarded as a new musical narrative’ (257). So as to put an example, the focalisation of a dramatic text or musical script of a piece of opera from which the opera soloists are based on to perform it afterwards, is always going to be the same, there is one story and a set of guidelines written on the paper, with a determined focalisation. However, when it comes to the performance of that dramatic text, there will be variations in the way the opera soloists perform it, since each soloist has its own particularities, and therefore, the performance is always to be different as well as the musical narrative and the focalisation of each performance will change, even if the change is very slight. Notwithstanding, problems through the narrative might be found depending on whether the pieces of music represented in the novel are known to the readership or by contrast are something totally alien to them.

Amongst Seth’s most celebrated novels, one encounters *The Golden Gate* (1986), the first of his novels, structured in a more than curious sonnet form, and set in California; *A Suitable Boy* (1993), Seth’s longest novel, comprised of 1349 pages, and mentioned by the British Council as the longest novel ever written in English; *An Equal Music* (1999) follows, being currently his last novel but not for a long period of time, soon followed by *A Suitable Girl*, the prequel of his 1993 work, as the author has expressed in several interviews.

Comparing *An Equal Music* with Seth’s former works, the reader is able to identify just one particular element in common to the three novels, a link through his works, presented in the figure of the sonnet. From its sonnet-structured *The Golden Gate* to the introductory sonnets in both novels *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*, this

is the only element relating one novel to another. On the contrary, taking into account that the author has travelled and lived in so many different locations such as China, the United States, England and India, one perceives a sense of transcending national barriers and profound knowledge of different cultures. In fact, this multicultural facet of an author that has the ability to set a novel in completely different and cultural backgrounds makes him go beyond cross-cultural barriers and be described as ‘a linguistic chameleon’, jumping from American slang in *The Golden Gate* to British English in *An Equal Music* (Heydari 83).

Hazarika and Vinai have claimed that, in these writings, Seth ‘focuses on different cultures and not on the aspect of creating a national identity’ (88). Referring to the European legacy through the settings and the musical compositions of the most relevant European composers such as Haydn, Mozart, Bach or Beethoven in *An Equal Music*, has caused Seth to be pointed as an “Eurocentric” (Mokashi-Punekar 173). Hazarika and Vinai explain in historic terms this criticism by stating:

During the time of independence there was a need for the Indian writers to show their nationalism and inform the West about their Indian culture so as to present the actual picture of the country and not as the exotic land it was depicted to be by the West (88).

In contrast, Seth's representation of a European world through classical music is the reason why ‘some critics were rather puzzled to read a novel by an Indian writer utterly devoted to the exaltation of Western music’ (Albertazzi 104). Yet, Seth’s response in an interview states:

I am ready for that [...] 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 writes an autobiography of a cat, they must have a tail [...] It's a very private communication between the writer and reader. If it does not work, the author can excuse himself as much as he likes, it's completely irrelevant. And if it does work, the critic can carp as much as he likes. It's equally irrelevant ('L.A. Weekly').

This could not be better expressed than Heydari's words do, '*An Equal Music* shows that the problem of the affiliations of a writer like Vikram Seth is too complex to be summed up in simple dichotomies like home and abroad' (90). Afterwards, the fact that Vikram Seth received after publishing *An Equal Music* the EMMA (BT Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award) for Best Book/Novel in 2001 is not a surprise at all (*The British Council*). But Seth's being such a global and cosmopolitan writer has its drawbacks as well as its merits. One particular drawback suggested is the fact that being so world-wide in range, Seth's work does not reach to every reader from an intellectual point of view, that is, a majority of the readership will just see the surface of Seth's works without being able to delve into the inner and most intimate messages of the author. Discussing Seth's novel only just as a tragic love story implies a concealment of a hidden musical and emotional world that at first sight the common reader may not realise. In fact, Gupta reaffirms,

Music usurps love's place as the driving force that pulls the reader along irresistibly, for *An Equal Music* is a meticulously researched, highly allusive text that stuns as one realizes the depth of resources at Seth's command (78).

It is not rare then to address Vikram Seth in some way as an author who writes for a limited audience, given the barriers put to the reader. This implies looking at two different types of readers. On the one hand, the flat readers, in the sense that they read it as a simple story, a story of love, drama and emotions through the point of view of Michael, a musician himself. For these readers the musical passages have no value, they are musical excerpts from the novel than don't evoke anything more than Michael's feelings towards it and his love. In contrast, the implied and informed readers will delve not only into that love story, but will also be able to identify all the literary and musical allusions made by the author, elements whose function is on one level or another hard to identify without having a previous knowledge. To support this idea I rely on Albertazzi's statement where she takes Seth as an author who 'seems to address his work to the happy few who share his sophisticated knowledge of European culture' (108). A clarification of an ideal reader is stated as one 'who is familiar with the musical works in question and is therefore able to "read" the intermedial references', in other words, a reader who 'upon reading a reference to a piece, for example, *The Lark Ascending* by Vaughan Williams, is able, aurally (internally), to recall the musical work in question' (Hooper 13), this is, in Kristeva's words, one who has the ability to put "the passage from one sign system to another" (59). However, it should be noted that in particular this piece is inspired not just by larks but more specifically by a poem of that title by George Meredith, so the involvement of music and literature is even closer here, since the poem was inspired by means of music and here the piece of music is partially inspired by means of literature.

Thereupon, having a closer and in-depth reading of the novel would be suggested so that the reader may be able to identify what the musical and literary figures are, contributing to its symbolism and intertextuality.

SYMBOLISING INTERTEXTUALITIES

By means of stretching the scope, my purpose in this part is to show and analyse in depth a series of musical and intertextual references throughout the novel. The purpose in studying the symbolism and intertextuality that arise in *An Equal Music* is to favour a thorough analysis and comprehension by the reader. Amongst the references to deal with, some relevant characters, influences and musical works will merge. Some of these are: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the Dickensian influence, Michael, protagonist and tragic hero of the novel, Julia (Michel's love), the Quartet, some musical pieces, with *The Art of Fugue* amongst others, and finally the title of the novel. These elements will be analysed in an attempt to convey a meaningful significance to the novel. In addition, it should be noted that these examples belong to a western literary canon, as it will be mentioned below.

An Equal Music is in its most general approach a mirror to the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In it, Orpheus's love, Eurydice, dies on their wedding day of a snake bite. Refusing to accept his lover's death, Orpheus, a great musician himself, decides to go down into the underworld, where thanks to his musical talents he persuades Hades to give Eurydice back to him. In return, they come to a deal, in which Orpheus is tested to prove his unconditional love for his bride and to prove trust in Hades as well. Not being able to stick to the deal, on his way back to the human world Orpheus is overwhelmed by anxiety and looks back to make sure that Eurydice is following him. By doing so, the deal is broken so Eurydice is taken back to the underworld and Orpheus then loses her forever.

This resemblance with the love story in *An Equal Music* is quite obvious. Taking into account that both tragic heroes, Orpheus and Michael, are musicians, the two stories are about a sudden loss of their beloved ones, as well as a pursuit to find them

again, concluding in a failed attempt to take them back and a consequently result of anguish and affliction of the tragic hero. These similar ideas are shared by some authors such as Gupta, who maintains that ‘*An Equal Music* reiterates this parable of love lost and almost regained by the power of music, the desperate bid to revive a dead romance against all odds, the subsequent anguish of heartbreak, and the agonies of accepting loss’ (77). In fact, being Julia the Eurydice of Michael’s love, some authors ‘believe that this name is not just a matter of preference and deafness not just a matter of tension’ (Cvitanic 24). It is not a mere coincidence for the name given by Vikram Seth to Michael’s love. In this sense, Cvitanic continues drawing a parallel with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*:

To be more exact, after the lovers found their love (at the concert and at the ball), they lost it (Michael left Vienna because of his own will; Romeo was exiled from Verona because of the Prince’s order) and they found it again (Michael sees Julia on a bus and after a while Julia attends the concert Michael is playing in- a similar event to the one when they first met; Romeo secretly spent the night with Juliet in her chamber- in the same house they first met) but lost it once more (Michael and Julia’s love ends because of her family; however, they never stop loving each other; Romeo and Juliet’s love ends because of their families and mainly with their death). Even though both Julia and Juliet sacrificed their lives and themselves at some point of the story it seems that love did not survive (24).

Besides, it is through this female character that the author pays tribute to Ludwig Van Beethoven, one of the greatest classical European composers within the western classical cannon represented in the text, by exploring the problem of deafness in an individual whose life has always been devoted to music. ‘Music is the heart of my life.

For me, of all people, to be betrayed by my ears was unbearable [...] How could I imagine that I was going deaf in my twenties!’ (Seth 191)³. As it is seen through Julia’s words, going deaf in her twenties indicates a connection to Beethoven, who went deaf at the age of twenty eight. This is not just exhibited as a mere fact but explored in detail, with passages in which the reader is able to explore Julia’s character even in terms of psychology: ‘It was a strange transition from the world of sound to the world of deafness (...) I was so afraid to lose my music...’ (AEM 193) In fact, it is Julia herself who alludes to Beethoven when telling Michael about her deafness: ‘But let’s not talk of Beethoven’ (AEM 195). Both the novel’s pianist and the classical composer went through and succeeded in a way or another. It is well-known that deafness, even when Beethoven was completely deaf, did not stop him from composing, conducting or performing music. Likewise, after Julia’s deafness is made public, concert tickets for her piano performances are sold out.

As mentioned previously, there is an introductory poem at the beginning of the novel “*for Philippe Honoré*”. This is an acrostic sonnet⁴, which is intended to be a sign of gratitude towards him for inspiration. Thus, digging further in the connection between this person and the author, it appears that he was Seth’s partner at the time of writing *An Equal Music* (Reddy). Gupta not only takes note of it but also makes a comparison in the inspiration for the beginning of the novel. The passage tells the following:

An Equal Music was conceived one wintry day in London, while Seth was taking a walk in Hyde Park with his friend Philippe Honoré. Seth recalls that as they were walking he saw in his mind’s eye a tallish figure, European or American by

³ Seth, Vikram. *An Equal Music*. London: Phoenix, 1999. Hereafter quotations from *An Equal Music* will be identified as AEM, followed by page number.

⁴ Appendix B.

race, dressed against the weather. This person was looking intently at the water of the lake in the park. Inexplicably fascinated by him, Seth turned to his friend and told him that he had a feeling that this imaginary person has something to do with his next book, and wondered as to what his profession was, what was making him look so pensively at the waters of the lake, and other such questions. Then Honoré, who was a musician, decided that this person was a musician too. That's how the novel began. The muse here was thus this imaginary, ordinary person staring intently at the water (75).

It can be said that Seth finds in Honoré some inspiration to give just a tiny part of his identity to the protagonist of *An Equal Music*, in the sense that both Philippe and Michael are violinists. Furthermore, what Gupta says in the previous paragraph moves the reader directly to the very beginning of novel, chapter I.I, where our protagonist is looking at the lake in Hyde Park in a cold and 'milky violet' night: 'I look at the water of the Serpentine' (AEM 3). In addition, it is not certain if the author might be making mention of himself and the French violinist Philippe Honoré in the following paragraph, where Michael relates:

I had the sense that someone had paused behind me. I walked on. The sound of footsteps followed along the gravel. They were unhurried; they appeared to keep pace with me. Then they suddenly made up their mind, speeded up, and overtook me. They belonged to a man in a thick black overcoat, quite tall – about my height – a young man from his gait and attitude, though I did not see his face [...] Now I heard the faint sound of hooves. This time, however, they were not embodied. I looked to left, to right. There was nothing (AEM 3).

Therefore, it is possible that this scene could be a sort of literary cameo appearance making allusion to both the author and his friend Philippe.

There is a strong association between Michael and the figure of the lark. Being just nine years old, Michael, together with his class, was taken to a School's concert. 'It was my first experience of live music' and 'what I particularly remembered was a piece about a lark – "The Lark in the Clear Air"' (AEM 88). Hearing this story, Mrs. Formby, Michael's old age benefactor, shows him what is going to be one of his favourite pieces, "The Lark Ascending", and soon after, she starts reciting George Meredith's poem, which later inspired the composer Vaughan Williams to create the musical work. From that particular moment, Michael's destiny to become a musician begins, for "'The Lark Ascending" made me beg Mrs Formby to teach me to play the violin' (AEM 89). But the influence of birds in Michael's mind goes deeper. Through the novel, the three main settings are London, Vienna and Venice, the most important western cities culturally and musically speaking apart from Rochdale, Michael's birthplace. These places are associated in the protagonist's mind with different sounds. Rochdale is associated with the singing of larks in the moors, 'Sometimes a single lark would sing; sometimes as the voice of one thinned higher and higher into the sky, another's would begin to rise. Sometimes when the sun came out after a drizzle, there would be a whole scrum of skylarks.' (AEM 35-36). London, however, is linked to the songs of robins in winter and blackbirds and pigeons in summer; Vienna is evoked by the songs of nightingales, and Venice by Vivaldi's music. (Gupta 91). Notwithstanding, Vaughan William's famous piece of music, "The Lark Ascending", is influenced by features from folklore and English traditional songs, since Vaughan was very "nationalist" in the sense that he was very fond of the English traditional music, far from cultivating a particular and esoteric style exclusively addressed to listeners from the elite classes of society (my translation, Burkholder et al. 878).

At the same time, Rochdale, his natal town in the north of England, is seen with feelings of nostalgia for the past from his childhood: ‘as a boy, I was quite happy in Rochdale. Our house was not too far from the edge of town, and once I got a bike I could cycle out towards the moors [...] I would lie there for hours sometimes’ (AEM 35). However, times have changed and it is not the same prosperous town that it was once anymore:

The handsome town hall presides over a waste – it is a town with its heart torn out. Everything speaks of its decline (...) its industries decayed, it lost its work and its wealth (...) everything civic and social was choked of funds. (...) The town which had been the home of the co-operative movement lost its sense of community (AEM 90-91).

This has something in common with the story itself. In fact, one way of looking at Seth’s novel implies taking a Dickensian point of view. To a great extent Seth’s protagonist is cognizant of the sort of music he is immersed into: classical music, in former days referred to as the music of the high spheres of society, a music made for the elite class listener. He realises Julia ‘had been brought up in a world unreachably different from mine, where art and literature and music are absorbed without effort or explanation- from speech and travel, from books and records, from the very walls and shelves’ (AEM 103). The son of a butcher, Michael comes from a working-class family in a rural and decaying town from the industrial north. In a town that has lost its resemblance of brightness and splendour, he strives to ‘break loose from his disadvantaged background through the generosity of a female benefactor’, Mrs. Formby, who helps him accessing ‘to a world of high culture’ (Heydari 85) by providing him the Tononi violin she used to play before her retirement. In addition, a

comparison between Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Seth's *An Equal Music* is done by Heydari, where she describes:

In fact, Michael's strong urge to escape his philistine environment reflects the Dickensian protagonist's rejection of his common origins and his yearning for a higher social status. For [Michael], moving to London consecrates [his] ascension up the social ladder (85).

In a scene he asks himself, 'As for my own accent, what has become of it? When I return to Rochdale I find myself donning, sometimes even affecting, what I once hid' (AEM 27). It is strongly noticed how the protagonist has already interiorized his higher status as he has almost lost his Northern accent due to the long time he has spent out of Rochdale. Heydari continues:

And just like *Great Expectations*, the conclusion of *An Equal Music* traces a moral evolution, Michael learns to lower his expectations and embrace his humble origins: "What keeps me in London? Why not come back home?" (480), he ponders (85).

But Michael's place of belonging is not a particular place or city. 'London unsettles me' he says, 'even from such a height there is no clear countryside to view. But it is not Vienna. It is not Venice. It is not, for that matter, my hometown in the North, in clear reach of the moors' (AEM 4), even in Rochdale, 'a part from my father and Auntie Joan and Mrs Formby (...) I have no living ties with this town.' (AEM 78). From Vienna and his violin teacher Carl Käll he flew, abandoning Julia with no much information detailed. In fact, it is the Quartet to where he belongs, at least till the last chapters in the novel. Seth's creation of a string quartet not only functions as a medium through which to expand the limits to encompass different musical works, but also serves as a unified but collective identity through which the pursuit of pure music in its best form and

beauty is reached. The quartet is a family, whatever the obstacles are, they are faced and dealt with:

It is dark outside, and we are exhausted, as much with another's temperaments as with the music. But ours is an odd quadripartite marriage with six relationships (...) 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 seems to us both true and original (AEM 17).

Another episode witnesses how, after having a strong and singular argument for the order and structure of the program in the Wigmore Hall, the quartet ends up as always, enjoying the music they play: 'We sink into its strange, tangled, unearthly beauty. At times I cease to breathe. It is unlike anything we as a quartet have ever played before' (AEM 77). And that is the way the quartet works; they complement each other, they support each other, and they do what they best know how to do, play music.

The reader eventually encounters the chance to know about the name and its origin, when Michael tells about it in a visit to Venice, while exploring the Italian city with Julia: 'Out on the black water, the façade of San Giorgio Maggiore shines out, white-lit. On this spot our quartet was conceived' (AEM 339). As Cvitanic suggest, the Quartet was probably created by Piers and his former partner and ex-second violinist of the quartet before Michael, Alex, during their stay in Venice: 'Now broken-hearted, is caught with his ambivalent memories of Alex and Venice and is not prepared to join the Quartet for a trip to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore' (20). Making allusion to this, the term Maggiore with which the Quartet was named, it is not complete anymore, in the sense that one of its founders is no longer part of it; and it is accentuated with Michael's spit-up at the end of the novel.

One of the musical pieces played in the quartet is Beethoven's String Quintet op.104 in C minor. This piece is relevant in the sense that Michael had not known before of its existence. Hence, he is determined to track the score down as well as some existing recording of it, and he eventually succeeds to do so. It is a rearrangement of Beethoven Trio op.1 no. 3 in C minor, which Michael used to play back in Vienna in his student years a long time ago with his ensemble. He used to play it with Julia along with another player, a cellist. There are two passages in particular in the novel that allude to this piece. The first one is when Michael manages to get a recording, and he arrives home and listens to it:

The sound fills the room: so familiar, so well-loved, so disturbingly and enchantingly different (...) I am in a world where I seem to know everything and nothing. It is a magical translation. I listen to it again from the beginning to end. (...) But somewhere in this music, interfused in my mind with so many extra-musical memories, this strange action too has found a sort of home (AEM 68-69).

Seth's protagonist explores this piece of music, even suggesting a personification of the composer through the playing of its music:

The quintet exits without us yet cannot exist without us. It sings to us, we sing into it, and somehow, through these little black and white insects clustering along five thin lines, the man who deafly transfigured what he so many years earlier had hearingly composed speaks into us across land and water and ten generations, and fills us here with sadness, here with amazed delight (AEM 101).

Michael's vision of music here reminds him of someone; in this case, it is his beloved Julia:

For me there is another presence in this music.(...) sensory, sensuous – do I sense her being again. The labyrinth of my ear shocks the coils of my memory. Here is her force in my arm, here is her spirit in my pulse. But where she is I do not know, nor is there hope I will (AEM 101).

These lines involve in a sense a poetic tone full of musicality, appearing by a mixture of passions, passion for music and passion for love, as well as in Michael's moments of agony and solitariness but also of ecstasy and happiness: '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; it resounds' (AEM 5). In the very same scene and page, Seth puts music into words, describing the beginning of the piece of music in a poetic form:

In a clear brook

With joyful haste

The whimsical trout

Past me like an arrow

Another piece of music relevant in the text is Mozart's Sonata in C major K.330, specifically the 2nd movement. In a casual visit to Michael's apartment, Julia 'begins playing without even testing the sound of the piano. With the first four notes, I am taken back to the student concert in Vienna where we first met. It is the slow movement of Mozart's Sonata in C major, K330' (169). The first four notes of the piece are actually the same note, in pitch c (do), though what makes its musicality and beauty is that each one of these notes is treated from a different point of view at playing it, and therefore its result does not suggest any kind of repetition in the beginning. It is the Andante cantabile, 'one of the most beautiful, yet simple movements of all Mozart's sonatas. It opens with a choral-like theme, which takes a turn to the minor, melancholy mood

before the return of the chorale theme' (Lee). But it is not Julia's music that Michael's mind is obsessed with, but Julia's appearance in every piece of music he listens to. Through the narrative device of the stream of consciousness the author represents some of Michael's psychological and inner thoughts directly to the reader. 'I have not heard from you. You have not replied to my unbidden fax. Are you not in town? Have you gone somewhere with your husband and his mother and your child? (...) Where did you hide for a week till the marks were gone?' (AEM 388). These questions are not addressed to Julia, but rather are the mirror of Michael's own thoughts. He is thinking about Julia, talking to her on her mind; and this implies a deeper connection between the protagonist and the reader. Moreover, this piece of music in particular expresses some of Michael's inner thoughts and experiences from what he feels, expressed in these words:

There is something tender and indefinably strange and searching about [Julia's] playing, as if she is attending to something beyond my hearing. I cannot put my finger on it, but it undoes me. I sit with my head in my hands, as Mozart drops note by note into my mind (AEM 169).

It should be noted that when describing music, abstract words may appear, as for instance, the words mentioned above 'something beyond my hearing'. Most of the times Michael senses music in a way that let his mind go to another sort of dimension, where he is no longer his own-self being, to form part of another entity, an abstract one, as his soul goes to another world revealed that cannot be expressed through words. This is the case when Michael together with the rest of the members of the Maggiore Quartet, perform a concert in the Wigmore Hall, concretely Haydn's opus 20 no.6 in A major, '[Michael's] most beloved quartet' (109). In fact, the reader is able to feel and sense what Michael tell us, apparently he goes into a sort of 'trance' due to the beauty of the

music, he steps into another world, an abstract micro-cosmos where he experiences a type of mind-state similar to the nirvana, or perhaps to the Modernist epiphanies:

The headlong happiness of the allegro; the lovely adagio where my small figures are like a counter-lyric to Piers's song; contrasting minuet and trio, each a minicosmos, yet each contriving to sound unfinished: and the melodious, ungrandiose, various fugue – everything delights me (...) while I rest – intensely, intently (...) 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? (...) 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 (110-111).

This state of mind in which Michael positions himself is similar to the one at the end of the novel, making allusion to Donne's sermon that will be mentioned below. There is a wide variety of musical perspectives within the novel. In some cases, music is treated as memory association, for instance, when Michael and Julia play a Mozart's Sonata, concretely the second movement of the E minor: 'Every joyful memory of Vienna comes flooding back to my mind. We play the movement through (...) an intentness, an inwardness that goes beyond Vienna, a lovely subtle directness imbues her music; and by conduction, mine' (AEM 173).

Yet, the most symbolic and evocative piece of music in the text is nothing less than *The Art of Fugue*. Literally speaking, the term fugue makes reference to a concrete musical piece which the composer structures concerning a "subject" or theme, that is introduced at the beginning and which is repeated through the piece in the form of

structural imitation. According to Bulkholder et al., *The Art of Fugue* was composed in the final decade of Bach's life, and it systematically reflects every type of fugal form; written in just one sheet but intended to be interpreted with the harpsichord, it comprises eighteen fugues and canons in the strictest style, all of them based on a particular subject or "theme" (515)⁵. The last fugue remained incomplete at the moment of Bach's death, and it has one theme that spells his letters in the German nomenclature: B-A-C-H, (b flat-a-c-b).⁶

It is not by chance that the favourite piece of the Maggiore Quartet – and the most difficult for them to play – is a transcription of Bach's *Art of the Fugue*. A large part of the novel is centred around the rehearsals for the Maggiore's recording of it: the more they try to play it, the more Bach's fugue has the power to make them forget their moods, passions and pains; at least for the brief moment of playing (Albertazzi 106)

Besides, treating *An Equal Music* as a musical reading, it may bear 'close similarities to the art of the fugue on which the structure of Seth's novel actually relies' (Heydari 86). Michael's psychological breakdowns make him more vulnerable and weak, leading to an anguish and solitary way of life. He breaks ties with the quartet, experiences in first person the uncertain agony of being on the verge to lose his appreciated violin, the Tononi given by Mrs Formby a long time ago, and eventually loses his love forever. That piece of music Julia would only play for Michael is at the end performed in front of a big audience. That *Art of Fugue* serves as a piece of music that renders Michael into a world completely at peace: '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' (AEM 484)

⁵ Appendix C.

⁶ Appendix D.

The term “fugue” could be associated to fugitive, a person who has escaped or run away. This may be strongly interconnected with the protagonist’s character, as he does not feel at home anywhere but in music. In Albertazzi’s words, ‘he always remains a displaced “cultural exile” in the universe of classical music’ (108); an outsider who experiences the solitude and loneliness of exile, stubborn by losing Julia, the love of his life, he is soaked by a sense of incompleteness, that according to Benson, is ‘not only for the vaguely metaphysical connotations of a final state of unendingness, but also as an analogue of the romance plot of the novel itself’ (125).

Last but not least, the title of Seth’s novel makes reference to John Donne’s *Sermon CXLVI*, in which an excerpt of this sermon is written as the epigraph of 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 an 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.

All through the text, the protagonist and tragic hero aims to reach that serenity and peace of mind that Donne portrays so well describing life after death, and thus, Seth creates an open ending. Hence, the *Art of Fugue* is an unfinished piece of music that symbolises the entire novel, and lets the end of the novel be open to interpretation. Just as Schubert did not finish his *Unfinished*, Bach could not finish his *Art of Fugue*, nor Beethoven his unfinished *Symphony no.10*, Seth could not finish in a better and musical way *An Equal Music*.

CONCLUSION

Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* illustrates the way in which music is perceived from a total and different sign-system as it is literature. Seth brilliantly succeeds 'through pen, paper, ink and inspiration' in transforming music into literature; the way he expresses in words what in most cases it cannot be expressed. It should be mentioned that music is represented throughout the novel from a large variety of perspectives: as memory association, in moments when Michael recalls Julia from the act of playing a piece for instance, as narrative, as symbol of moods so as to express Michael's feelings through music, as a parenthesis in ordinary existence, as a matter-of-course professional concern, and even as pure structure. Thus, it acquires a multiplicity of meanings inside the novel. This music is expressed through the complex character of Michael, a tragic hero in the sense that due to his decision of leaving Vienna ten years ago he became responsible for his own unhappiness with Julia. The novel focuses on him as a narrator and focalizer and explores through him the stream of emotions and feelings interlinked in his psyche, feelings that will punish him for that sudden choice he took in the past. Despite being criticised by some critics for not being deeply rooted to his place of origin, Seth memorably projects his global and international motifs and themes within his books, and gives voice as well to the permanence of those roots seen now from a more encompassing perspective, such as Michael's changing relationship to his family and his town.

The novel articulates the feeling of making the reader thirsty for music, makes him feel the sensation of playing an instrument collectively, and being able to reach the aesthetical experience that Michael does within the text. In the epilogue the author reveals, 'music to me is even dearer than speech'. This might suggest in a way a portrayal of Seth's own personal feelings for music, since he is great connoisseur of

western classical music, and therefore the novel could have been used as a vehicle to express the author's loving for music. By means of the intertextual musical associations of Michael, Seth brilliantly manages to create a character in depth, with profound thoughts, that in some cases are presented directly to the reader through the use of the stream of consciousness. The author focuses mainly on the relations of the individual performance and its art, a search for originality and for truth, only reachable through music. Seth challenges the readers in the sense that the story suggests an exercise to recall aurally the different pieces of music played and interpreted through the text. Through the main protagonist's point of view, the reader is immersed into a world in which sounds take on a life of their own, in the form of nightingales, robins, larks, pigeons, violins, violas, cellos and pianos. Hence, Pärt's words in his documentary 'may well express Michael perception of music throughout the novel: 'Music is my friend, understanding, empathic; forgiving, comforter. A towel to dry tears of sadness, a source for tears of happiness; liberation and flight; but also a painful thorn, In flesh and soul'.

An Equal Music is a novel flooded with musical references to the great composers of western classical music, such as Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert and Bach. There is a considerable richness concerning symbolism and intertextuality within the novel and a detailed knowledge of the technicalities involved in playing such compositions. Therefore, our analysis somehow extracts to the surface the main inspirations and ideas going on in the minds of the author and of the narrator. Hence, just as the reader explores the story through Michael's narration, we try to explore Seth's mind through the analysis of these musical and literary elements.

diagram I: I) 'Main areas of musico-literary studies'

according to Scher, ed. *Literatur und Musik* 14 (translation mine)

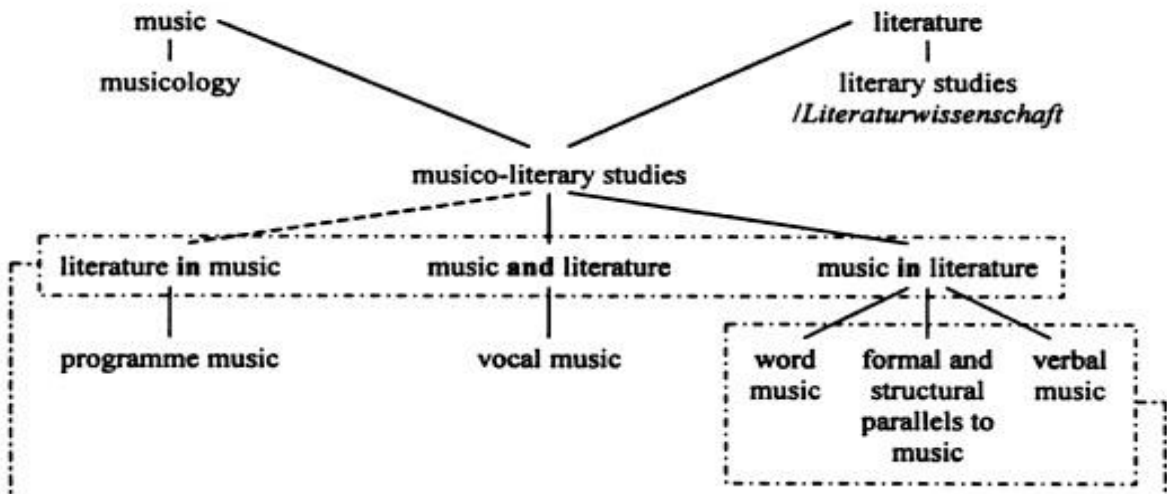
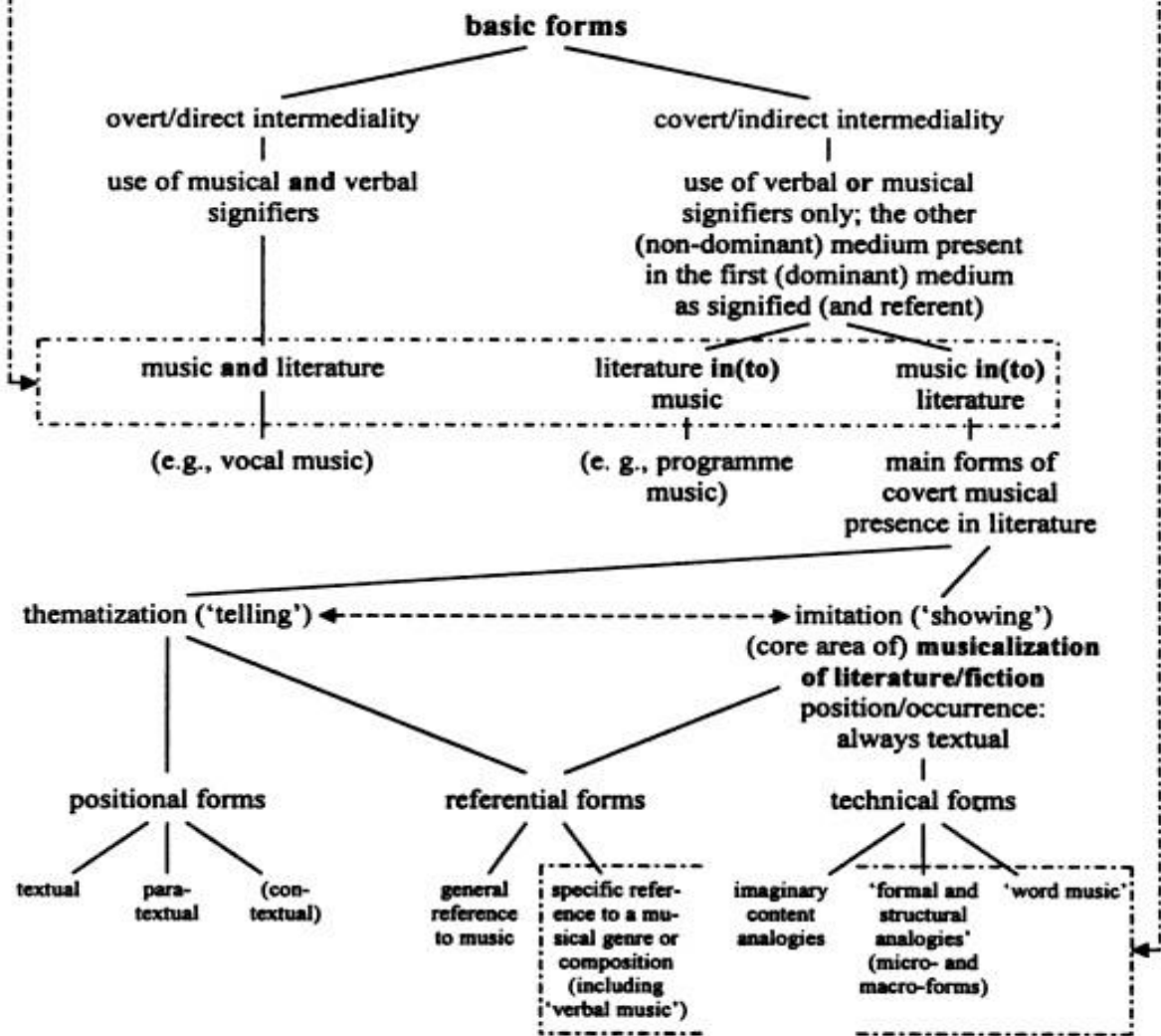


diagram II: II) Musico-literary intermediality



APPENDIX D)

II)

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation on aged, yellowed paper. At the top right, there is a small number '5'. The first two staves contain musical notation with various notes, rests, and clefs. The third staff is partially filled with musical notation on the left and contains a block of handwritten text in Dutch on the right. Below this, there are several more staves that are mostly empty, with some faint markings at the bottom right.

5

B über dieser Satz, wo der Kaiser
B A C H in Contrasubject
angebracht worden, ist
Der Meisters Gesonben.

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