



An Equal Music

Vikram Seth

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The author of the international bestseller **A Suitable Boy** returns with a powerful and deeply romantic tale of two gifted musicians. Michael Holme is a violinist, a member of the successful Maggiore Quartet. He has long been haunted, though, by memories of the pianist he loved and left ten years earlier, Julia McNicholl. Now Julia, married and the mother of a small child, unexpectedly reenters his life and the romance flares up once more.

Against the magical backdrop of Venice and Vienna, the two lovers confront the truth about themselves and their love, about the music that both unites and divides them, and about a devastating secret that Julia must finally reveal. With poetic, evocative writing and a brilliant portrait of the international music scene, **An Equal Music** confirms Vikram Seth as one of the world's finest and most enticing writers.

An Equal Music Details

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From Reader Review An Equal Music for online ebook

Lisa says

I was disappointed in this book. I was looking forward to a novel that had lots of musical detail in it and it definitely succeeded there, and the writing about playing was excellent. But the prose surrounding the main plot of the novel was extremely self-conscious, overwrought and annoying. I didn't find much to like in the main character (beyond his talents as a musician, which came across) and couldn't see any reason for this great love that existed between him and Julia.

Kevin Ansbro says

Seeing this much-lauded novel on one of my bookshelves yesterday reminded me to post a review.

I read this several years ago, when it was being feted by culturati luvvies the world over.

"A masterpiece ... as clear, lovely and civilised as a Schubert quartet" -Daily Mail

"Seth follows the heart's changes as rigorously as if they were the interweaving lines of a Bach score, and, at its frequent best, his prose, as he intends, is as clear, lovely, inexorable, as a fugue." -Evening Standard

I, on the other hand, found it self-conscious, pretentious and bland.

The writing, though beautifully lyrical, cannot hide the fact that the book is big on the technicalities of classical music, but low on thrills.

This isn't helped by a central love story that is altogether shallow and emotionless, and which didn't engage me one bit.

5/5 for Seth's superb writing: 2/5 for the substance.

Debbie says

This book appealed to the writer, the artist, the poet in me.

This book reads like poetry.

Each sentence, phrase, group of words, a symphony, a melodic soliloquy of language speaking fervently and in depth to the heart, mind, body, soul, bone, marrow, blood.

I read, rather sang this book from page to page.

Finding myself enveloped, enraptured within the music of each verse.

Intoxicated, melding myself comfortably between cover and cover.

Eyes closed, mind open.

Entranced, I became one with Michael's lonely violin and
was caressed in phantom memory by Julia's tinkling fingers.

Mesmerized by the music

or was it the words.

Vikram, oh Vikram, what a poem, what a song, what a book.

I was *Equal* with the *Music*.

Khush says

'An Equal Music' is indeed a musical story. The language is immensely beautiful, throughout the book, one sees how much time human beings spend in tuning 'things' so that they can live in harmony. In this story, we see how the characters struggle with notes, compositions, and life. Both music and life demand the same things, it is only in moments when right notes are struck joy, bliss and happiness is attained momentarily, perhaps. Most characters in the story, not only in the practice sessions but in real life too, search for 'an equal music.'

While Seth dedicates the book— through a beautifully worded poem— to his intimate friend Philippe Honore. In addition to this, the book opens with the following luminous lines of John Donne.

"And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud, nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but one equal music, no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity."

These lines, in some very significant ways, clarify Us to ourselves. All of us, knowingly or unknowingly, strive to attain that space of 'one equal eternity.' For some, such searches are even more daunting. In the novel, to me, the story of Michael, at least in the beginning, reads like the story of a homosexual man. In first thirty pages, we seem him playing, practicing music, talking to friends, but his real love— Julia— appears much later whom he sees through his window seat. With his current girlfriend, he is hardly at ease; and the one that he truly loves is elsewhere— nowhere in sight. What he really has is himself: his walks, his music, his books, his thoughts, these are the things that actually sustain him. In a way, this acute loneliness and search for an equal 'space' run throughout the novel.

There are small instances in the book that mirrors 'experiences' central to gay lives. For instance, in one of his walks Michael thinks that someone is walking behind him, noticing him, and after having noticed him, the anonymous person seemed to have made up his mind and walked with renewed energy and overtook Michael— indicating lack of interest. In yet another instance, Michael talked randomly with a man on one 'wintry' evening, the whole scene reads as if he were cruising; one man is seen taking a dip in icy water, the other, being lonely, wandering for no particular reason; both searching for 'something.'

Anybody who likes western classical music would love reading this book, even though I am not particularly familiar with it, I loved how seamlessly the story is entwined with the language of music.

However, the search for eternal home, love is an everlasting searching. One can live 'bliss' in moments, one can glimpse it many times, but one cannot inhabit it fully and forever. Maybe the world that still tries to stifle certain 'kinds of love,' a search for such a 'love' is even more exhausting. But there is no need for any of us to despair, no matter what kind of love one is drawn to— 'speakable' or 'unspeakable.'

The book ends on a great hopeful note, justifying the title and the story.

“Music, such music is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music— not too much, or the soul could not sustain it— from time to time.”

Smitha says

Am not equal to dissecting or reviewing An Equal Music.

Suffice to say that it was a wonderful experience, especially to a person who is not passionate about classical music and who doesn't know the ABCD thereof.

Though I couldn't comprehend differences between D minor, F etc... i enjoyed reading about the musical dilemmas.

Loved the interaction between the music fraternity.

The poignant bitter love story was an added bonus.

Mike, Julia, other members of the quartet and the whole premise of this beautifully crafted take will remain with me for ages to come.

The almost musical language in which the tale was told is the strongest attribute of this book.

personal note - BR with Gorab. I own a beautiful paperback.

Reindert Van Zwaal says

There is one thing the book really excels in: describing music.

Musical aspects are really recognizable (if you are a musician) and well worked out.

You can almost feel it flow out of the pages during rehearsals and concerts that take place.

The plot was interesting, although there wasn't much happening in the middle of the book.

Writing is almost poetical in some parts, somehow matching the love and music themes.

Kailash says

I have never gone as low and as fast in my opinion of a book as with 'An Equal Music'. After the first 25 pages, I felt that I'd stumbled on to something incredible (no doubt helped by the very simple writing, which was a refreshing change from Salman Rushdie's tediousness); but after a 100 pages it became clear that it was incredible, just the wrong type - incredibly bad.

The story is about a violinist who is reunited with his lost love after 10 years. She has re-married and has a child, yet sees nothing wrong in getting involved with him again, with remarkably little wooing from him. They have fun for a while and then she leaves him again. I know I make it sound crass, but that really is the story. There's a lot of musical stuff involved, as both of them are musicians, but that is incidental to the story.

For a book that presumes to talk about emotions and sensibilities, it is remarkably devoid of sentiment and feeling. That's the first problem. The other problem with this book, an ostentatiously realistic novel, is that it

is not grounded in reality. There is no semblance of consistency, logic, even common sense to either the story, the narrative, or the characters. The narrative progresses at such a slow pace that even a snail would get tired following it. There's no thread of consistency or even a shred of believability about the protagonists' actions. It's as if they don't think at all; and all their actions and words are based on whims! The lead character is so contradictory that one gets the feeling that 4 or 5 diametrically opposite personalities have been squeezed into one. All this is very bad. What pushes it to infuriatingly bad, is that the two protagonists living in a very real world with very real problems, are so far removed from reality. It is hard to feel anything but contempt and strong loathing for them. As if that weren't bad enough, these inconsistent characters show an appalling lack of moral strength as well.

And the last straw? The writing becomes more and more pretentious as the story progresses. As if, at the beginning the writer wasn't sure about his abilities and as the book became longer he realized that he has suddenly become a good writer. To paraphrase a very apt quote - 'It's not the quantity of pages written, but the quality on the pages, that makes a good writer'.

The praise for this book was led by the Daily Telegraph - "The finest novel about music ever written in English". I will counter that verdict with mine - "A most infuriating book with the worst conceived and realized characters that I've ever come across in any book".

Laura says

This is the story of the Maggiore Quartet composed by Michael, Piers, Helen (brother and sister) and Billy.

However the main plot involves the love story between Michael - a music student in Vienna and Julia McNicol, a pianist.

After a nervous breakdown, Michael unexpectedly leaves Vienna as well as Julia. A few months later, we didn't manage to contact Julia.

By a faith of destiny, ten years later, Michael saw her in a bus in London, tries to pursue her but she got lost in the traffic.

While in a concert of the Maggiore Quartet, she attends one of their concerts and meets Michael again. However, now she is a married woman with a young son.

When Michael and Julia meet he learns through her son that she is gradually going deaf due to an autoimmune disease. Even so, Julia agrees to join them to a tour in Venice and Venice where their love story becomes vivid again. However, life reserves some surprises to these main characters.

I really liked the book, not with the same intensity as with "A Suitable Boy" and the reading was slow-paced in the first half of the book. And perhaps if I had a more deep knowledge on classic piano music, I would enjoy more this book.

3* A Suitable Boy

3* An Equal Music

TR Two Lives

Beth says

Dive into the heart and mind of a obsessive, melancholy, melodramatic violinist who can't let go of the love of his life, a person who he had ditched out on. But seriously, this is a beautifully written book about love and music and loving music. I am not a professional musician, I played piano when I was young, but not that well, and to the reviews I've seen that found classical music oriented parts of the book to difficult or too obscure or too distracting, so as to be suitable only for those with expert knowledge of classical music, well I say "Nonsense!" That's the point, you get a look at a *different* world and you learn something about it -- bonus time! The love story is tricky and interesting, though a bit of a downer. Don't be looking for a happy ending. Vikram asks whether you can recapture the past and it looks like the answer is no.

This book was very psychological, first person, every detail about what is going on with the main character/narator. What I liked even more than the music and the psychology and the tricky love story was the depiction of life in an ensemble. Wow, you think romantic relationships are hard? Check out what goes on in the string quartet

I liked this book a lot; I liked *The Golden Gate* even more. This guy can write fabulous engrossing books that make you want to stay up all night reading them.

Julia says

The smell of rosin on a bow, the satisfaction of slow scales played with a partner, the sleepy somnolence of working a piece through in your head just before sleep - I miss these things. I forgot them too. Vikram Seth lent them back to me this week.

I've read *An Equal Music* before, quickly. This read, with bed rest time to spin through, I read it page by page, at half tempo. It was delicious. Seth recreates the world of a violinist in a string quartet, bringing in the human element of chamber music, and, more bravely, the music. Music is frustratingly difficult to write about - what seems glorious to experience becomes trite on a page, or simply does not show up. But Seth does it well, mixing chewably real details with tone poem text to help you hear the music.

Jay says

I even question giving this book as much as 2 stars. This is an adequate but unimpressive character study about professional musicians and the lives they lead, but is cancerous plagued by a main character so supremely and wholly unlikable that I cannot fathom why Vikram Seth wrote him that way. He doesn't gain anything or change, not really. He is only barely more infantile at the end of the book than at the beginning. The entire main plot of this book is technically serviceable, but serves no real purpose. If I hadn't been reading this for a class, I wouldn't have been able to get more than a third of the way through.

Page99 says

The book is about music, love and struggle. It's not a typically happy book – because it shows you a lot of happiness and then takes it away. I've come to believe that it's a soulful book.

Michael Holmes is a violinist. He plays for the Maggiore Quartet. He's in love with Julia McNicholl. Julia is a very gifted pianist. Julia and Michael go their separate ways and before they meet again, Julia would have married and have had a child. They meet. Love and music is in the air. And then it isn't. Not love, not music. There is the proverbial trouble in paradise, with an added complication. Julia is losing her power of hearing.

The plot is as unique as there ever will be. The writing bears a little heavy on floral and arboreal descriptions of parts in and around London. The characters however, are very engaging. Every character is in shades of grey, which always excites me. There is no good or bad guy. There are two sides of the coin for characters, for relationships, for music. And therein lies *An Equal Music*.

The review continues at <http://page99.in/blog/2013/06/20/an-e...>

James says

This is a beautiful love story and it is a musical tale. The importance of music cannot be emphasized too strongly for, from the title page to the last paragraph music permeates each character. The protagonist, Michael Holme has a spiritual connection with music and with the instrument, a Tononi violin, that he uses to express his music. This goes beyond playing a piece of music, whether Schubert or Bach or Beethoven, and enters his soul and through the prose of Vikram Seth enters the soul of the reader. The description of the music and its effect on various characters was superb. As a musician myself I appreciated the depiction of the canon of classical music (at least the Viennese portion).

The theme of love also transfixes the reader from the opening of the story when Michael is pining for his lost love through the fugue-like complications of his relationship with Julia throughout the novel. The melodrama of the story is overcome by the irresistible tension of their love. The result is a deeply moving narrative that this reader found difficult to set aside.

Rachel Stern says

I was surprised by how much i loved this book. It's blow off your travelling companions and curl up in your youth hostel until you finish it good. It's finish it and then wish you hadn't so you could read it again for the first time good. The tension in the love story is addictive. But what I loved most was the way Seth writes about music. the way he integrates music into the lives of the characters (all professional musicians) is more than convincing, it's intoxicating.

Pallavi Kamat says

So I read this book for the 2nd time and found it to be even more amazing than the 1st time around. It's a story of Michael and his music quartet, and it's a story of Michael and Julia and their love.

If you are a music lover, then this book will be a buffet for you; Seth talks about so much music throughout - there's Bach and Schubert and Beethoven and Mozart and their musical pieces in great detail!

If you aren't a music lover, you can just enjoy Seth's poetic prose and his descriptions of London, Vienna and Venice.

Seth is a great storyteller and the book draws you into the story right away. Pick it up as soon as you can, you won't be disappointed.

Some sentences from the book:

Life settles into an unbearable aloneness.

We shouldn't rush into things. We shouldn't dawdle out of things, either.

That was not a farewell. That was an au revoir.

Why get upset about where the universe is headed? When there's so much to get upset about closer at hand?

If you don't have any sense of discrimination, you enjoy many more things.

Why taint such sporadic joy with long views before and after?

What suasion will you use on one who lacks a will?

If I left this darkness and this blankness, it would not make the universe sneeze.

C. says

I read almost half of this book yesterday, and was left somewhat perplexed. There was some nice writing about music, but apart from that - *nothing*. I mean, there was a plot and characters and so on, but so banal! So mundane! Well, ok, so maybe it wasn't completely banal and mundane - love and so on, of course. Deafness. Children and marriage in the wrong places for our brave protagonist. But it was slightly dramatic in such a conventional way! Why?

A good author should be able to make the slightly dramatic fascinating. I believe Seth to be more than a good author: I believe him to be a great author. In *A Suitable Boy* he raised the mundane and the banal to the level of the sublime. The plot of *An Equal Music* is on the surface much more interesting, but really the only reason I read even as much of it as I did was because of my respect for Seth.

I've caught myself wondering a couple of times over the past few days - wondering what will happen next to silly Richard (I don't think that was his name - he wasn't memorable enough) and mildly annoying Julia (that was her name) and sort of looking forward with an easy anticipation to a few hours of lazy low-level pleasure on the couch reading this tome, before realising that the book is a few hundred kilometres away in country Victoria and I am in suburban Melbourne. Maybe this says something about it: I got a similar sort of enjoyment from it as I'd get from reading some romantic trash or racy thriller, but without the dirty, greasy feeling afterwards.

More importantly, though: there was no feeling of regret when I realised that it is there and I am here.

Sarah Milne says

There are things I loved about this book and things I did not love, but the bottom line is that after finishing it I sat for 15 minutes and just pondered it. That's good. I have read a few reviews stating a disdain for the narrator - he's whinny, he's selfish, he's annoying. Yes, those things are true enough. But I like that Seth didn't make a heroic main character. The fact is that a person going through a failed love affair generally tends to be those things. Argue with that all you wish! I feel that the resolution - which I imagine some probably feel could have been clearer - was that music was enough for him. I like that. I wish he had gone on for a few paragraphs more (at least), but perhaps the strength here is that it leaves the reader to continue pondering. This may be a book geared more for those who also share a deep love for music - I'm not sure how it would go over for anyone less invested in it. But who knows! Beautifully written, and it says just enough without giving away too much. A lovely read.

Cheryl says

Your words have given me life and taken sleep away. The park gates open at first light. Slate-grey and coral, dawn is reflected in the pool. The flowers have been turfed under in the sunken garden. The chack of a squirrel, the splash of a small duck, a blackbird hopping about beneath the thinned-out linden hedge: this is all. I am alone with this troubled joy.

That beautiful, gray day when I found you, *Equal Music*, a parallel to those drops of hard rain on windowpanes. Go to the used bookstore where it is so dirty you smell the cat's litter when you enter, but never mind, for you have a cup of strong coffee to sip, books to browse, the sound of rain making music on glass, and oh yes, a book that has music in the title, music in the soul, and love to guide the narrative.

The choices we make in life affect our journey at each vital point. Maybe at some point we breathe a sigh of relief, maybe we take only a moment of retrospective remorseful silence, or worse, we live each day regretting the ones we loved and lost. Is love enough, these characters and musicians must figure out. The Quartet is the core of love, the music they play, life's pulse; each note delves into innermost feelings. The musician lives for the music. The violinist and pianist reunite and suddenly everything seems warm, depression gives way to heartfelt music, flowers bud warm, bright colors, grappa goes down warm, an agent lands them a great deal and all is well with the world. Or is it?

I put my hand on my shoulder where your head rested. Then I say your name once, twice, a third time, a fourth. Some nights I sleep like that, remembering you; some nights I only sleep as dawn comes on.

When a poet pens prose he adds beats and descriptive words soar. Transcendence. The broken heart beats. The violinist tunes to F and there goes a lower, deeper beat. Bach, the sound of pain and pizzazz elucidated through notes. Lyrics on the page, a narrative flow that soothes. Michael and Julia. Love, the sound of two heartbeats. Gondolas, the pulse of a city on water. The cello, melancholic yet pure, like the beat of raindrops on fallen leaves. Vivaldi, your Baroque makes my heart beat.

Lynne King says

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.

I was absolutely enthralled with Seth's two novels "The Golden Gate" and "A Suitable Boy" and so I couldn't wait to start reading this book. But it turned out to have an odd effect on me as I alternatively loved and hated it. I couldn't understand this at all. I put the book down for a day and started again; but still this dichotomy of loving/hating the book remained. But why? This was beyond my comprehension as I really admire this author.

"An Equal Music" came highly recommended to me. Everyone seemed to love it and the subject matter was brilliant in that it was based around the famous Maggiore Quartet comprising Michael (one of the two main individuals in the book), Piers and Helen, brother and sister, and Billy.

Apart from my passion for reading, photography and gardening, I'm enthralled with classical music and this book promised me so much in that regard.

The book on the whole is lyrical and there are indeed some mesmerizing passages but I feel that it really doesn't have any soul. Michael and Julia, a pianist, had met ten years previously and he had never forgotten her. One day he's on a London bus and sees Julia on a bus travelling in the opposite direction. This was magnificent to read and the travels to Vienna and Venice are quite magical but I found myself becoming more and more incensed with the relationship of our two protagonists, which appeared to be so contrived. And the great secret? Well words fail me here. Try to imagine a married woman with a young child, who is recommencing an affair with Michael who in turn then suddenly discovers something quite untoward.

In addition, Michael to me lacked passion, true passion. I think that really the only thing he ever loved apart from his music was his violin, the Tononi which in turn led him a merry dance. He had been loaned it many years before by an elderly neighbour, Mrs Formby and always lived in constant fear that she would insist upon its return for one reason or another. The prose throughout the book, nevertheless, is exquisite regarding this instrument.

The doorbell rings. It is the registered letter from Rochdale... Shall I play you and then give you up? Shall I give you up unplayed, so that the memory of our parting is not marred with sounds; so that Bach is not joined by other losses: Mozart, Schubert, all that gives me life. What would I play if not that, what would I play if not here? "Tea for Two" chez Tricia? The dog-food for my old, tired teacher? The untrembling scale with my estranged friends? "The Lark Ascending" in honour of a dispersed spirit?

The gift however that Julia finally gave him was musical; he had always been so moved by her playing:

Music, such music, is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music – not too much, or the soul could not sustain it – from time to time.

I feel so sad that I did not find this book all embracing. There's nothing worse than disappointment in an author who normally has me entranced. However, another book... Another time.

Gorab Jain says

3.25

Since reading A Suitable Boy a couple of years back, I was highly impressed by the writing style and character sketch of Vikram Seth.

An Equal Music has been on my radar since then. Got a paperback recently, and the beautiful cover added to the charm of diving into this. BR with Smi motivated me further.

What I loved:

1. Chapters are structured exactly like A Suitable Boy. Small chapters with indices like 1.1 to 1.13 etc.
2. Gripping right from the start.
3. Excessive use of musical jargons, which were difficult to comprehend, but added the touch of reality.
4. The descriptions! All the descriptions were mind blowing good. Especially the quartets practice sessions, chasing their passions, the European ambience and descriptions of emotional dilemmas.

What I couldn't appreciate:

1. The plotline wasn't very appealing.
2. The middle parts (5 and 6) felt unnecessarily stretched.
3. Its not fair to compare, but this fades significantly in front of ASBoy.

Overall: A very comfortable and enjoyable read.
