

The Ministrations of Music:
The Sublimation of Passion in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*

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The lights have dimmed. Now they're returning.
Throats clear. Brahms' A Minor begins.
The brisk allegro. Then a yearning
Warm ductile length of lyric spins
Its lovely glimmering thread at leisure
Inveiglingly from measure to measure
With a continuous tenderness
So deep it smooths out all distress,
All sorrow . . .

The Golden Gate, 3.37

Music has always been important to Vikram Seth. In addition to being stubborn and obsessive as a four-year-old, Vikram displayed another distinctive trait, as his mother tells us:

He loved music, and could identify the 78 r.p.m. records even before he learnt to read properly. He must have assessed that I was tone deaf; when I tried to lullaby him to sleep he begged me not to sing. He stated that he only wanted my friend Koly . . . to sing to him.¹

As Cynthia Haven notes, this youthful talent was later developed through training: "As a boy in Calcutta, Seth was trained in the

classical Indian musical repertoire, specializing in singing."²

Music has also been a central feature of Seth's writing. Although Seth's poetry is dominated by his tendency to set himself apart, a poem such as "A Little Night Music" (The Humble Administrator's Garden) is all the more affective and memorable because of the unexpected feeling of inclusion evoked by the music and the musician's welcoming gesture. This same feeling of brotherhood—"the commonalty of all mankind"—is evoked on a more universal scale when Seth hears the fluteseller play in Kathmandu (From Heaven Lake, 176-77), and his irregular journey into Tibet was only made possible, in a most fortuitous way, by his singing "The Wanderer" (11-14).

In "The Cat and the Cock," the cat saves his friend from the fox by means of his fiddle and singing (Beastly Tales, 57-71), and music is both central to and the expressive form of Seth's libretto, Arion and the Dolphin. Sue Dorati plays the cello in The Golden Gate, and Seth's moving tribute to music's power to comfort is used as the epigraph to this article. Music also plays a prominent role in A Suitable Boy, for it often announces the theme of passion, as in the "Lusty Songs" from the popular movie Deedar, "which are sung in every street of the city," as Pran reads from the newspaper ad (3.1), or as in "Two Intoxicating Eyes," the song that Varun repeatedly plays and sings (7.2, 7.6). Music is also very effective at evoking passion, particularly when a singer such as Saeeda Bai has a "powerfully emotional voice" (2.2), and Lata looks on in fascination as the singer moulds the feelings and moves the hearts of her audience (2.4).

Her religious songs are even more moving. During Moharram,

Saeeda Bai chants marsiyas, which are laments for martyrs, and performs soz, "a sort of musical wailing . . . that grips the heart," as Firoz explains to Maan. As an unbeliever, Maan will not be able to see Saeeda Bai perform, but he finds it "strangely exciting" just to think of her "weeping and wailing passionately" (15.3). The effect on Firoz, who attends the small gathering at Saeeda Bai's house, is profound:

At the lamentations Saeeda Bai's voice rose into the air in a strange sobbing wail, intensely musical, intensely beautiful. . . . Saeeda Bai's eyes were closed; even for the supremely controlled artist, her art had passed beyond her own restraint. Her body, like her voice, was shaking with grief and pain. And Firoz, though he did not realize it, was himself weeping uncontrollably. (15.7)

In fact, music is so important to Seth that he did not want to use it as a subject, as he told Debashish Mukerji: "Music is the last subject I would have liked to write about. I wanted to keep it as a refuge from the tensions of work." However, once the idea for the novel had taken root, Seth was compelled to make a literary decision, as he goes on to say:

. . . when I'm inspired to write something, the form follows it, in some cases, precedes it. For instance, writing about music almost made it essential to write this book in the first person. It's very difficult to write about another art form in an expository way. That's very boring. . . . The only

way to make it interesting is to write from the inside.³

Seth had already gained a great deal of critical admiration for his surprising versatility and for writing in what seemed to be a different genre each time.⁴ Although *An Equal Music* is recognizably a novel, it is so different in scope, approach, and setting from *A Suitable Boy* that it seems almost a different genre. Seth had not really wanted to be restricted to a first-person point of view for the narration, but once he accepted that he would be writing about music, he realized it would be essential.⁵ This is not a decision a writer takes lightly, for the choice of a first-person narrator severely limits what the author can do. Since practically everything in such a novel must be presented from the narrator's limited point of view, there is much that the narrator—and hence the reader—cannot know. The fact that the narrator may not be an entirely appealing character is also a drawback.

A. The Hollow Man

The narrator of *An Equal Music* is Michael Holme, a 37-year-old violinist who lives in London, though he grew up in the north, in Rochdale in the Manchester area. Michael is a member of the Maggiore Quartet and gives private lessons to a few students, but his life is otherwise empty because he is still pining for Julia McNicholl, a pianist who was his lover ten years ago in Vienna, where they were music students, but whom he has not seen or heard from since he abruptly left Vienna after a breakdown. Michael is limited by his situation and frequent lack of comprehension, and one obvious manifestation of this limitation is that the narration

is filled with questions, sometimes entire paragraphs, as in the following instance, after Michael learns through a slip by her son Luke that Julia is losing her hearing:

The next day I decide to write to her. But what can I say other than that I want to see her again? Does she want me to know? Has Luke told her anything? Am I deluding myself? Is there anything to know at all? (4.2)⁶

This last question is particularly pertinent for the reader, for if Michael cannot know, how are we to know? Since there is no omniscient third-person narrator to guide us and grant us privileged insights, we must be more attentive readers and resist allowing ourselves to be limited by Michael's limitations. We must know and see more than Michael, which means we must recognize and benefit from his mistakes, and we must be especially attuned to patterns, parallels, descriptions, and images in the text, for that is the way the author can unobtrusively intrude to give us important information, especially information that may counter or modify Michael's perceptions.

Except for the quartet and his music, Michael's life is hollow. He is most often lost in his thoughts, so that he seems to have only a tenuous contact with the world around him. When the woman behind the counter in his croissant shop tells him he must be a happy man because he is always humming, Michael stares at her "with such incredulity that she looked down," and he can only remark, quite bitterly, "It's my work" (1.1).

Michael's mother has died, and he is not very close to his ailing

father. Auntie Joan now lives with Michael's father and his cat Zsa-Zsa, the center of Mr Holme's interest. Michael makes occasional dutiful trips back to Rochdale, and when he does he always calls on Mrs Formby, his benefactor, the woman who introduced him to the world of classical music and who generously loaned Michael her valuable Tononi violin when he went off to Vienna. Michael had been invited to study under Carl Käll, but Michael felt too restricted and pressured by Carl, "came apart" at a concert, and fled Vienna, abruptly leaving Julia without a word of explanation (1.5). Michael occasionally sleeps with Virginie, a 21-year-old French girl who is one of his private students, but Michael is fully aware that Virginie "is not the woman with whom I want to share my life." Since Virginie is in love with him and wants to continue the relationship, Michael goes along out of "lust and loneliness . . . and laziness, and lack of focus" (1.2).

B. The Tononi

Michael has a much more intimate relationship with his violin, the Tononi generously lent to him by Mrs Formby. When Michael plays a happy bit from Schubert, "The Tononi does not object; it resounds" (1.1), and Michael keenly senses the reciprocity: "I love it, and it responds to me . . ." (2.5). When he hears from Mrs Formby that she may be compelled to leave the violin to her nephew with the rest of her estate, Michael agonizes:

I love it and it loves me. We have grown to know each other. How can a stranger hold and sound what has been in my hands so long? We have been together for twelve

years. Its sound is my sound. I can't bear to part with it.

(2.12)

Helen, the viola player in the quartet, suggests the unusually close correspondence between the two, the man and his instrument, when she is thinking of playing a bigger viola for a recording. Michael cautions her, referring to himself "as someone who's had problems with his fingers—", but when Helen considers asking the best instrument maker and repairer for his assistance, she immediately thinks of a problem with Michael's violin: "... and you need to work out why your violin sometimes buzzes" (3.10). The clear implication is that Michael transfers his emotional problems to his violin, and Helen, though a musician herself, also thinks that Michael loves the Tononi, lovely though it is, "more than makes any kind of sense" (3.13). Michael later admits as much to Julia, telling her that Helen "thinks my relationship with my violin's a bit over the top" (4.19). For Michael, the relationship is much more sensual and intimate than just that of skilled player to superb instrument, and he thinks of the relationship as a loving one akin to a marriage:

... I go to my small music room—more music cell than music room—and open my violin case. I lift the olive-green velvet covering and take out the Tononi. Gently, very gently, with the back of my hand I touch its back, its belly. How long we have lived together, the two of us: my time in Vienna, the solitary years that followed, these years with the Maggiore. It came into my life the same year as Julia. How long we

have sung in one voice. How much we have grown into each other. (4.14)⁷

When he tells the troubled Mrs Formby that he loves the Tononi, he also reminds her that the quartet will be going to Venice: "So I'll be taking it back to its birthplace for a visit. That should make it happy" (2.12). When Michael and Julia are in Venice, they visit the Pietà, Vivaldi's church. When they find that the church is effectively closed to the public except for Sunday prayers, Michael again expresses his feeling in terms of his violin: "I can feel my Tononi moping." After some dramatic special pleading—"I am a musician,' I say, holding up my violin case. 'Violinist! Vivaldi! This is his church.' I hold up my hands in adoration"—they are allowed to slip inside. Michael is hesitant to play the Tononi for fear they will be ejected, but Julia tells him he must:

"Michael, if you don't play your violin here, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"And I suppose my violin would never forgive me."

"There you are." (6.5)

Michael cannot bear the thought of losing the Tononi—"Will I lose the touch of it, the sound of it, the sight of it?" (7.5)—and when he thinks the dreaded day has come, he plays a lament that "comes more from its heart than from mine," for Michael knows that the music that comes from their union—"I play it, it plays me"—is all that gives him life (8.19).

C. The Maggiore Quartet

Michael's most sustaining human relationship is with the Maggiore Quartet. The other members are Piers, the first violinist and co-founder of the group; his younger sister, Helen, the viola player; and Billy, the cellist and only married member. As individuals, they each have their flaws and foibles. Helen, who hosts their usual practices at her house, can never seem to remember Michael's coffee habits, but she knows and provides Billy's favorite cookies (1.3). Piers is used to getting his way, and he is often irritable when he first arrives, as the house is a source of disquiet. Their aunt left the house to Helen rather than the elder Piers because she disapproved of Piers's homosexual lifestyle, and that, as Helen tells Michael, is the source of his irritation: "He gets into a bad mood every time we're in my house... The moment he stoops to enter he starts growling" (3.13). Billy is invariably late, which can be an annoyance, but he is also trying his hand at composition, and Piers fears it will be something "gratingly awful" that Billy will ask them to perform, but Helen forestalls any further "talking behind each other's backs" (1.3).

Despite the occasional tensions and disagreements, the members try to accommodate each other and reach mutual agreement, and Seth at times uses a nearly choral rendition of the group's conversation as they come to an understanding, as in the following moment during a practice session:

"Once more, then? From ninety-two?" I suggest.

"No, from the double-bar," says Helen.

"No, from seventy-five," says Billy.

"OK," says Piers. (1.4)

At another practice, Helen, who has had quite a lot of wine at lunch, begins unconsciously imitating Billy's gesture of raising his left hand from his instrument when he plays an open string, and when Michael notices, it becomes infectious: "So fascinated am I by this that I do not notice that I have begun to do the same." When Piers sees them, he begins, "with a broad grin, to raise his hand off the fingerboard too." The red-faced Billy, justifiably irked, suddenly stops playing and glares at them: "I hate it when you gang up on me," he says with a hurt expression in his eyes, "I hate it." When Helen realizes what she has been doing, she quickly apologizes and kisses Billy on the cheek, and they even agree, tentatively and reluctantly—"Once," adds Piers—to play the quartet Billy is writing in order to mollify him (4.8).

When Helen wants to avoid tensions in the group, she reminds them that "A quartet is a quartet," and Piers quickly reassures her: "We all love each other, that goes without saying" (1.3). Yet the members of the quartet often find themselves compelled to speak or think, as Michael does, about the nature of their "odd quadripartite marriage with six relationships, any of which, at any given time, could be cordial or neutral or strained" (1.4). Michael knows that other musicians "consider quartet players to be an odd, obsessed, introspective, separatist breed," and he feels it is their "proximity to each other and only to each other which . . . makes us stranger than we are" (2.15). For Michael, the Maggiore is a "strange composite being" (2.20), and Piers searches for the appropriate simile:

"It's the weirdest thing, a quartet. 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." (4.21)

The quartet may be an odd marriage, but when it works, it is sublime. Just as the rather dumpy Billy is transfigured when he plays—"But the moment his bow comes down on the strings he is transfigured" (1.3)—so too is the quartet transformed and united when they play the scale that begins every rehearsal, as Michael appreciates:

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 comes to it, one. . . . When I play this I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. (1.4)

All grievances are forgotten in the creation of music—"Within a minute I have forgotten all resentment, all rights and pleasures due to me. They are irrelevant within this lovely, vigorous music" (2.17)—and, in a nearly alchemical fusion of disparate elements, the four players become one within their playing, as Michael senses during their brief encore at Wigmore Hall:

We play in an energised trance. These four-and-a-half minutes could be as many hours or seconds. In my mind's

eye I see the little-used clefs of the original score, and the sinking and rising, swift and slow, parallel and contrary, of all our several voices—and in my mind's ear I hear what has sounded and is sounding and is yet to sound. I only have to realise on the strings what is already real to me; and so have Billy, and Helen, and Piers. Our synchronous visions merge, and we are one. . . . (2.22)

When Julia reenters Michael's life, he becomes increasingly consumed with the desire to recapture their former relationship, and the resulting tensions caused by Michael's selfishness become disruptive to the quartet. Aside from Michael and her agent, no one in the music world knows of Julia's increasing deafness, so she is chosen as a last-minute replacement to play the piano with the Maggiore Quartet for their Vienna performance of Schubert's "Trout Quintet." There is only one problem during their first rehearsal, but Piers walks in on Michael helping Julia during a break, and he knows there is something odd (4.20). Piers invites Michael over for a drink and generously offers him the chance to play the violin in the "Trout," but when the delighted Michael lets slip that it may be the last time Julia plays with others, Piers presses him about Julia's problem: "We're in a quartet. It's based on trust. Now what is it? Spit it out." In the face of this insistence, and out of loyalty to the unity of the quartet, Michael is compelled into a painful admission: "She's going deaf, Piers,' I say helplessly." When Piers rebukes Michael for keeping the information from the quartet, Michael responds fiercely—"Don't tell me what I owe you . . . I've broken a confidence by saying what I've said"—and soon after

Michael seems perplexed by the realization that his greater loyalty was to the quartet: "But I am surprised at myself, that I should so suddenly have broken faith with her . . ." (4.21).

Sadly, and much to his detriment, Michael begins severing his ties with the quartet, separating himself by spending more time alone and with Julia. In Vienna, where Julia stays with her widowed Austrian mother, Michael walks the streets alone at night (5.3) and refuses Helen's invitation to have dinner with the others (5.7). At the end of the "Trout Quintet," Michael, haunted by his ghosts and concerned about Julia's future, suffers a kind of nervous paralysis (5.11). He instinctively turns to the others—"The bathroom—Piers—Billy"—and Billy supports and encourages him. In the green room, when Michael insists that he cannot go on again, Julia and Billy join to help him, taking a Schubert manuscript ("Die Liebe") off the wall and urging Michael to play it with Julia. Although Michael turns in gratitude to Julia as he comes to himself, Billy's contribution is all the more significant, for it presages his crucial help at the end (5.12).

In Venice, Michael's separation is even more extreme, as he will neither travel nor stay with the quartet. He will go by train with Julia, and he will stay with her in her friend's spare apartment in Sant'Elena, far from the palazzo where the quartet will stay, practice, and perform. What makes this worse is that Julia will not be playing with them in Venice, which is to be solely a quartet performance. Helen insists on unity—"We should stay together, the four of us. We always have"—but Michael rejects the suggestion and deflects the group's understandable concern about his collapse in Vienna, further isolating himself: "I don't know what happened.

I've got to sort it out in my own mind. I'd rather not make it a quartet issue" (5.14). Predictably, Piers's voice is "cold" when Michael finally arrives late, with Julia, for rehearsal, and even Helen seems cool (6.6), so Michael begins to resent what he feels is their "unwelcoming attitude to Julia" (6.7). Despite the group's concern, Michael has no further problems performing. Ironically, he is playing one of the pieces "better than before," but for a disturbing reason: "...because I can hardly bring myself to care" (6.16).

Julia breaks off their renewed relationship and returns to her family in London. When the quartet returns and meets at Helen's for a rehearsal, it seems for a time that Michael has also found his way back to where he belongs: "So here we are together. I too have my family now." After some difficulties and disagreements about how to play "The Art of Fugue," the magic appears to have been recaptured:

Then, at a stroke, the quartet is transfigured—its sound, its texture, its appearance. We move directly to a piece where both Helen and I have to use deeper, larger instruments. We look and we feel oddly out of proportion: with ourselves and with the others. I play the viola I have borrowed, she what could perhaps be called a tenor viola. It makes an amazing sound, lazy and growly and very rich and weird, and suddenly all four of us are laughing with delight—yes, delight, for the world outside has thinned out of existence—even as we continue to play. (7.6)

The impromptu dinner they have, with all of them pitching in to

prepare it, is another positive sign of renewed togetherness, since, as Michael realizes, it marks "the first time for months that all four of us are—as we so often used to be—together for a meal" (7.7). Despite his emotional turmoil over Julia, his violin and practice with the quartet keep him properly aligned: "We meet, the four voices, and enter a braid . . . My violin senses where I am veering, and keeps me to the path that is direct and spare" (8.1). Disastrously, when Michael learns that Julia will be playing "The Art of Fugue" for her solo concert, he unjustly considers this to be her last and greatest betrayal, and, just as in Vienna, he hurries to a toilet, his heart "thumping sickly, erratically" in his chest (8.4).⁸

Michael rapidly falls apart. He can neither practice alone—"The finger pads refuse to touch the strings"—nor with the others—"the fit still grips my hands"—and he is certain that he has "lost the link from eye to hand," so he loosens his bow and puts the violin away (8.5). Even though a conciliatory letter from the dying Carl Käll admits that Michael was right years ago—"he has decided at last that the quartet is in fact my true home. He exhorts me to remain where I am"—Michael foolishly rejects his former teacher's advice a final time (8.7).

Michael has lost Julia, he fears he is about to lose the Tononi, and, suddenly dead-fingered, he has lost the ability to play, so he abruptly leaves the quartet. Despite Helen's pleas—"We can't do without you . . . It would make me sick to play with someone else"—and Piers's encouragement—"It's happened before. We worked it out. We'll work it out again. We're not that fragile"—Michael feels that there is no point in trying to continue, that he is of no use, so he flees again, and in doing so the image of their dynamic unity is

undone: "the braid has been untwined" (8.8).

D. Julia

Michael meets Julia McNicholl at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, where both are studying music. They quickly fall in love, and, finding they respond naturally to each other when making music, they form a trio with Maria Novotny, another student. Julia is a daughter of an Oxford professor and a Viennese mother, and although she is five years younger than Michael, she becomes his "best teacher," for Michael feels that Julia "had been brought up in a world unreachably different from mine, where art and literature and music are absorbed without effort or explanation..." Just as Mrs Formby had introduced Michael to classical music, so Julia introduces him to the world of art. Their trio is accepted for a summer school, and for a time Michael feels as though he is living "in a waking dream" (2.18).

Because of his conflict with Carl Käll, Michael becomes increasingly depressed, his finger begins giving him difficulty, and he comes apart in a concert. Although Julia tries to encourage him, Michael is unresponsive: "But I could not speak to her of the bleakness in my mind." When Julia defends Carl, Michael regards it as "an unbearable betrayal on her part," and he abruptly leaves Vienna, not trying to contact Julia again until months later, but by then it is too late, and he has lost her (2.18).

Important as she is to Michael, the novel is not about Julia, so what we learn of her is mainly what she and others tell Michael, but we find out that she was seriously hurt by Michael's departure and silence. When Michael finally writes to Maria, having received

no reply to repeated letters to Julia, he is told that Julia is “still very upset,” and she disappears once her course is over (1.11). Later, Julia tells Michael that she had “slowly gone to pieces” after he left (3.5), and that she had stopped playing after her exams (4.6). When Michael flippantly remarks that she may not have thought of him often over the years, he is stunned by her sharp response: “Michael, I thought of you as if you'd committed suicide—without leaving a note” (4.19).

Julia has a new life and a new name. She had married James Hansen, an American banker from Boston, and they have a nearly seven-year-old son, Luke (3.8). James supported her when she learned she was losing her hearing (4.3), and he is the one who encouraged her to resume her music career (4.6), and the extent of her change is shown in the following exchange with Michael:

“And are you still McNicholl? For professional purposes?”

“No. I took my husband's surname.”

“Which is?”

“Hansen.”

“Oh, so you're Julia Hansen. I've heard of you.” (3.5)

The point may be made comically here, but it is a serious point: Julia Hansen is not the Julia McNicholl of ten years ago. Seth shows this repeatedly in a number of ways, and the most obvious is the number of times we see Julia removing her hand from Michael's. The first time is when they first meet again, backstage after the Wigmore concert. The surprised and delighted Michael grasps her

hand, and Julia has to whisper: "Michael, let go of my hand" (2.24). This graphic image of separation is shown repeatedly (3.8, 3.15, 3.20, 4.19, 5.8, 5.17), and the implication is clear: Julia is not available to be reclaimed or regained, no matter how desperately Michael wants to do just that.

Julia comes back into Michael's life in a surprising way. Michael has been searching for a rare recording of Beethoven's nearly unknown "String Quintet in C minor, opus 104," and just when he is rejoicing in having found an LP recording—"so desperately sought, so astonishingly found"—he catches sight of Julia in another bus going the other way (1.15). Michael despairs when Julia is no longer on the bus when he finally manages to run it down, but even at this first sighting, there is a clear indication of the extent of their separation when Michael pounds his window and shouts her name: "She cannot hear me. We are in separate worlds" (1.6).

Once they meet again, it is not long before they become lovers again, and it is music that leads Julia into this betrayal of her marriage. Even before they become physically intimate again, Julia tells Michael that he was and is "a huge part" of her life (3.8), and the intimacy of music leads to their renewed physical intimacy. Michael gives Julia the LP, telling her that it is "an old friend transfigured" (3.15). Late in his life, Beethoven had arranged his trio in C minor, Julia's favorite, into a string quintet (1.3), so the LP recording awakens Julia's hunger for the shared intimacy of music: "I've been so hungry to speak of music—and to play it with someone who understands me before I—before all these changes in my life" (3.16).

Although she shakes her head when Michael holds her hand,

this time she “lets it be,” and they kiss and hold each other (3.16). They make love “with ecstasy born of starvation” (3.17), but Michael can read the ambivalence in her face, and a few days later, when he takes her hand in public, with her son nearby, Julia’s response is abrupt: “Don’t!” (3.20). It is, after all, only proper for Luke to hold her hand and for Michael to turn away.

This sort of back-and-forth continues, but with increasingly serious implications for both of them. In a lengthy letter to Michael, Julia says that she wants to share her life and music with him “in some way,” as he connects her to “the greatest happiness—and unhappiness” she has known, yet she has a serious reservation: “But, Michael, I don’t see how our love can reach any sort of full expression. Years ago perhaps it could have, but how can it now?” (4.3). Michael still thinks he knows Julia uniquely—“in the core of her being: the great, fraying cord that links her to her music”—but Julia is now a mother, and her love for her son is outside Michael’s knowing. When Michael tells Julia that he has had to tell Piers about her hearing problem, his vague pronouns—“Julia, he knows. I had to tell him”—cause Julia to look at him “with something akin to terror,” for Julia thinks Michael means he has told James about them, and her horrified reaction shows where her strongest love lies.

Michael meets the unwitting James when Julia invites him to lunch, and the jealous Michael can hardly bear it, feeling “numb hatred” for a man he realizes is perceptive and decent, but Michael believes it will be otherwise when he and Julia are in Vienna, a city he feels belongs to them (4.17). However, Vienna turns out not to be the constant he has sought. Michael is shocked to hear from Julia

that a favorite restaurant, Mnozil's, "doesn't exist any more" (5.6), and Michael is soon borrowing from Yeats to lament how it has "all changed, changed utterly," even though he will not yet accept that it is also true of their relationship (5.7).⁹

When Michael asks her to go to Venice with him, Julia releases his hand and says: "I can't. . . Michael, how can I go to Venice with you? Just think what you're asking me to do. . ." (5.8). Michael is surprised and speechless when, a short time later, at the scene of their last meeting years ago, Julia suddenly says she will go with him, and it is only later that we learn the reason for this surprising reversal. She had found the old, unread letters her father had not sent on in a trunk in her mother's house. She had read part of one, sensed Michael's remorse and sorrow, and agrees to go to Venice in part to relieve his pain (7.2).

In Venice, they have both freedom and isolation, and Michael finds that Julia "is far bolder than she has ever been before—it is as if this voyage by water and this unknown room have freed her from constraint," but there are repeated checks on their ecstasy (6.1-2). Julia's friend's children have measles, which causes Julia to think of the child she has left behind in London, and Julia panics when Michael mentions a camera (6.4). Julia's slip of the tongue—"We'll come to that bridge when we cross it"—contains an ominous reminder that Julia may be going too far in her relationship with Michael (6.4). When Michael bullies Julia into accompanying him on the piano in Vivaldi's church, the result is prophetic: "It is rapture, and it is soon over." Typically, Michael wants to recreate the moment—"That was perfect. . . Let's do it again"—and he fails to heed Julia's enormously significant reply: "No, Michael," says Julia,

closing the lid of the piano. 'If it was perfect—since it was perfect—it is certainly not to be done again" (6.5).

Boys kicking footballs and the "little legs and arms and bottoms" of cherubs protruding from ornate putti ceilings prompt Julia to take Michael's question about the location of the palazzo—"You'll find your way back?" (6.6)—in a deeper sense, for she desperately misses Luke, her "poor baby" (6.8). When Julia realizes that their intimacy in the Schiavoni has been observed by the old man who surveys them so coldly, she is horrified and shamed. Combining past and present in her distress, she tells Michael it has to end—"Why did you leave me?—this can't go on—I hate it—," and Michael knows the significance of the moment: "Something has come undone" (6.9).

Julia desires to leave Venice as soon as possible, and she tries to make Michael see both the wondrous nature of their interlude together and its limitations: "Michael, I'm happy here with you. You're happy here with me. Isn't that true? It's a miracle we're here at all. Isn't that enough?" (6.14). Sadly, it is not enough for him, and back in London Michael keeps pursuing her. When he goes to her house while Luke is in school, Michael kisses her neck, and Julia has to reproach him: "No—no—let me go. Don't be crazy. I don't want all this. . . Michael, think a little of me" (7.5). The still unsuspecting James invites Michael to a birthday party for Julia, and at the party Julia is again forced to fend him off: "—just leave me alone, Michael." Between the invitation and the party, James has learned of their affair, so he is now cold towards Michael, and his words as Michael is leaving early—"You must say goodbye to Julia" (7.10)—contain a double meaning: out of politeness, Michael must not leave without saying goodbye to the hostess, but, much more significantly,

Michael must remove himself from Julia's new life.

This is not easy for Michael. Despite a last letter from Julia in which she tells him that, although she loves him, he cannot relive his life with her (7.16), Michael again goes to her house. To avoid upsetting Luke, they walk to a park, where Julia tells Michael that she cannot live without James, who comforted her and gave her courage, and that she has been selfish, self-indulgent, and reckless—"worse than stupid"—to jeopardize her love for her husband and son.¹⁰ Michael's petulance makes their parting an unpleasant one, but it does seem definite:

Julia is holding the record out to me once more. This is the music that we both once loved. This is what I lost, then found.

I look at it, and at her, and fling the wretched taunting thing into the pond.

It sinks. I do not turn to see her expression. I leave her there and walk away. (7.18)

E. The Ascension of Michael

In many ways, Michael is an extended version of John in *The Golden Gate*, though he might also be thought of as a Kabir, ten years later, ruing the lost opportunity with Lata (*A Suitable Boy*). Michael is so completely immersed in his sorrow that he is in danger of drowning, and in his thoughts he constantly dwells on what has been lost in his greatest mistake: "Where are you now, Julia, and am I not forgiven?" (1.1).¹¹ Michael is at his best only as a member of the Maggior Quartet, but once Julia reappears, he begins

to separate himself from the nurturing quartet in his increasingly desperate efforts to recover what has been lost.

Intellectually, Michael knows the past is past, as he tells his father, who still blames the carpark that replaced their butcher shop for killing Michael's mother: "I know, Dad, but it's, well, it's the past" (1.9). Emotionally, however, it is a different story, and Michael's vocabulary gives frequent indication of his preoccupation: renewal (4.10), remade, recapitulation (4.15), restore (5.1), re-making (5.11), retrieved, redone (6.9), and reconfigured (8.13). Michael does not want to answer his own questions—"Could London ever have restored what we lost in Vienna? Can Vienna restore what we have lost in London?"—and his self-assurances—"The quiet of the cafes will restore us"—are shown to have no foundation, for Mnozil's, like the family shop in Rochdale, has disappeared, and shaking his head in disbelief and dismay will not alter the fact (5.1, 5.6).¹²

Michael's surname, Holme, is just a final letter away from Holmes, the famous detective, which ironically emphasizes Michael's psychological blindness, for he cannot or will not heed the clear evidence in front of him. Despite his frustration at the separating bus windows (1.6), Michael seems unaware of all the other images and examples of separation, whether it is the miniature blue screen of the intercom (3.8) or the lift doors that slide swiftly across, cutting them off from each other (3.8, 3.15).¹³ He is apparently unconscious of the number of times Julia withdraws her hand from his. On occasion, she moves out of sight (2.24), draws away (3.5), or, not waiting for the lift, walks away down the flights of stairs (4.22).

When Julia takes him to the Schiavoni, on the other hand, Michael seizes upon the "gorgeous, impeccable, polite, adoring, curly

-haired white dog" in Carpaccio's painting of St. Augustine as an image of constancy and devotion. When Julia leaves Venice, Michael wanders distraught, his mind in turmoil, and he thinks he sees "Carpaccio's dog incarnate... small and white and faithful" on a boat (6.18), and he sees it again in a vision when he is turned away from Julia's house (7.5).¹⁴ When Helen offhandedly informs him that the dog was originally a cat, Michael refuses to accept the idea (8.9), obsesses over it, and goes to the British Museum Print Room, where he finds that the dog that solaced him had indeed once been a cat—or worse: "And it's a cat that holds the floor. No, not even a cat, not even that but some sly stoat or weasel on a leash!" (8.12). Yet Michael refuses to recognize the significance of the rusted bird as an image of a phoenix which "this time has not risen," and which so blatantly contradicts his immediately following hope: "Surely what was lost so stupidly, so swiftly and in so short a time can be retrieved, redone, brought to life once more" (6.9).

Venice is not the answer. Although it is the trip they had wanted to make together, it comes ten years too late (5.17). Now, Venice, a sinking city of water and light, can only provide illusions, and even the brief romantic miracle of Venice is not enough for Michael, as we know from his unspoken reply to Julia's query: "I am silent for a while and concentrate on that. Yes, it is true, but no, it is not enough" (6.14). In the garden of the Palazzo Tradonico, Michael shamelessly reads a loving fax that Julia has written to James. Feeling "sick at heart," Michael crosses one more bridge, and this time he goes too far (6.16).

That evening, back at the apartment on Sant'Elena, Michael shocks and frightens Julia by savagely biting her in the bitterness

of his passion, and he goes on to cruelly wound her with his words:

My tongue is as brutal as my teeth. She stares at me
and cries out—a horrible sound of rage and hurt and disbelief
and violation—then covers her face with her hands and her
hair. I try to touch her. She slaps my hand away. (6.17)

Julia's cry reminds us of Lata's cry of emotional pain when her love was denied by Kabir (*A Suitable Boy*, 3.20), and we have seen milder parallels to Michael's violence in John (*The Golden Gate*, 10.36-58) and Kabir (*A Suitable Boy*, 8.13). Michael's action is all the worse because we know that he does not like it when Virginie bites him playfully during their love-making (1.6), and Michael fully realizes that this transgression may not be undone: "An egg may not be unboiled nor trust resealed" (6.18).

An even worse sort of violence is to follow, although in this case all the harm is to Michael. Julia has made Michael the gift of a handmade music copy-book, and it is a gift of love:

On the first few pages, in her hand, and with a dark brown
ink, so different from her usual blue, she has copied out
from my score the first eighty or so bars—in fact, the whole
of the first fugue—of the "Art of Fugue". (6.15)

Back in London, Michael sometimes fingers the book as a talisman and emblem of the love they have shared (7.2), but when he learns that Julia will be playing "The Art of Fugue" in concert (8.4), Michael destroys the gift in a quiet but shocking act:

Late at night, thirst wakes me, and then I cannot sleep. By my bed lies the book inscribed and scored by her. With water on my fingers I move along my part. Page after page I hear my smudging notes. The staff dissolves, the heads and stalks blur into mire, the water in my glass grows turbid brown. The wetness seeps into the neighbouring voices, onto the pages not yet traced and bleared. As if in worn-down braille my fingers touch my name, that once you wrote; and look, I cannot read it any more. (8.7)¹⁵

At the end of part seven, after Michael has thrown the LP recording into the pond and walked away from Julia (7.18), he returns to his "nest above the world," hoping to find peace (7.19). The persistently ringing telephone shatters any hope of tranquility, but despite the bizarrely comic conversation with the woman who is calling the London Bait Company, the part ends with repeated references to death. As Michael confidently informs the woman, "99.93% of those who used trout pellets in 1880 have subsequently died." After a gasp of surprise from the woman, the line goes dead, and Michael seems to be waiting for death: "I turn the ringer off and sit still, hour following hour, listening to nothing, waiting for nothing" (7.20).

After destroying the score, Michael begins rejecting the world, not answering the phone or opening a letter from Carl Käll. He finds the world to be "a brutal place," and even though he mistakenly still blames Julia for his situation, at least his sense of direction is correct—"Why must she spin me down into this place?" (8.6)—for

his life is rapidly going downhill. He begins removing memories of Julia—"rooms, books, meetings, the flecks in her irises, the scent of her skin"—from his mind: "let them be hauled away on weekday mornings, let them float off in helium balloons" (8.14). Paradoxically, this lightening of emotional ballast only causes Michael to sink further into his mental abyss, and soon he has a graphic warning dream of his descent:

But as I descended, the escalator shaft grew narrower and darker and I was alone. Everyone else had disappeared and except for my violin, which I had been ceaselessly playing, there was silence. Deeper into the earth the escalator descended, far past where it had previously stopped; and I could do nothing to stop it. I was no longer playing the three calm open chords, but a line of compelling, terrifying music that I only gradually recognised as my single, unsupported line of the "Art of Fugue". (8.26)

Just as Michael needs the harmonious unity of the woven braid of the quartet, so he needs to achieve balance in his life, and this necessity is imaged in the ancient elemental quaternity of earth, air, fire, and water. Michael, who bears the name of an archangel, lives on the top floor of Archangel Court (1.1), but that is a rarified extreme, and Michael is too airy and hollow. The psychological meaning of fugue is a mental condition in which one loses awareness of one's identity, which is often coupled with flight from one's environment, and those symptoms certainly fit Michael. He fled Vienna (and Julia) to become, in his words—words, significantly,

that are variants of fugue—"a fugitive in London" (2.18), living in a flat that has become "a refuge of light" (1.9). From the bed in his unadorned bedroom, he "can see only the sky" (2.5). The first time she visits his flat, Julia remarks, "But it's so high up here—so high above everything" (3.8), and that is part of Michael's problem. Trying to escape the feeling of things closing in on him, Michael has isolated himself to a damaging extent, and he variously refers to his flat as his "eyrie" (4.17), his "high lair" (4.25), and his "nest above the world" (7.19). In Vienna, too, Michael has a hotel room on the top floor (5.7).

Even though he is twice reprimanded for walking on the grass (2.3, 7.18), Michael needs to be more grounded. He seems to sense this, for when he is back in Manchester he always makes a point of making physical contact with the touchstone outside Bridgewater Hall, and when he and Julia are ordered off the Holland Park grass by the stern policewoman, Michael's impulse is to make contact with the solid stones: "Beyond the grass are smooth stones, the zen margin of the pond. I will touch you. Guide me... It is peace I need. I will go down to the water's edge and touch the smooth round stones" (7.18).

Yet this contact has its own dangers, and we remember the threat of metaphorical identification with stones that is posed in "A Little Distance" (The Humble Administrator's Garden).¹⁶ Moreover, the message from such contact may contain more threat than comfort, as Michael learns:

About noon I find myself at the Bridgewater Hall. I
have come to consult the huge, smooth-curved touchstone

outside. Today, when I pass my hands over it, it gives me an initial sense of peace; but from somewhere in its cold heart emanates a delayed impulse of danger. (2.14)

On a later visit, when he is wondering if he should flee London, the response is cold and of no comfort: "I embrace the touchstone. I press my forehead and my face against it. It surrenders no swift answer. It is very smooth, very cold, and in its heart very old" (8.32). No, the contact that Michael needs is not with cold stone, but the elevating contact that Michael first discovered as a boy when he lay in a grassy hollow on the moors and heard "the rising song of a lark" (1.10). Michael can recapture this as a man, and even though at first the hollow might seem to be only a barren recreation of his sterile flat—"I crouch in a hollow . . . and there is nothing but silence and sky"—Michael's spirit can again be uplifted by the "whistle of joy and energy that becomes a frenzied untrammelled song that rises higher and higher as the lark itself spirals unseen into the low grey sky" (7.12). The "silver chain of sound" that is the lark's song does not bind but links, and that will be music's final, necessary, and greatest gift to Michael.

In human terms, fire usually manifests itself as passion, and passion can be creative, inspiring, and supportive. The quartet is transfigured by its passion for and in the music it creates, and when they play the scale, the music transforms Michael: "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" (1.4). This is the knowledge that Michael loses and must regain, for it was the "soaring sound" of Handel's "Messiah" that first inspired Michael's

passion for the violin:

Into my mind comes an extraordinarily beautiful sound. I am nine years old. I am sitting between Mr and Mrs Formby in a state of anticipation. . . . A small, frail man enters to applause such as I have never heard before, followed by the strange, absolute silence of a multitude.

He brings down a stick and a huge and lovely noise fills the world. More than anything else I want to be part of such a noise.

. . . It was thus that I heard and saw the small and ailing Barbirolli re-create in the King's Hall at Belle Vue the soaring sound that rocked my head for days, and that, together with "The Lark Ascending", made me beg Mrs Formby to teach me to play the violin. (2.11, 13)

Unfortunately, passion all too easily and all too often rages out of control, and this danger is the constant underlying theme of Seth's works, so it is no great surprise that we see passion bring out the worst in Michael. He wants to play first violin in the Beethoven quintet he has uncovered—"the part that I had come to see and hear as mine"—and this selfish desire leads to murderous thoughts: "Piers cannot imagine how qualmlessly I would stab him with the poisoned tip of my bow" (2.17). When he meets Julia's husband, Michael's jealousy causes him to "feel half insane," "feel numb hatred for this decent man," and, most ominously, feel he is "not far from hating" Julia (4.27). Passion can easily verge into violence. After the first time they make love in Venice, Julia tells

Michael, "Your lips might be a bit gentler" (6.2), and before she leaves Venice, Michael has savagely wounded her with his teeth and tongue (6.17).

Passion can be exciting, and Michael feels "ecstatic" after making love to Julia in his flat, but passion also clouds the mind, and Michael allows his passion to mislead him into thinking that their relation can be renewed as before and has a future: "I hardly think of the future of our relationship, so dazed am I by the intimacy and disbelief and excitement of its renewal" (4.10). As Michael knows, passion can be virulent: "I am consumed by past love; its germs, long embedded, half contained, have grown virulent again" (5.13). And sexual passion, when it is neither licit nor appropriate, can also arouse powerful feelings of guilt and shame, as when Michael and Julia go upstairs at the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni:

We kiss for a long time. I sit on the bench, she sits astride me, I move my hands over her, and under her dress.

I whisper into her ear what I'd like to do, knowing she can't hear.

"Oh God—" she says. "Let's stop at once! Let's stop!"

Julia's instinct is right, and when they leave and realize that the old man has seen them on closed circuit television, Julia is suitably chastened: "'Let's get out of here,' says Julia, her face filled with horror, her cheeks red with shame" (6.9).

Water may douse fire, but it is a treacherous medium, as is suggested by "Otto Schnörkel" (3.11), the comic German name that

Michael uses in a fax to Julia, for one cannot breathe unaided when immersed in water. The Serpentine, despite its disgusting state, would seem to be a positive image, for swimming in it gives Michael access, as he realizes, "to a world outside Archangel Court and the Maggiore Quartet and Virginie's flat and the past and future and the ungiving pressure of my thoughts" (1.7). Even though it may not be evident, the Serpentine also suggests the possibility of progress, for, as a Water Serpent assures Michael before he becomes a member, "... it flows underground into the Thames" (1.7).¹⁷

In *An Equal Music*, however, water is primarily associated with Venice, and whereas it may suggest freedom, it also connotes instability and impermanence, even, by extension, death by drowning. Michael may feel that water is partly to account for Julia's increased sexual boldness—"it is as if this voyage by water and this unknown room have freed her from constraint" (6.2)—and he may enjoy following Julia's lead—"I am happy to be led on land, and even happier to be carried by water" (6.3)—but the phoenix has been rusted by water (6.9), Michael throws the record into the pond (7.18), and he destroys the score with water (8.7).

Instead of embracing cold touchstones, Michael should embrace trees, and he displays a healthy interest in them, which hints at the potential for change and growth that lies dormant in Michael. Making use of water and sunlight to grow up out of the earth into the air, trees are living emblems of wholesome unity. When Michael goes to the park, the plane trees are still bare, but he notices that the "weeping willows have come to life again" (3.19), and it is a positive sign that he loves "this season of wood" (4.1).¹⁸

In fact, it is wood, that precious product of trees, that

Michael needs to continue to cherish and embrace. Eric Sanderson's workshop is so comforting and pleasant because it is filled with different woods that will be made into violins, and Sanderson knows that the instruments he crafts and repairs are living things (3.14). When Michael fears the Tononi will be taken from him, he knows it will be a personal disaster—"Why must this thing of wood undo me?"—for he thinks of himself as a composite being: "By night, by day, I am half flesh, half wood" (8.8). When he is trying to remove all reminders of Julia from his mind, he no longer looks in his favorite kind of tree, the knobby and peeling plane tree, but his instinct to get as close as possible to his violin is precisely right: "Remove the chin-rest, feel its wood again" (8.14). And when the registered letter that will demand the return of the Tononi finally arrives, Michael takes out the violin, tunes it, and in the darkness of his cell plays it for what he believes will be a final time, but he is moved to a prayer of surprising and promising generosity:

But now it has swerved into the Vivaldi largo that I played on that miraculous day, there in his church. I play it, it plays me, and in the darkness of my cell I know that I will not hear the repeat, that it is time to cease, to beg the guardian gods of the woods from which it sprang that in its future life—and may it live another two hundred and seventy years—or more, or more—it will be treasured by its owners and fare well. (8.19)

Michael needs help, and, like John in *The Golden Gate*, he receives it from a dead woman. The dreaded registered letter is from Mrs

Formby's solicitor, but rather than confirming the feared separation from his beloved violin, Michael is informed that Mrs Formby has left the Tononi to him in her will, and in a dictated note Mrs Formby explains her generous act:

I want to help you increase the good times, and this is the best way that I can think of to ensure this. Besides, I can't bear to imagine my violin passing by sale into the hands of a stranger when it's been played by you for so many years.
(8.21)¹⁹

Michael can scarcely believe what has happened, but he knows its significance—"Your words have given me life . . ." (8.22)—so he writes a note to the dead Mrs Formby in which he acknowledges that his "life had shelved towards desolation" before what she has done for him, and he thanks her profoundly and jointly: "from soul and soundpost respectively" (8.25). In response to Mrs Formby's unparalleled generosity, Michael for the first time begins to think of the happiness of others rather than just his own, recalling Dr McNicholl's biting question: "For God's sake, Michael, haven't you hurt her enough?" (1.11, 8.27). He starts to be more considerate of his students, and he is surprised to hear an echo of Carl Käll in his emphasis:

"Must I prepare this by the next lesson?"

"Yes," I say, thinking of Carl. "You must."

I smile at him, and he, surprised, smiles back. (8.27)

Michael needs to be taken still more out of himself, but that is something music can do.²⁰ Before that can happen, however, he needs to make his way back to the quartet, and to do that Michael must stretch and grow as a person (7.3, 5). As Julia bluntly tells him, “. . . just go and get on with your life” (8.13), but that is not easy for a fugitive type to do. Fortunately, Michael receives still more help. In the emotional sleeplessness of his nearly disbelieving response to Mrs Formby's life-giving gift, Michael had asked himself a key question: “Is it the violin alone you want to give me, or must I learn some lesson from the world?” (8.22). In a novel filled with Michael's questions, this is the crucial one. The answer, which we can give with assurance, is a resounding “Yes!”, and the final sections are practically a chorus of encouragement and good advice. The girl at Etienne's tells him that he “should never freeze croissants” (8.28), and the implication is that he must unfreeze himself. Justin Fisher, the “sticky fan” who has been such an annoyance in the past (2.19), suddenly calls, and, in an unwitting echo of Michael's frequent multiple negatives, informs Michael that his temporary replacement is not to his liking—“No, no, no, it won't do”—and rings off with an absolutely clear command: “Return, and forthwith. Goodbye” (8.28).

On the way to Eric Sanderson's workshop, Helen and Michael begin talking about romantic attachments, but when Helen tentatively suggests they might renew their “one-off thing” in Kyoto, Michael tells her: “I, Helen, am no good to anyone. . . . I wish I could help myself” (3.13). Michael can help himself, but he must first realize that he can. He must realize that he is more than just someone who is “irreparably imprinted with the die of someone

else's being," as he reductively thinks of himself (4.9). He may not be able to regain the past and reclaim Julia's undivided love—he cannot, indeed, uncook an egg—but he can mend the braid that he has unraveled by leaving the quartet.

As a first step, he plays scales on his violin, though he plays them alone (8.29). He accepts an invitation to Nicholas Spare's party only because he knows Piers will not be invited, but that is the first person he sees. Piers, who has been drinking, immediately crosses the room, nearly pins Michael to the wall, and, after an emphatic greeting, blurts out: "Michael, come back." Helen is depressed, they all miss Michael—"It's not just that you're a fantastic player, it's that you're part of us"—and they did not play the scale with any of the others they have been trying out to replace Michael. When he hears this, Michael feels "the pricking of tears" behind his eyes, a sign that he is thawing and that, perhaps, his conscience is being pricked as well. Michael is shocked to hear that Jango, Billy's little boy, had been seriously ill with meningitis, and Piers points out that Michael has been "out of touch with the world" for too long.²¹ This prompts Michael's honest self-assessment—"I'm a selfish self-centred bastard"—but he tells Piers he will miss Julia's concert and remains evasive about rejoining the group, which leaves Piers looking at him "with troubled concern" (8.30).

Michael finally accepts that Julia is lost to him—"I met her in winter, and lost her before winter came" (8.31)—and goes north for Christmas. He places a white rose on his mother's grave, then drives to Blackstone Edge, where Mrs Formby's ashes have been scattered (8.21, 8.33). In a sacramental act, he crumbles some Christmas pudding onto the snow, and then Michael plays a tribute

to the spirit of Mrs Formby, before going on to perform a surprising act of catharsis and healing:

I get the violin from the car. I play a little from "The Lark Ascending". And then I tune down the lowest string to F.

My hands are not cold, nor my mind agitated. I am in no dark tunnel but the open moor. I play for her the great unfinished fugue from the "Art of Fugue". No doubt it makes no sense by itself, but she can fill in the parts that I can hear. I play it till my part runs out; and listen till Helen too has ceased to play. (8.33)

The shock is that the name he names is Helen, rather than the expected Julia, which dramatically announces that Michael is no longer obsessed with Julia and is again thinking of himself as a member of the quartet. Just as in the Wigmore performance, when Michael had rejoined the trio without conscious thought, so too has he rejoined them at this moment.²²

Michael returns to London and goes directly to Wigmore Hall, but Julia's concert is sold out. In his desperation to get a ticket that may have been kept aside, Michael tells the young man in the box office, "I've played here before—I'm—I'm with the Maggiore Quartet," thus confirming his own identity as a member of the quartet and telling us that he has found his way back. In a panic at not having a ticket, Michael's response when Billy speaks to him is remarkable and revealing: "Oh, Billy, Billy—I've been standing here—I—oh, Billy—I was so shocked to hear about Jango." Michael

is no longer the selfish self-centered bastard he had thought himself, and his new generosity of spirit is matched by Billy's, as Billy forces his ticket upon him: "Take it . . . Don't argue, Michael. Take it and go. Go" (8.34).

Just as in Vienna, Billy and Julia combine to help Michael, though this time they act individually, and Julia's help is in her music. As Julia begins playing "The Art of Fugue," Michael recognizes "a beauty beyond imagining," the achievement of the sublime. When Michael was new to the quartet, he saw something that greatly surprised him:

Piers had slightly averted his face. It astonished me. Piers is hardly the sort of musician who weeps soundlessly at the beauty of scales. I had no idea at the time what was going through his mind. Perhaps, in playing the scale again, he was in some sense letting Alex go. (1.4)

Michael leaves at the interval, and the rain washes his tears away, but they have been tears of elation, not tears of regret or sorrow. Like Piers, Michael has been able to let go of a former lover, and in rejoining the quartet in his mind he has begun regaining his best self and freeing his constricted spirit. Sublime music can sublimate the darker passions and transmute them into something pure, ennobling, and uplifting. Michael's soul has again been borne upwards by the same kind of beautiful, soaring sound that first elevated his spirit as a boy. As Michael has learned, through a long, painful, and costly process, "Music, such music, is a sufficient gift" (8.35).

Notes

¹ Leila Seth, *On Balance: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2003), 104. Later, while living in Patna, "Vikram was entranced by Asha," the wife of the Personnel Manager, with whom the Seths shared a palatial old bungalow, "who sang melodiously and, apart from North Indian classical music in the khyal style, was also fond of bhajans and thumris" (142). Mala Pandurang, *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2001), in writing about *An Equal Music*, remarks that "Seth's keen interest in music is evident in his earlier creative writing" and gives a few examples, mentioning only *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy* (152).

² Cynthia Haven, "Poetic License," *Stanford Magazine* (May/June, 1999) 9 Mar. 2003 < <http://www.standordalumni.org/news/magazine/1999/mayjune/articles/seth.html> > .

³ Debashish Mukerji, "A Suitable Author," *Interview*, *The Week* (9 May 1999) 15 Jul. 1999 < <http://www.the-week.com/99may09/life2.htm> > . Seth begins his "Author's Note" at the end of *An Equal Music* with the following statement: "Music to me is dearer even than speech. 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." We can be thankful he did, for critics have been unreserved in their praise of Seth's ability to write about music from the inside. See, for example, John Carey, "Music for the Mind," rev. of *An Equal Music*, *Sunday Times* (28 Mar. 1999), who refers to the novel as "a wonder-work: irresistible, tense, deeply moving. It solves the problem of writing about music by putting music back

into the people who perform it . . ." As Cynthia Ho, "Vikram Seth," DLB 271: British and Irish Novelists Since 1960, ed. Merritt Moseley (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2002), later summarized critical reaction: "the most highly praised element of the novel is the way it accurately represents the social and musical dynamics that govern string quartets" (314).

⁴ See the following comments on Seth's versatility as a writer: John Carey, "Is there anything Vikram Seth cannot do?"; Jay Nordlinger, "Seth, Rhymes with 'Great,'" rev. of *An Equal Music*, *National Review* 51:9 (17 May 1999), "He seems to have no proper home and no literary limitation" (60); Akash Kapur, rev. of *An Equal Music*, *Salon Books* (13 May 1999) *Salon.com*, 15 Jul 1999 < <http://www.salon.com/books/review/1999/05/13/seth/index/html>> , "No two books of his have been alike"; and Neelam Srivastava, "Seth, Vikram," *The Literary Encyclopedia* (30 Oct. 2002) 14 Feb. 2005 < <http://www.LitEncyc.com>> , "...he has radically changed genre and setting with nearly every book he has written."

⁵ Seth did not want to write a first-person narrative, as he told Jay Currie and Michele Denis in an interview, "Hearing a Different Music," *January Magazine* (June 1999) 9 Mar. 2003 < <http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/vseth.html>> :

I didn't want to write in the first person, especially about a character I feel somewhat ambivalent about. The only way I could write about music in the first place was to talk from inside his thoughts, otherwise it would just sound like program notes or something. Having decided that, then I had to talk about everything—love, obsession, the other

characters—through Michael rather than through what I'm used to, which is the omniscient or semi-omniscient narrator.

⁶ *An Equal Music* (London: Phoenix; New York: Broadway-Random, 1999). Since pagination varies among British and American hard- and paperback editions, references are to part and section rather than page number.

⁷ Pandurang quotes part of this passage, noting how "Seth evocatively describes the sensuous relationship between man and instrument..." (160).

⁸ This is not a betrayal. Michael is quick to reject what he does not believe (Virginie on opus 104, for instance) or does not want to accept. Giving in to Michael's repeated pleas to play the first fugue, after she has given him the handmade copy-book at the Palazzo Tradonico, Julia finally says: "All right...But this isn't something I would ever play for anyone but you" (6.15). Given the situation and Julia's condition, what she said was appropriate, but she meant that she would not be doing it then and there and in her state for anyone else but Michael; she was not vowing to never again play "The Art of Fugue" for anyone else. Michael later blames "The Art of Fugue" for his inability to play (8.5), but we know it is his own fugue state, his impulse to flee and become a fugitive.

⁹ William Butler Yeats, "Easter 1916":

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.

I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

(The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 4th ed., 1089)

¹⁰ Julia's statements are much briefer but essentially similar to Lata's explanation to Malati of her feelings and the reasons for her decision in *A Suitable Boy* (18.21).

¹¹ Katherine Knorr, "Vikram Seth Plays to His 'Truest Judges,'" *International Herald Tribune* (23 Apr. 1999) 9 Mar. 2003 < <http://www.ihf.com/IHT/KK/00/kk042399.html> > , precisely captures Michael's condition:

Michael seems curiously and permanently in mourning for his life, for Julia, a woman he left in Vienna 10 years before 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.

¹² In a comic parallel, we see Michael's Auntie Joan refuse to let go of the past:

"I never forgave Maggie Rice," says Auntie Joan, her eyes on the TV.

"What was that, Auntie Joan?"

"Maggie Rice. I never forgave her."

"What didn't you forgive her?"

"She tripped me up at the Whit Friday races."

"No!"

"Her excuse was that I had won twice before. I never spoke to her again."

"How old were you?" I ask.

"I was seven."

"Oh."

"Never forgot, never forgave," says Auntie Joan with satisfaction. (2.10)

¹³ John Carey is right to notice that often in Seth's writing, "Ordinary events gather sombre symbolic weight," such as "the steel door of the lift in [Michael's] Bayswater flat sliding shut across the glass panel through which he can see Julia's troubled smile."

¹⁴ This is a grimly humorous variation of John's desperate attempts to wring meaning from things that have no meaning in *The Golden Gate*:

..... day by day, withdrawing
From every thought but those that bring
Her life to life, he tries to wring
Meaning from things that have no meaning,
And scrapes at rusted words that yield
Few glints of insight. (13.26)

¹⁵ Shirley Chew, "The Art of the Fugue," rev. of *An Equal Music*, *Times Literary Supplement* 5009 (2 Apr. 1999): 22, has noted the scene's power: "... tonal contrasts, when they occur, are the more powerful, and nowhere is this so apparent or shocking as in the scene in which Michael... sets about disfiguring and obliterating the score... which [Julia] had copied into a notebook as a... present for him."

¹⁶ The sunbathing pair would appear to be a romantic couple, but the speaker, fearful of emotional risk, prefers a chaste relationship, and thus the couple are metaphorically reduced to the inanimate condition of "the warm grey boulders."

¹⁷ Katherine Knorr provides us with the interesting information that Seth was a Water Serpent himself:

Swimming 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 slivers and shards that you can't always see, and they can tear into you. I love swimming there, the back stroke."

¹⁸ Michael's surname is a final letter in excess—though still a homonym—of holm, the name of a type of evergreen, the holm oak. There may be a suggestion of this link when Michael sees some evergreens and recalls that Virginie referred to them as “persistent” (8.28). For her birthday, Michael gives Julia a bonsai that will have to be watered every other day: “If she does not tend it, it will certainly die” (7.10). Later, when Michael has frightened her with his insistent, puzzling references to Carpaccio's dog, we hear that Julia is not happy about the constant reminder:

“The bonsai—”

“Yes,” she says bitterly. “Yes. It's well. It's very, very well. A brilliant present. I suppose I should thank you.”

(8.13)

¹⁹ Seth makes an unannounced appearance here, for the name of the solicitor, Keith Varms, like Kim Tarvesh in *The Golden Gate*, is an anagram of Vikram Seth. This might also be a quite subtle reminder that outside the confines of Michael's narration there is a benevolent author who will not allow Michael to be cruelly separated from the Tononi he has played and loved for so long.

²⁰ We find clear and instructive examples of this in *A Suitable*

Boy, particularly in the thematic subplot of Ishaq Khan and Ustad Majeed Khan (6.2, 6.17, 6.27), for music is one of Seth's favorite examples of a vehicle that enables one to transcend oneself.

²¹ Jango, who is only mentioned a few times, is important here because he is very musical and particularly sensitive to discord, as was shown when Billy brought him to one rehearsal (3.9). That Michael can now be concerned about Jango's recent illness suggests that he will now be more sensitive about others and more aware of and sensitive to the discord he has caused by withdrawing from the quartet. This is shown again, even more dramatically, when thoughts of Jango break through his panic at not having a ticket to Julia's concert (8.34).

²² During their performance of Haydn's Quartet in A major, Michael's "most beloved quartet," Michael is completely immersed in the music:

But the part I like best is when 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 Tonomi is stilled. My bow lies across my lap. My eyes close. I am here and not here . . . 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.

(2.20)