

**AN EXPLORATION OF
MUSIC, VOICES,
MIRROR IMAGES AND PLACE
IN *AN EQUAL MUSIC*
BY VIKRAM SETH**

by

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DECLARATION

I, MD Botha, declare that this research report is my own, unaided work, except as indicated in the acknowledgements, the text and the references. It is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Limpopo. It has not been submitted before, in whole, or in part for any degree or examination at any other institution.

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SIGNED ON THIS 3 DAY OF July, 2008

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**Remember,
Information is not knowledge,
Knowledge is not wisdom,
Truth is not beauty,
Beauty is not love,
Love is not music,
Music is the best**

Frank Zappa

**Music gives a soul to the universe,
Wings to the mind,
Flight to the imagination,
And life to everything**

Plato

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Dedication

To Louis

Abstract

In my mini-dissertation I have endeavoured to explore *An Equal Music* (1999) by Vicram Seth with regard to its literary merits, which are informed by Western Music.

The research expands on, and discusses, the importance of elements of music, voices and mirror images as inspired by the mirror fugues in the *Art of Fugue* by J.S. Bach (1749), as well as the alliance between music and place in the novel, thereby demonstrating that there exists throughout a clearly defined relationship between music, characters and events.

This study investigates the complementary and reciprocal roles played by literature and music in the novel, as all events take place against the background of Western classical music.

Introduction

Vikram Seth is an author of high repute, not only as novelist, but also as poet, and has been the recipient of numerous literary awards, most notably the Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award, the WH Smith Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. In addition, he was presented with the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award by the president and government of India, for outstanding achievement in his chosen field of enterprise. A singular honour was also bestowed on Seth in that he, with the collaboration of the Decca record company, could bring out a double CD of the music mentioned in *An Equal Music*, performed by artists of his own choosing.

Certainly any work by an author of such excellence warrants exploration and analysis. A personal lifelong interest in both literature and music has focussed special attention on this novel, as it has great literary merit, and music informs all action and events.

This research expands on, and discusses the important elements of music, voices, and mirror images as inspired by the mirror fugues in *The Art of Fugue* composed by JS Bach (1749), as well as the alliance between music and place in the novel, thereby demonstrating that there exists throughout a clearly defined relationship between music, characters and events.

Contextualisation and Problem Statement

All action and events in the novel take place against the canvas painted by Western music. The two main protagonists are musicians, and to a great extent music determines the course of their lives. The author also, as in the reading of the Beethoven quintet score by the Maggiore quartet, stresses the almost mystical relationship that exists between composer, music and performer.

This study investigates the challenge or problem inherent in demonstrating the close alliance between music and literature in the novel, and in exploring the various aspects of music which have special bearing on the course of events. Such aspects are voices in the music, mirror images and the importance attached to place and composer.

The importance of place is emphasised when, for instance, Michael and Julia, the main protagonists, are in Venice, and undertake a pilgrimage to the church in which the composer Vivaldi had played his own compositions. For Michael this visit is enhanced by the fact that he has the opportunity to play his Italian violin, the Tononi, in the church, when he and Julia together play one of Vivaldi's most beautiful works.

Aim

This study investigates the complementary and reciprocal roles played by literature and music in the novel, as all events take place against the background of Western classical music.

Objectives

This study demonstrates various aspects of music the author introduces and explores in *An Equal Music*, such as the voices in a fugue, the functioning of a string quartet, and, in certain sections of the novel, the close alliance between music and place.

The study furthermore illuminates the mirror images in the novel, intimating awareness on the author's part of the mirror fugues within *The Art of Fugue*, the composition by JS Bach (1749), which mainly features in the novel, and mostly influences the course of events.

Rationale

There seems to exist a large corpus of criticism concerning the literary aspects of *An Equal Music*, but the various elements of Western music, as well as the interaction between literature and music in the novel, have not been explored in depth.

Significance

This study should enhance the knowledge of all students interested in investigating the genre of novel writing, as well as provide valuable insight into the work of an author who combines the art of novel writing with knowledge and sensitivity regarding the art form of music.

Methodology

As the most appropriate procedure for the purpose of this study, the qualitative research method has been used.

In this instance a descriptive study has been conducted by investigating and analysing the primary text. A secondary study has been based on critical material such as articles, reference books, dissertations and theses on both the author under scrutiny, and on the novel, as a specific genre in the literary field. The internet has also been consulted. Further study has concentrated on the form and characteristics of the fugue, with specific reference to *The Art of Fugue* by JS Bach, and the seminal role the author ascribes to this composition in *An Equal Music*. Additional research has consisted of an analysis of the classical fugal form, concentrating on the mirror fugues in *The Art of Fugue*. The methodology has also entailed analysis of the novel to reveal the influence of Seth's understanding of the intricacies of the fugue, and of his wide knowledge of Western music.

Literature Review

In his essay on John Galsworthy, DH Lawrence (in Lodge, 1972:21) states that “we judge a work by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else”. Certainly this rather sweeping statement is true regarding our enjoyment or otherwise of novels, as novel reading and judgement remain essentially a completely subjective exercise.

Specifically regarding novel writing, in his essay *Morality and the Novel*, Lawrence (in Lodge, 1972:127-128) maintains that

the business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circum-ambient universe, at the living moment ... The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance and untrue outside of its own time, place, circumstance.

The concept of place is important in *An Equal Music* (Seth, 1999), as the author deliberately moves the action to various cities, not only with regard to the circumstances surrounding the characters, but in order to ally their emotional experience with musical experience, as it is music which essentially informs all their actions, and certain places are associated with certain composers, for instance Venice and Vivaldi.

Probably Lawrence's (in Lodge, 1972:131) most compelling statement is that “the novel is a perfect medium for revealing to us the changing rainbow of our living relationships”, and one becomes ever more aware of the essential truth of this statement when one accompanies the two main characters in *An Equal Music* (Seth, 1999), on their emotional journey through the novel.

Apart from its appeal to the emotions, the reader has come to expect the presence of certain literary elements in a novel, as Scannell lists them in *How to Enjoy Novels* (1984:21-35), namely language, plot, character, dialogue, atmosphere, imagery and symbolism, entertainment, and discrimination. All these elements are present in *An Equal Music* (Seth, 1999), and notable is the excellent use of language, in accordance with the statement by Scannell (1984:22) that “the major novelist uses language with that almost obsessive regard for each word's rightness – its meaning, associations, sound, colour and texture – that the best poets display”.

An author, of course, depends on language for the method of narration in a novel, as narration will determine the point of view. In *Literature*, Roberts and Jacobs (1995:180) reflect that

point of view may be regarded as the centralizing or guiding intelligence in a work – the mind that filters the fictional experience and presents only the most important details to create the maximum

possible impact. It may also be considered as a way of seeing, the perspective into which a work of art is cast.

The authors (Roberts and Jacobs, 1995:183) further state that “of all the points of view, the first person is potentially the most independent of the author, for such a speaker is often given a unique identity...”.

This statement is most appropriate regarding Seth's novel, as Michael, the main protagonist, is a first person narrator. This lends far greater impact and immediacy to the novel, and leads the reader into Michael's world of thought, emotion, and musical experience.

Sandved defines a fugue (Latin: *fuga*, meaning 'flight') as follows:

The fugue is the most exacting of all musical forms ... Its name indicates the way in which the voices or parts “flee” from each other. The fugue begins with the so-called exposition, in which there is presented a subject or theme which is introduced by the first voice and serves as a basis for the whole fugue ... All voices enter with the subject. Once the first voice has introduced it and it has been taken up by the second voice, the first voice sings a counter-subject, with which it continues after the other voices have entered with the subject. When all the voices have sung the subject, the exposition terminates.

~ Sandved c.1950:795

Bach's last considerable instrumental work, *The Art of Fugue* (1749), is thought to be “the largest instrumental composition of the Baroque period, and it forms the definite end of an epoch ... Bach here gives the quintessence of his contrapuntal knowledge ... and shows how one and the same theme can be varied and utilised” (Sandved, c.1950:69-70).

In his introduction to the revised and annotated edition of *The Art of Fugue* (Bach, 1749), Jones (2002) gives the following explanation:

In essence, *The Art of Fugue* comprises a series of contrapuntal variations upon a single theme ... with fugue and canon as its constituent forms. As it proceeds step by step from simple to complex, multiple forms of variation are simultaneously operative.

The Art of Fugue, might well be viewed as “one of the loftiest accomplishments of the human mind” (David and Mendel, 1999), as this study undeniably illustrates.

Chapter One: The Music

It is vitally important to realise that in *An Equal Music* Seth has placed all characters and events in a subservient position to the music. Certainly, as in all romantic novels, there appear male and female protagonists. They are the main characters, but the main element in the novel is undoubtedly the music. Michael, the violinist, and Julia, the pianist, as well as the members of the Maggiore quartet, are all music driven, as music determines all their thoughts and actions. Music is not only the determining factor in their lives, but the author also lets it be understood that it elevates and inspires them in a unique way. No single character ever rebels against, or even questions his or her allegiance to music, continually overcoming personal problems and financial difficulties to pursue a chosen way of life. In his philosophical treatise, *The Secret Power of Music*, David Tame (1984:20) states that “we discover this timeless flame of ageless wisdom preserved in musicians who ... have combined academic knowledge and the practical experience of music with a genuine and earnest inner spiritual development”.

Tame further quotes from *Theme and Variations* (1972), a treatise by the world famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who states in the opening sentences:

Music creates order out of chaos; for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent, melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous.

Thus a confusion surrenders to order and noise to music, and as we through music attain that greater universal order which rests upon fundamental relationships of geometrical and mathematical proportion, direction is supplied to mere repetitious time, power to the multiplication of elements, and purpose to random association

~ Menuhin in Tame, 1984:14

All the musicians in *An Equal Music* obviously only feel that their world has order and substance when music dictates its rhythm. They are, though, through the music, also privileged and able to enter a sublime realm whose doors remain closed to those of lesser talent and less acute perceptions. It is imperative never to underestimate the significance of the listener in the musical experience. Opening mind, spirit, and intelligence to the waves of sound, lowering all defences, and allowing the music to penetrate to the core of being, also requires a specific talent. Without the musician to interpret them, the composer’s notes would forever remain little black blotches on paper. Without listeners, the musician would forever be playing in a vacuum. Tame gives a striking description of this mystical experience and relationship which exists between music, performer, composer and listener in relating his own

experience when attending a concert in London's Royal Festival Hall. Interestingly, it was a Bach concert, and Bach's *Art of Fugue* (1749) is the major work featured in *An Equal Music*. Tame, though, attended a performance of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*, and states:

Then, *literally from the first note*, the timeless moment was upon me. Yet I was already far beyond the ability to reflect consciously upon it, for the experience was all-encompassing. It left no scope whatever for any other mental activity other than to *be* the perceptions to which my mind now seemed to have been opened...

My perceptions were opened as though they had always before been firmly closed. Never had I heard music in that way! What previously I had often listened to as abstract sounds were now *Sound* – a tangible, living filigree lattice-work of mathematical precision which I could almost reach out and touch, and which I could virtually see as it flowed out from the leading violin. Every note hung suspended in the air, timeless and immaculate beyond all powers of verbal description

~ Tame, 1984:20

Seth drew his inspiration for the title, *An Equal Music*, from a sentence written by the poet John Donne, which is quoted in full at the beginning of the novel:

And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but *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.

~ Donne, in Seth, 1999

The reader may therefore assume that Seth is familiar with the poetry of John Donne, and that there is an oblique reference to Donne's poem, *Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness*, in Seth's depiction of the musical experience of his characters. The third and fourth lines of the first stanza proclaim that

I shall be made thy music: as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door, ...

~ Smith, 1986:347

In a similar way all the musicians in the novel become and live the music they perform.

In their work *Literature* (1995:183), Roberts and Jacobs reflect on the fictional experience, and state that “of all the points of view, the first person is potentially the most independent of the author, for such a speaker is often given a unique identity...” In Seth's

novel, Michael, the main protagonist, is a first person narrator, and the impact and immediacy with which the reader is led into Michael's world of thought and intense emotional and musical experience, demonstrates the validity of this statement by the authors.

Michael describes how music first entered into his life when he attended a Schools' concert, and, fascinated by a violin solo about a lark, visited an old family friend, Mrs Formby, and told her about it. She promised to take him to a performance of Handel's *Messiah*, and this event changed his life forever:

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 noise.

~ Seth, 1999:67

It is clear that Music has marked this little nine year old boy for her own. That such a young child should be so inspired, is Seth's way of subtly underlining Michael's enormous talent. Throughout the novel, the author never blatantly states that the characters are supremely talented, but rather brings this to the reader's awareness in more oblique ways.

During the *Messiah* the desire is born in Michael to become a violinist. Mrs Formby is his first teacher, and afterwards, when he has completed his studies in England, and she learns that he is going to study in Vienna under the great Carl Käll, she entrusts her extremely valuable Tononi violin to him, which becomes his most prized possession.

During his studies in Vienna he meets Julia, and between them there develops a very deep and apparently abiding love. Their love of music has brought them together, and sharing this enhances an already perfect relationship. When Michael reminisces about their relationship, he remembers that Julia

had an acuity, a gentleness unlike anything I was used to. Perhaps what she saw in me was a corresponding strangeness – a volatility, a sense of resistance, of scepticism, roughness, impulsiveness, even at times, of dark panic, almost brainsickness.

~ Seth, 1999:81

These last two elements in Michael's character come to the fore when he feels that his music is threatened, and will contribute to force a separation. Michael finds Carl Käll's way of teaching unbearable. Musically speaking, they cannot agree, and because Michael feels that his music is under threat, to him this becomes a life-threatening situation; the reader is left in no doubt that his decision to leave Vienna is instinctive. He does not even stop to think of the

implications for their relationship, but returns to London. "Love or no love, I could not continue in that city. I stumbled, my mind jammed, I felt the pressure of every breath ... I came to London. The smog dispersed, but too late" (Seth, 1999:5). For the following ten years he mourns the loss of Julia.

If music had been the cause of their forced separation, the redemptive and healing powers of music are Michael's saving grace during the next ten years. He is invited to join the Maggiore quartet as second violin, and his description of their rehearsals and performances, brings the reader to an understanding not only of the depth of his emotions, but illuminates what is probably the most important element in several interpretations of the title, *An Equal Music*. He describes the almost mystical relationship which exists between performer, listener and composer, an equality of experience, with the music elevating them into the realm of the sublime, as during a performance of Haydn's *Quartet in A major*:

... in front of us 540 half-seen beings intent on 540 different webs of sensation and cerebration and emotion, and through us the spirit of someone scribbling away in 1772 with the sharpened feather of a bird.

I love every part of the Haydn. It is a quartet that I can hear in any mood and can play in any mood ... My eyes close. I am here and not here ... A flight to the end of the galaxy and perhaps a couple of billion light-years beyond? ... I can hear myself playing. And yes, the fiddle is under my chin, and the bow is in my hand, and I am.

~ Seth, 1999:86-87

So intensely aware is Michael of the vibrant presence of the composer, that the moment does not exist between audience and musicians only, that, in his description of the performance of the Schubert *Trout Quintet* in Vienna, the composer's voice becomes superimposed on his own:

Thank you, then, my fellow citizens, for listening to this here, for your acute attentiveness to what is the mere elaboration of a song; my one concert was also under these auspices, and ... after the interval you will hear what I would myself have been pleased to hear through gut and hair and wood, not merely through the music of my mind. But it was the year I walked to Haydn's grave; it was the year I died; and the earth took my syphilis-riddled flesh, my typhoid-ravaged guts, my vainly loving heart many times around the sun before my quintet for strings was heard by human ears.

~ Seth, 1999:240

The composition, *The Art of Fugue*, by the German composer Johann Sebastian Bach, is the music to which Seth refers most frequently in the novel, and it is a part of this composition which contributes to Michael and Julia meeting again after an interval of ten years. The Maggiore had decided to play the first item of this work, the *Contrapunctus 1*, as

an encore for a performance in the Wigmore Hall, and so beautiful has Julia found their rendering of the music, that she decides to come backstage. She and Michael find themselves as strongly attracted to each other as always, and after a few meetings she eventually comes to his flat. To Michael's disappointment he learns that she is married and has a child, but he shares his conviction with the reader that he still feels he can lay claim to possessing more of her, and to knowing her better than even her husband does, because he knows her inner musical self: "But I feel I know her uniquely – as this man who lives with her cannot – in the core of her being: the great, fraying cord that links her to her music" (Seth, 1999:168). When Julia comes to Michael's flat, highly charged with emotion as the atmosphere is, they do not make love, they reach out to each other through music. The first time she visits, Julia plays the slow movement of Mozart's *Sonata in C major, K330*. The music is calm and pellucid, and reflects their joy at finding each other again, with, at that moment, none of the complications in their relationship which will later appear.

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

~ Seth, 1999:133

Even in this moment of deep joy at finding Julia again, Michael translates the experience into music – it is not Julia, but Mozart who drops the notes into his mind.

The second time Julia comes to the flat there is music again, but now, inevitably, a duet, a prelude to making love, an action they have both hungered for for the past ten years. "She kisses me. I hold her in that soundless room, far from daylight and the traffic of Bayswater and all the webs of the world. She holds me as if she could never bear to let me desert her again." (Seth, 1999:137). They have chosen the slow movement from Mozart's *E minor for Violin and Piano* to play together, but in her playing Michael notices "again, as with yesterday, and intentness, an inwardness ... a lovely subtleness imbues her music; and, by conduction, mine" (Seth 1999:136).

It is later when he receives a long letter from Julia, that this "intentness", this "inwardness", is explained, when she writes that she is slowly but surely going completely deaf. To Michael, this is shattering news. Surely nothing more catastrophic can happen to a musician. He loves Julia devotedly, but now has to realise that although their "blood beats in one pulse" (Seth, 1999:170), they inhabit different worlds, not only physically, but, of far greater importance, musically, as entrance into her world of unique musical experience is barred to him.

Through a quirk of fate, Julia accompanies the quartet to Vienna as pianist for Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. Inevitably, the other players have to be told about her affliction, and although the rehearsals are perfect, Julia announces her intention of never playing in ensemble again. Michael finds this infinitely distressing. He is haunted by the fact that part of her musical life has come to an end. "It is a death, a passing; for will she ever? – she will not ever – play with anyone again" (Seth, 1999:239).

So great is Michael's distress and empathy that he suffers a nervous breakdown during the playing of the *Trout*, and temporarily loses his own hearing: "My ears cut out on me, I cannot hear, but I know these agile fingers have possession of the piece. Their intonation is perfect. The fingers are mine, the board on which they dance is of ebony. This silence I hear, is this what she is confined to?" (Seth, 1999:239). An era in Julia's musical life has come to an end, and Michael dies the death of that era, and feels his whole world dissolving.

In this immensely stressful situation, Seth emphasises the redemptive quality of music. Michael has to go back on stage to play his part in the quintet, but is physically quite unable to do so, as his mental perturbation renders him helpless. Then Julia sees a manuscript of Schubert's hanging on the wall of the green room, and they play the song through together. This calms him to the extent that he can play his part in the quintet. He realises that their future is dark, but draws strength from the music:

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

~ Seth, 1999:242

From Vienna the quartet proceeds to Venice, and although she will not play with them, Michael has persuaded Julia to come with, and the two of them will live in a friend's apartment. Of course they associate Venice with Antonio Vivaldi, Venice's greatest composer, and visit Vivaldi's church. During this visit the reader is made acutely aware of Michael's unique relationship with his violin. At times he seems to regard it as an extension of himself, otherwise, as in this instance, as a separate person. When they find the church closed, he states that he "can feel my Tononi moping" (Seth, 1999:267). When he had visited Mrs Formby in Rochdale he had told her that he was going to visit Venice, where the violin, still the property of Mrs Formby, had been made. "So I'll be taking it back to its birthplace for a visit. That should make it happy" (Seth, 1999:69).

When at first they are not allowed into the church, he is convinced of the violin's deep unhappiness, and when they are eventually allowed inside, Julia convinces him that he has to play there, to which he replies that if he does not, "I suppose my violin would never forgive

me” (Seth, 1999:268). For Michael, these are moments of pure enchantment as Julia, who has vowed never to play with anyone again, then accompanies him in a rendition of the *Largo* movement of Vivaldi's first *Manchester Sonata*. There is, however, a very important other element in his joy: “It is rapture, ... and my violin clearly feels it has been written personally for it – for it to play here” (Seth, 1999:269). From the first moment that Mrs Formby lent him the violin, Michael has enjoyed this intimacy with the instrument. This is especially notable when the possibility exists that he may lose it to Mrs Formby's cousin. He desperately wants to ask her for the fiddle, because “I love it and it loves me. We have grown to know each other ... Its sound is my sound” (Seth, 1999:69). The reader is brought to realise that to Michael this “sound” has far wider implications than making music – it expresses the vibrations which emanate from the core of his being.

When the threat of parting with the violin is imminent, he addresses it as both friend, and as part of himself, and one realises that in the final analysis music will remain as his life giving force: “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, so that Bach is not joined by other losses: Mozart, Schubert, all that gives me life” (Seth, 1999:358). He does play – music that he regards as a lament, and which springs from the heart of the violin itself. “Farewell then, my violin, my friend. I have loved you more than I can say We are one being, but now we must part and never hear our common speech again. Do not forget my fingers or our voice” (Seth, 1999:359).

Eventually Michael inherits the violin from Mrs Formby, and this is a saving grace in a time of spiritual desolation when he has finally lost Julia. During their sojourn in Venice she takes the decision to return to her husband and son, and leaves Michael in a state of utter despair.

In his exposition on the art and aspects of novel writing, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt states:

The daily experience of the individual is composed of a ceaseless flow of thought, feeling and sensation ... yet it is the minute – by – minute content of consciousness which constitutes what the individual's personality really is, and dictates his relationship to others: it is only by contact with this consciousness that a reader can participate fully in the life of a fictional character.

~ Watt, 1964:191-192

Certainly the validity of this statement is clearly demonstrated when, at and after their parting, Michael takes the reader with him on the emotional journey of a tortured spirit. When Julia has to catch her flight, his mind becomes virtually unhinged with grief, and one is allowed glimpses of his troubled, wild thoughts:

A walk at the end of the world, the earthquake plate, alone; the mudflats of subsidence and flood, and the hermitage of the one who found the true cross ... Grief and rue, grief and rue, break the erring heart in two ... there she must be ... viewless and hurtling on the winds ... From above light darkens upon red pillars, the colour of algae, and music floats on the unsanded shelves and shoals ... Let all and no things come to pass, for how will I pass these days?

~ Seth, 1999:292, 293

Only music helps Michael to retain a degree of sanity, as the quartet continues to give performances throughout Venice, and Michael can cling to his violin: “Yes, I have got to where I am from somewhere else. But I too am subject to higher powers – to music...” (Seth, 1999:300).

Eventually Michael returns to London and, he hopes, to Julia, but she steadfastly refuses to resume the relationship. His music remains the one constant in his darkened world: “So I play ... My violin senses where I am veering, and keeps me to the path that is direct and spare” (Seth, 1999:335). At that stage the possibility arises that he may lose his violin, and he begins the agonising process of leave-taking. While still convinced that he has only a few months left with the Tononi, the Maggiore has to rehearse for a recording of the *Art of Fugue*, and this is the moment when Michael suffers a complete breakdown and finds himself quite unable to play. During their sojourn in Venice Julia had given him a handwritten score of the *Contrapunctus I*, the first fugue in the *Art of Fugue*, had played it with him, and had sworn never to play it to anyone else ever again. Just before the rehearsal he hears that she is going to give a recital of the *Art of Fugue*. He sees this as an act of the utmost betrayal, and with this comes the realisation that their relationship has irrevocably reached its end. Having to play under these circumstances is suddenly impossible, and he realises that he has lost all co-ordination. “It was that fugue that coiled all this around me. It led her to me, and that night, she played it. It is the unpaid remnant of the gift she promised me and then defaulted on” (Seth, 1999:344). In his desperation Michael does the worst thing possible – he resigns from the Maggiore, thereby depriving himself of his life blood, music.

When he is notified though, that he has inherited the Tononi, he regains his mental equilibrium, and in a state of calm acceptance visits Mrs Formby's grave, where he, in tribute and gratitude to her, in the depth of winter, plays the violin: “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*” (Seth, 1999:379).

The reader is forced to the conclusion that the loss of Julia shatters Michael's world, but the loss of his violin would have dissolved it. Even in his desolation he remarks: “Do not dramatise this. It's just love, it's not a limb. How far does this dramatisation, this sensitisation

extend? ... Is all this worthy of your violin?" (Seth, 1999:368). The loss of his violin would not have been "just love", it would have been like losing a limb, because "by night, by day, I am half flesh, half wood" (Seth, 1999:348).

Towards the conclusion of the novel there are faint intimations that he will rejoin the Maggiore, and, although he had not originally intended to do so, he attends Julia's recital. He at last experiences a catharsis when, in tears, he walks into the rain-soaked night, reconciled to his loss, but recognising that to him, "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" (Seth, 1999:381).

Julia lives and moves in a thrice-shattered world. The first storm she had to weather was Michael deserting her when they were both music students in Vienna. Later, when they are together again and discussing this period, she tells Michael that she had slowly gone to pieces and had thought of him "as if you'd committed suicide – without leaving a note" (Seth, 1999:189). During this period however, her music studies had helped her to survive, and before she meets Michael again, she has found a great deal of happiness and contentment in her marriage and her little boy.

The second tremendous issue she has to contend with is the knowledge that she is slowly going deaf. By introducing this theme, Seth addresses quite a few different issues. Surely nothing more calamitous can happen to a musician, therefore this enhances the dramatic impact of the novel. A second issue is of course whether a deaf musician can in fact still practise his or her art. In the *Author's Note*, Seth assures the reader that he has researched this phenomenon extensively, also amongst musicians, "to get some sense of what it might be like to live, to have lived, and to expect to continue to live in the zones that lie at the intersection of the world of soundlessness with those of heard, of misheard, of half-heard and of imagined sound" (Seth, 1999:Author's Note).

One condition for a deaf musician to perform, Seth does not mention outright, and that is that the musician should possess prodigious talent – mediocrity will gain no entrance into this world. That Julia is a musical genius Seth demonstrates by the clear analogy he draws between her and the great German classical composer, Ludwig von Beethoven. Concerning Beethoven and his affliction, in *The World of Music* it is stated that "the darkest shadow over Beethoven's life was his ever-increasing deafness. Even before his thirtieth year he noticed to his horror that he was beginning to lose his hearing, and to begin with he made every effort to keep it a secret ... In 1802 Beethoven realised he had to abandon all hope of improvement. His despair is expressed in a letter dated October 6, which has been called the 'Heiligenstadt

Testament' " (Sandved, c.1950:183). The letter is addressed to his two brothers, and he gives the reason for his sometimes inexplicable behaviour:

'Ah, how was it possible I could acknowledge weakness in the very sense which ought to be more acute in me than in other men? ... But how humbled have I felt when someone near me has heard the distant sounds of a flute, and I have heard *nothing*; when someone has heard a shepherd singing, and again I have heard *nothing!* Such occurrences brought me to the border of despair, and I came very near to putting an end to my own life. Art alone restrained me!

~ Sandved, c.1950:183

Julia also views her art as her saving grace when she states that "I hate my deafness. If I were blind I would have coped better. If it weren't for music I'd be a mess" (Seth, 1999:328).

Similarities between Beethoven and Julia serve to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between music and literature, as Seth draws heavily on the musical history of the composer to aid him in the composition of his own literary work. As Beethoven had written to his brothers to explain his deafness, Julia writes an explanatory letter to Michael, and, like Beethoven, has continued to practise her art and to find solace in that. As she states, "so much of what one hears is in the mind and the fingers anyway" (Seth, 1999:150). Seth's research is clearly demonstrated in the way in which she tells Michael that

it was a strange transition from the world of sound to the world of deafness – not soundlessness, really because I do hear all sorts of noises, only usually they're the wrong ones ... As for making music, since I do play chamber music still, I have learned to judge – from the bow, the fingers, the change of posture, the visible upbeat of breath, from everything and nothing – when to play and at what tempo. You heard my sad new virtuosity the other day with the Mozart.

~ Seth, 1999:152

The third issue Seth addresses, is that Julia has entered into the world of the deaf, and this causes heightened tension in the novel, and emphasises distance between her and Michael. It warns the reader that not only can Michael never enter into this domain of reading sound rather than hearing it, but that the eventuality may occur of total impenetrability between their worlds. In an excellent demonstration of situational irony, Seth illustrates this possibility when Michael sees Julia passing him in a bus, and pounds on the window of his own bus, calling out to her as loudly as he can : "She cannot hear me. We are in separate worlds" (Seth, 1999:41). He does not realise that she is already deaf, and the glass windows of the two buses are symbolic of their eventual habitation of separate spheres.

Her fast progressing deafness forces Julia to explore music in new ways – those of filtering music through the mind and into the fingers, and to cope with the frustration of never quite hearing other musicians. When she and Michael discuss her condition she tries to

explain this: “All the subtleties of other people's playing are lost to me now. So when I come to play something myself, especially something I've never played before, I'm absolutely forced to be original...” (Seth, 1999:253). Despite her affliction, she succeeds excellently well, until she reaches a stage where her relationship with Michael is seriously affecting her musical ability, and, when her music is under threat, she writes him a letter in which she ends the relationship: “I can hardly play the piano these days. It seems as if my heart stops when I play” (Seth, 1999:324). She admits that she still loves Michael, and always will, but, as in his case ten years previously, this is not only a conscious decision, but an instinctive choice. At all costs, the music has to survive, and through the music, Julia's survival is assured.

Seth maintains that a musician can overcome deafness, as he allows Julia to have the greatest musical triumph in the novel when she gives a solo performance of the *Art of Fugue*, affording her audience a unique musical experience. Her playing is chosen to become a demonstration of the novel's title: “There is no forced gravitas in her playing. It is a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely, inexorable, phrase across phrase, phrase echoing phrase, the incomplete, the unending 'Art of Fugue'. It is an equal music” (Seth, 1999:380).

Another aspect of music which Seth explores is that of ensemble playing, and he achieves this by weaving the Maggiore string quartet into the story. The quartet also illuminates another facet of *equal music*, as the four players are absolutely equal. Although there is a first violinist, the other three are indispensable for the correct interpretation of the music. Although the members of the quartet, with the exception of Michael, are not depicted as fully rounded characters, the reader does meet them as individuals, basically through each one's unquestioning determination to practise his or her art, and each one's intimate relationship with his or her instrument. Piers needs a new violin, and is willing to cripple himself financially, even bidding seventy four thousand pounds at an auction for a violin with which he feels that he could bond. When he loses the bid, he feels as though tragedy has struck, and he sighs “a long, half-sobbing sigh. In his eyes are tears of frustration and despair” (Seth, 1999:341). Helen, Piers' sister, plays the viola, and the reader also joins her in her quest to find a viola which will successfully lend itself to the variant tuning required for the *Art of Fugue* which the quartet is to record, and shares in her joy when she finds such an instrument. Billy is the cellist, and whenever they have to fly, a seat on the plane is always booked next to him for his cello.

Yet these widely divergent personalities merge into one through the medium of music, and Seth expresses this unity of thought and action extremely well in Michael's words: “No matter how fraught our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive

our disputes ... or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it ... we are, when it comes to it, one” (Seth, 1999:10).

In the fact that their lives have become entangled through their music, there lies both joy and frustration, as Piers struggles to define the qualities of this apparently strange musical entity: “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” (Seth, 1999:199). As Michael maintains, the “platoon” is often under fire, not because of criticism from the public and critics but because of their unity. At the core of their “one-ness” may also lie the seeds of discontent and dissension, waiting to germinate: “it is our proximity to each other which, more often than we recognise, constricts our spirits and makes us stranger than we are. Perhaps even our states of exaltation are akin to the dizziness that comes from lacking air” (Seth, 1999:76). Yet the fact that they are one will always reign supreme, and, as always, Seth accentuates the omnipresence of the composer, when Michael describes the Maggiore playing the encore to conclude their recital in the Wigmore hall:

We are playing the first Contrapunctus of Bach's 'Art of Fugue' ... We play with such intensity, such calm, as I never imagined we could feel or create ... We play in an energised trance ... Our synchronous visions merge, and we are one: with each other, with the world, and with that long-dispersed being whose force we receive through the shape of his annotated vision and the single swift-flowing syllable of his name

~ Seth, 1999:90

As in the case of Michael and Julia, Seth indicates in a subtle way that the other members of the quartet are also immensely talented. Michael hears that Beethoven had himself re-arranged his third piano trio as a string quintet, and then instigates a long search for the recording and score of this music. When Michael's efforts are eventually crowned with success, he is transported when he listens to the beauty of the music. “From the moment, a mere ten bars from the beginning, where it is not the piano that answers the violin but the violin itself that provides his own answer, to the last note of the last movement ... I am in a world where I seem to know everything and nothing” (Seth, 1999:54). He is then of course eager for the quartet to share in his joy and takes the quintet along for them to play at their next rehearsal. As they are able to sight read this extremely difficult music at the correct tempo, with perfect intonation and expression, the reader realises that this rehearsal is Seth's way of underlining their talent. Again he points to the almost mystical relationship between the music, the artists and the composer:

How good it is to play this quintet ... to play for our own joy, with no need to convey anything to anyone outside our ring of re-creation ...

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

~ Seth, 1999:79

Every rehearsal of the Maggiore begins with a scale of three octaves which the four members play in unison. Gradually the reader becomes aware of the fact that this scale is not merely an exercise, but that for each one of them it opens the door into the sublime realm of music itself. Michael defines this experience by stating that when he plays the scale “I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will, I free myself” (Seth, 1999:10). Obviously he experiences the playing of scales on an esoteric level. When he is in danger of losing the violin to Mrs Formby's cousin, he consoles himself by playing scales: “Tune the strings though. Play scales. More than father, mother, friend or lover, it has companioned you ... Play scales on it...” (Seth, 1999:354). Piers, the first violin, also reiterates the mystical qualities of the scale when he tries to persuade Michael to rejoin the Maggiore, and tells him about the other players they auditioned, because they have to fulfil their contract to record *The Art of Fugue*: “But I associate you with the 'Art of Fugue', Michael. So do we all ... God knows how we'll manage to get the feel of it without you. Everyone else is on probation. They're all sort of OK, more than OK, but we couldn't play the scale with any of them” (Seth, 1999:374). Obviously they felt that without the scale, they could not lay bare the heart of music.

In word-play on the word “scale”, when they have returned to London from Venice, and Michael is forced to realise that the final parting from Julia is very near, he continually thinks of her: “I walk here and there, and you play Bach for me. Is love so light in the scale?” (Seth, 1999:303). In Michael's case, despite himself, despite him being in torment about Julia, in the final analysis, love is lighter than the “scale” with all which that entails.

This is clearly demonstrated when he describes the quartet's first rehearsal of the *Contrapunctus 1*, and, agony forgotten, is enchanted by the music:

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.

~ Seth, 1999:308

In conclusion, this chapter has clearly illustrated the interwoven processes of artistic creation, and the ability of good art to engulf the reader audience.

The following chapter will focus on the intricacies of literary and fugal voices.

Chapter Two: Voices

The composition most often referred to in the novel is *The Art of Fugue* (1749) by Bach. *The World of Music* describes this, Bach's last considerable instrumental work, as follows: "The work is the largest instrumental composition of the Baroque period, and it forms the definite end of an epoch ... Bach here gives the quintessence of his contrapuntal knowledge, 'a mine of choice jewels,' as the work has been called" (Sandved c.1950:70). *The World of Music* further quotes the conductor and Bach specialist Heinz Freudenthal as maintaining that "We find everything in the composition: learning, knowledge, all the possibilities of expression. And it comprises not only Bach's own knowledge, but is the quintessence of the whole Baroque period" (*ibid.*). In his introduction to the revised and annotated edition of *The Art of Fugue*, Jones (2002:9) quotes David and Mendel as proclaiming that this composition might well be viewed "as one of the loftiest accomplishments of the human mind". Jones (*ibid.*) further states that "theory and practice, composition and performance, study and the delight of the spirit, are all integrated here as indissolubly as in all Bach's major keyboard works". The work was first published by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, son of the great composer, and Jones quotes him describing *The Art of Fugue* as "the most perfect practical fugal work" (*ibid.*). It is entirely understandable that Seth chose this magnificent work to complement his own literary effort, as, to a great extent, this music is the thread in the novel which ties incidents one to the other, and which often illuminates moments of deeply felt emotion. In fact, the whole of *An Equal Music* may be regarded as a literary fugue. In order to explore this concept it is necessary to investigate the nature and construction of the fugue as a musical entity, as well as to discuss the Baroque era from which it sprung. With reference to this novel, the most important feature of a fugue is that it is written in voices, and, as will be demonstrated, during the course of *An Equal Music*, the organisation of characters and events often gives rise to the formation of minor fugues.

The Oxford Companion to Music explains this phenomenon as follows: "The word fugue, 'Fuga' in Italian or 'Fugue' in French, means 'flight' (Scholes, 1944:337). Seth echoes this as Michael describes the quartet's rendering of a Mozart quartet: "In the fugal – or rather, fugish – last movement... we do what a fugue – especially a quick one – should do: take flight" (Seth, 1999:87). *The Oxford Companion to Music* continues: "A fugue is (shaped) in a fixed number of melodic strands – called **Voices**, the form being obviously in its origin a choral one ... The idea seems to be that the opening of a composition of this sort gives the impression of each 'voice' as it enters chasing the preceding one, which flies before it" (Scholes, 1944:337). The name therefore indicates the way in which the voices or parts "flee" from each other. It has to be stressed though, that there is no dominant voice.

Nowhere is the equality of voices more clearly demonstrated than in the first fugue, the *Contrapunctus 1* from *The Art of Fugue*, the first page of which is included.

Soprano = Red

Alto = Green

Tenor = Orange

Bass = Purple

The first page of the *Contrapunctus 1* clearly demonstrates the interweaving of voices in a fugue. Rests - when a voice is temporarily silent - have been circled. The attached CD comprises the entire fugue. Understanding and musical experience may be enhanced by listening to the whole of *Contrapunctus 1*.

Understanding of the term “Baroque” is essential, as this period in music gave birth to the fugue. *The World of Music* states that “The fugue was the musical form of the Baroque period in the same way as the symphony was the most characteristic expression of the classical age” (Sandved, c.1950:70). In the discussion on the historical background of the Baroque era *A Performer's Guide to Music of the Baroque Period* explains the term as follows:

The Portuguese used the term *barocco* to describe a flawed pearl. The French version, *baroque*, continued throughout the eighteenth century to imply the bizarre or grotesque. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768): 'A baroque music is that in which the harmony is confused, charged with modulations and dissonances, the melody is harsh and little natural, the intonation difficult, and the movement constrained'. Only during the twentieth century did the term take on its implications of bold, decorative, confident and flamboyant. This certainly describes the underlying spirit of the age, despite the rich variety of styles throughout the 160 years ...

~ Burton, 2002:3

Although *The Art of Fugue* overarches all music in the novel, and is the model for its literary complement, notable minor literary fugues appear, and in their context the early meaning of the term “Baroque” is significant, as the intricate web woven by the voices is often disturbed by an intrusive dissonance, when the melody becomes “harsh and little natural”, and “the movement constrained”.

The major literary fugue in the novel, comparable to *The Art of Fugue*, is formed by the four voices of the music, the main protagonists Michael and Julia, and by their love – love lost, regained, and eventually forsworn. All concerns in the novel are subject to this central conceit.

The first fugue on a smaller scale is formed by the voices of the music, Michael, Virginie and London. As Seth moves the action to various cities, each with its own atmosphere, each exerting a particular influence on the characters, it becomes obvious that each place has its own individual voice. When the novel commences, Virginie is both Michael's violin pupil and his lover, but he is always very lukewarm in his feelings towards her:

Every time I sleep here I wonder what I am doing with my time and hers ... She is not the woman with whom I want to share my life. But, having begun, what we have continues. She wants it to, and I go along with it, through lust and loneliness, I suppose; and laziness, and lack of focus.

~ Seth, 1999:6

In contrast, all his actions and even his music are suffused with thoughts of Julia, and after he has seen her on the bus, and cannot contact her, he finds the situation almost unbearable: "Days pass. I cannot bear to be in the company of others, but when I am alone, I am sick with memory" (Seth, 1999:50). Therefore, when he does meet Julia again, the voice of Virginie in this introductory fugue quickly fades to be supplanted by that of Julia.

Very soon though, in an oblique way, the reader is reminded of the early meaning of "Baroque", as Seth introduces Julia's deafness into the narrative. The voice of London temporarily fades, and surely no greater dissonance, nothing more disturbing to the ordered pattern of a fugue, could have erupted, than for this musical genius to have become partially deaf, and to know that she will eventually have to cope with total loss of hearing. It is an anomaly, but also a supreme example of situational irony, that such a loud, harsh and intrusive voice in this fugue, should have its origin in silence.

When Michael describes the memories of his childhood and of his home town Rochdale, the reader becomes aware of the voice of the child Michael, and of, for him, the glorious moment when he discovered music. There is also the resonant voice of Mrs Formby, a person of great importance, as she nurtured Michael's love of music and his talent as a violinist. He describes how he told Mrs Formby about a schools' concert he had attended, and had most liked a piece called "The Lark in the Clear Air". Thereupon she played "The Lark Ascending" by Ralph Vaughn-Williams on the gramophone, which so enchanted the nine year old boy, that he desired nothing better than to learn to play the violin. Mrs Formby even read him the poem by George Meredith which had inspired this composition:

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,

In chirrup, whistle , slur and shake ...
Till lost on his aerial wings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

~ Seth, 1999:70

The violin is often linked to lark imagery, and perhaps *The Lark Ascending* caught Michael's imagination because the boy was already aware of the bird's beautiful song, as the adult Michael describes how he used to cycle towards the moors, and lie down in grassy hollows

where I could no longer hear the sound of the wind ... I had never heard such silence before. And into that silence after a minute or two fell the rising song of a lark ... Sometimes a single lark would sing; sometimes as the voice of one thinned higher and higher into the sky, another's would begin to rise. Sometimes, when the sun came out after a drizzle, there would be a whole scrum of skylarks

~ Seth, 1999:28

Even in this fugue with the voices of an eager and talented little boy with his violin, a dedicated teacher, and the idyllic countryside of Rochdale there is disharmony, in the shape of the disillusionment, and almost bewildered disapproval of Michael's parents, as he recounts that "My father's eyes flashed fire and he went stomping off ... It took years and the intercession of others for us to be reconciled" (Seth, 1999:23). Clearly, even as a youngster, Michael had to contend with "modulations and dissonances" (Burton, 2002:3) and disharmony in the home to fulfil his ideal of becoming a violinist.

The Maggiore quartet is invited to play in Vienna, and Julia joins them to play the piano part in Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. Clearly this turn of events leads to the formation of different fugues. The first one is formed by Michael, Julia, their memories and Vienna representing the four voices. Their love affair had begun ten years previously in Vienna, and had of course been rudely interrupted by Michael's abrupt departure. Now, although they seem to be recapturing the magic, there is a definite undertone of disharmony, caused by the doubts besetting Michael, and by his unquiet mind. He desperately wants his and Julia's relationship to continue, not only to continue, but to be as untrammelled by any other emotional responsibilities and external circumstances as it previously was in Vienna, but realises that much stands in the way of this being accomplished, and asks himself whether London could "ever have restored what we lost in Vienna? Can Vienna restore what we have lost in London?" (Seth, 1999:219) As he restlessly wanders through the streets during the night, he is actually walking the paths of his memories, "here where this happened, there where that was said" (Seth, 1999:219). He is reluctantly brought to the realisation that the present is too obtrusive to be ignored. Even the objects in the streets seem to have changed. "I cannot see

the city as once I saw it: freshly, with enchanted surprise. These shapes to me are states of mind” (Seth, 1999:219). The fine mist of his awareness that the past cannot be recreated has enveloped and distorted these shapes. There is the immediate disturbing fact of Julia's loss of hearing, and the ever present fear that their relationship is doomed. Eventually his “thoughts burn out one by one” (Seth, 1999:219).

Yet, despite all evidence to the contrary, Michael persists in believing that there may be a future for him and Julia to share, as though the past and the realities of the present are warring in his mind: “Memory and despair close in on me – pulsations of intolerable pressure, followed by relaxation, almost elation. By the *Musikhochschule* I feel that I can recreate the past, that any wrong turn can be righted ... I was happy here once” (Seth, 1999:230, 231). The same train of thought intervenes when the Maggiore rehearse the *Trout* with Julia: “By what strange ways have we been led back here? The Trout and Vienna itself: are they not unfinished business for us? From time to time my doubts disperse, and I seem to appraise the scene from a perspective where, against its custom, the past rises to bless, not haunt, and where every impossibility seems possible again” (Seth, 1999:222).

After their last rehearsal of the *Trout* Julia quietly announces to Michael that she will never play with others again. The stress is too great – her hearing is virtually destroyed, and she does not want to wreck her mind as well. To Michael this has the sound of a death-knell, as he struggles desperately against the inevitable, and to accept that he and Julia will never play together again.

The *Trout* is a quintet, therefore requiring five players, and it also consists of five movements. This is emblematic of the fact that the literary fugue formed by the characters and their performance in the *Musikverein* will also consist of five voices. The Maggiore quartet assumes an important role, with a dominant “voice”. Other voices joining in are those of Julia, the music, and Michael. Although Michael forms part of the quartet, the fact that it is a first person narrative, as well as his vivid description of his emotional turmoil, marks his as an individual voice. The music is very important, as it not only provides the background and motivation for players and scene, but, to a certain extent, precipitates Michael's nervous breakdown, the fifth voice and by far the most dominant. There is no equal music here, as it is a voice which jars and distracts. It both stems from, and causes deep distress, and emanates from Michael's extreme mental perturbation.

The *Trout* is the catalyst in this set of circumstances. Because it requires five players, Julia, who otherwise would have been in London, is now Michael's constant companion in the city where they parted ten years previously. It is after rehearsing this music with the quartet that Julia tells Michael she will never play in ensemble again, and it is during their

performance of the *Trout* that Michael suffers a nervous breakdown. The first intimation the reader has of this impending disaster is when, during rehearsal, Michael thinks that “A small cloud must have passed between us and the sun. For a few minutes the bright skylight grows dull, the hall dim” (Seth, 1999:236). This acts as a warning to the reader that Michael's mind is to become similarly clouded. Equally indicative of his mental confusion, when he should only have the Schubert they are to perform on his mind, is his drawing attention to various composers – Mozart, Brahms, Kreisler, and the statue of Beethoven, which “looks as if it is shivering from cold on this warm night (Seth, 1999:237). While they are playing the last movement of the *Trout*, Michael is agonisingly aware of the fact that for Julia it represents the last moments of an era. Schubert originally intended this quintet to have only four movements, but for the sake of a friend he added a fifth. Seth refers to this through the thoughts rushing through Michael's mind: “I bless Paumgartner who begged Schubert to tag it on, for if it is the last piece she plays in ensemble, a few minutes more means everything; a repeat is everything; the last phrase must be imprinted for ever; and the last note (Seth, 1999:239). His thoughts, though, tumble and jerk in increasing confusion, they take on a surreal quality, until he cannot even stand up to acknowledge the applause:

The attendant ghosts press down on me ...

The herringboned floor of the hall turns to tarmac: black ebony, white ivory; it is a car park covered with snow, melting into the Serpentine. A slim fish leaps in silver scales from its murky shallows. Each time it emerges it is a variant colour: gold, copper, steel-grey, silver-blue, emerald

~ Seth, 1999:239

It is not only in Michael's mind that “the harmony is confused” (Burton 2002:3) – the quartet also suddenly find their “movement constrained” (*ibid*) as they react with concern, but also with consternation and fear to Michael's condition. Suddenly their unity and future are in jeopardy. There can be no doubt that in this fugue of musicians, music and performance, the rudely intrusive voice of disharmony, “charged with modulations and dissonances” (*ibid*), against all principles and tradition of fugal construction, sounds with a resonance which dominates the other four voices. There is no vestige of “equal music”. Michael emerges from his ordeal on stage with only one consolation, namely that Julia will accompany him to Venice.

In Venice the voices re-arrange themselves into another pattern. Michael and Julia together form a separate voice, as they distance themselves entirely from the second voice, the other three members of a still deeply perturbed Maggiore. They do not stay in the same palazzo as the other members, but far away in a friend's apartment, and, apart from rehearsals, do not join in any of the Maggiore's activities. Julia even refuses to attend their rehearsals.

The third voice is the music. That flows easily, and is a uniting factor, as Michael and Julia enjoy music together, and the quartet has frequent performances. The fourth voice though, again creates dissonance, as Michael is forced to realise that Julia will return to London without him, and that it may be a prelude to their final parting. Despite the fact that he knows she will return to her family, he keeps hoping against his better judgement that their relationship will continue: "Here is the watergate to the opera house: on it lie scraps of twisted metal ... a rusted bird ... This is the phoenix which burned down once before and this time has not risen. Surely what was lost so stupidly, so swiftly and in so short a time can be retrieved, redone, brought to life once more" (Seth, 1999:280). When Julia takes a flight much earlier than planned, he is almost deranged with grief:

Grief and rue, grief and rue, break the erring heart in two ... Will she land, has she landed, can she land ... is she of this centrimetrage, and are these her birthmarks? Are her eyes gold, her hair blue? She has marbled the apartment in grey. She has written *die Liebe* into my notebook. Campari calls from the Lido, and I sing of trout at the sight. From above light darkens upon red pillars, the colour of algae, and music floats on the unsanded shelves and shoals

~ Seth, 1999:293

It is only the music which he performs with the Maggiore quartet which helps Michael to retain the precarious balance of his mind.

When the quartet returns to London, there are momentarily only three voices in the newly formed fugue – those of Michael, the Maggiore, and the music. The music assumes great importance, as they rehearse to record a CD of *The Art of Fugue*, and even in his unstable mental condition, Michael can delight in this great work. After a while the voice of Julia makes an entrance, but now it plays a distant melody, as she has decided to end the relationship, and stands firm in her decision. They do have contact, but at a final meeting in the park, she leaves him in no doubt that they will never meet as lovers again, and that she and her husband and little boy will shortly be leaving for Boston. *The Art of Fugue* is Michael's saving grace during these intolerable days, as the voice of the absent Julia sings as loudly in his mind as when she was with him: "Moon-rise, moon-set. In Boston too the weeks pass at this pulse. Need I list the vegetation that the Gulf Stream gifts the squares of London? Shall I blotch the invariant calendar with dyes and juices?" (Seth, 1999:336). At an auction of music instruments though, he learns that Julia, who will give a solo concert on her return to London, has changed her programme, and will play *The Art of Fugue*. To Michael, nothing can underline the fact that she has pushed him out of her life more emphatically. In Venice she gave him this music, and promised never to play it to anyone else, now she has

determined to share it with the world. The shock is so great that, at the Maggiore's rehearsal of *The Art of Fugue*, he loses all power to play:

No, no I am playing at nothing, I am playing nothing, this something has me right along the nerve. I cannot breathe ... For everything has stopped. Why have I not come in? I thought that I was playing but am not ... But I have lost the link from eye to hand ... I make a sound, but such a sound as stops the others dead, mid-note. These bones, so many, in these much-trained hands have lost clean action, and this mind is smudged.

~ Seth, 1999:344

Ironically, whereas he had clung to *The Art of Fugue* in a world where he felt everything melting under his feet, Michael now states that “It was that fugue that coiled all this around me” (Seth, 1999:344), and resigns from the Maggiore. The others try to convince him that he must stay, but he maintains that “I am no use, dead-fingered ... It's fugue I suffer from” (Seth, 1999:348). Suddenly, therefore, the broad stream of the music “voice” thins to a tiny and desperate trickle, as Michael also hears that Mrs Formby has died, and that he may lose his beloved violin, as she had previously warned him that her nephew would probably inherit the instrument.

Four voices thread together though, to form a new fugue – the voices of Mrs Formby, Michael, the violin – emblem of a world of music – and Rochdale. Although she has died, the voice of Mrs Formby sounds clearly through a letter she wrote to Michael before her death, in which she unconditionally bequeathed him the Tononi violin. “I can't bear to imagine my violin passing by sale into the hands of a stranger when its been played by you for so many years ... I send you my love, though by the time you receive this, the ashes of that 'I' will be scattered ... around Blackstone Edge” (Seth, 1999:361). The voice of Michael answers in a letter to Mrs Formby, in which he tells her that his life “had shelved towards desolation” (Seth, 1999:366). The gift of the violin though, saves him, on the brink of this desolation, from toppling over the edge. In the letter, he also makes a solemn vow to Mrs Formby: “I will drive to Blackstone Edge at the right time each year. I will take your violin with me ... what you have done for me will last till I go too” (Seth, 1999:366).

Once again the voice of the music is resonant and pure as at Christmas time Michael keeps his promise to Mrs Formby. After his final leave-taking of Julia he had expressed a wish: “Let me sit in silence. Let my head drop on my chest. Let me, abjuring hope, find peace” (Seth, 1999:330). After all the emotional and mental agony, it is obvious that he has now found that peace as he visits Blackstone Edge, for “the view is far and clear” (Seth, 1999:379). In memory of Mrs Formby he crumbles some Christmas pudding onto the snow, then takes the Tononi, and finds that his “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' (Seth,1999:379). Of course the voice of Rochdale is also present in this literary fugue, as that is where Michael's involvement with music and with Mrs Formby and his violin began. His playing now could not have taken place anywhere else but on this open moor.

This is not necessarily a joyous fugue – Michael's sense of loss is still too great for that, but the voices blend beautifully and equally, and a sense of sober thankfulness and contentment pervades the whole.

Stripped of all extraneous matter, turbulent emotions, and conflicting events, the last short fugue, when Michael attends Julia's solo concert, echoes the four voices when they resumed their relationship, and consists of the four voices of Michael, Julia, the music and their love. Julia has confessed that she has always loved, and always will love Michael, but she has forsworn that love, and has also retreated into her silent world. Although deaf, through her music her voice rings clearly, and at the end of this literary fugue, she, most fittingly, performs the *Art of Fugue*. She will always find solace in music. Michael listens to half of the concert, and then stumbles out of the hall into the rain-washed night. He has accepted his loss, and realises in his turn that music will always sustain him, for “The rain has washed my earlier tears away” (Seth, 1999:381). In this last fugue, the voice of the music soars above those of Michael and Julia, to absorb them and their love, and raise all to its own level of sublimity.

This chapter has explored Seth's masterful portrayal of the interaction between the auditory and the literary arts. The next chapter will illuminate Seth's intimate knowledge of *The Art of Fugue*, through his use of the minor fugues to create mirror images in the text.

Chapter Three: Mirror Images and the Mirror Fugues

Through the many allusions to *The Art of Fugue* in *An Equal Music*, it is clearly demonstrated that Seth has an intimate knowledge of this composition, and therefore of the mirror fugues which form part of this monumental work by Bach. The reader may logically draw the inference that these served as inspiration for the mirror images frequently encountered in the novel. In order to better illustrate this premise, it is necessary to elaborate on the structure of a mirror fugue.

Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines a mirror fugue as follows:

A canon or fugue in which two parts, or more than one pair of parts, are so devised as to appear simultaneously upside down as well as right side up, their appearance on paper being that of a thing reflected in a looking glass.

~ Blom, 1966:790

The following more detailed description is contained in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, with specific reference to *The Art of Fugue*:

a recondite type of fugue in which all the voices can invert all their intervals (upward intervals becoming downward and vice versa), the new fugue thus brought into existence being as effective as the old. For a reference to 'Mirror Fugue' of this type see *Art of Fugue*.

~ Scholes, 1944:584

In order to fully understand the concept of the mirror fugues, it is advisable to revise the formation of the fugue, clearly defining the various terms used to describe the fugal form. *The Oxford Companion to Music* states that "A fugue is ... in a fixed number of melodic strands – called **Voices** ... These voices, at the outset, enter in turn with a scrap of melody called **Subject** ... until at last all are singing" (Scholes, 1944:337). Concerning the subject in *The Art of Fugue*, Jones in the *Introduction* explains that "The principal subject occurs not only in its original melodic form but in a series of increasingly elaborate variant forms"; neither does it occur "only in its original note values but in metrically diminished and augmented forms (with note values halved or doubled). In the mirror fugues the principle of invertible counterpoint is united with that of intervallic inversion" (Jones, 2002:8).

Terms which may need to be more clearly defined are "counterpoint", "inversion", and "interval". *The Oxford Companion to Music* quotes Hadow in the *American Webster's Dictionary* explaining counterpoint as

A single part or voice added to another is often still called a 'counterpoint' to the other, but usually the word is given the general meaning of 'the combination of simultaneous voice-parts, each independent, but all conducting to a result of uniform coherent texture.

The Oxford Companion to Music states that “By an interval in music is meant the difference in pitch between any two notes”, and explains the inversion of intervals as “the reversing of the relative position between which the two notes lies, so that the lower becomes the higher and the higher the lower” (Scholes, 1944:469). Jones' reference to “intervallic inversion”, therefore becomes clear as meaning that the music may contain, for instance, an interval of a low D to a high F, which inverted will progress from high F to low D.

Probably the best explanation of the mirror fugues appears in an article on the internet by Timothy A. Smith, namely *What in the World is a “Mirror Fugue?”* He elucidates as follows:

Mirror fugues are a pair in which, whatever one does, its mirror does the opposite. Bach called the original fugue the *Rectus*, and its opposite the *Inversus*. The two were said to be played *alio Modo*, “in either fashion.” In the following fugues, Bach employs not one, but six mirrors at the same time! That Bach was able to accomplish this without deviation of a single pitch is astounding, and accords the mirror fugues of *die Kunst* a unique place in the puzzle music of the western tradition.

~ Smith, 1996

Fugues XII and XIII are the mirror fugues, and Smith enumerates the aspects of reverse images in the fugues, such as that melodies are inverted. “Each melody of the mirror fugue moves in the opposite direction. Where a melody ascends, the mirror fugue descends”. Voice entries are also mirrored: “Where a motive is stated by the soprano, the mirror states it in the bass”. Sequences, or echoes also move in opposite directions, and of course, as already stated, many intervals are inverted.

As an example the first pages of Fugue twelve, the *Rectus*, and its mirror fugue, the *Inversus*, are included, illustrating only one aspect of a mirror fugue, namely the early entrance of the soprano in *Contrapunctus XII*, followed by the late entrance of the bass, with the opposite taking place in the mirror fugue.

Soprano = Red

Bass = Purple

The first pages of Fugue XII, the *Rectus*, and of the mirror fugue, the *Inversus*, demonstrate the early and late entries of soprano and bass in the fugue, and inverted in the mirror fugue. The recording though, comprises the rendering of the complete *Rectus* and *Inversus*.

Contrapunctus inversus a 4

The first system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. The lower staff is a bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The music features a series of chords in the upper staff and a melodic line in the lower staff. A blue circle highlights a specific note in the lower staff.

The second system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The lower staff is a bass clef with the same key signature. The music continues with chords and a melodic line. A blue circle highlights a note in the lower staff. Trills are indicated with 'tr' in the lower staff.

The third system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The lower staff is a bass clef with the same key signature. The music continues with chords and a melodic line. A trill is indicated with 'tr' in the lower staff.

The fourth system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The lower staff is a bass clef with the same key signature. The music continues with chords and a melodic line. A red line highlights a specific melodic line in the upper staff.

The fifth system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The lower staff is a bass clef with the same key signature. The music continues with chords and a melodic line. A red line highlights a specific melodic line in the upper staff.

In *The Secret Power of Music*, Tame states that “the intellectual or mental content of music had once consisted of the sacred mathematics of Bach...” (Tame, 1984:78). Surely these “sacred mathematics” are brilliantly illustrated in the mirror fugues of *The Art of Fugue*, but it is extremely important to remember that a reflection in a mirror is not the real image, and because of all the carefully worked inversions **the most important aspect of the music, the sound texture, is completely changed**. To illustrate this point further, listening to fugue and mirror fugue may be interesting.

Taking this important point into consideration, Seth allowed himself a great deal of latitude in the portrayal of mirror images in the novel. As the images change the sound texture in the fugues, various images in the novel may vary in emotional or musical content. Settings may also differ. Only rarely may the mirror image be a perfect reflection. In some instances the image may be distorted, or the mirror tarnished. The musical entity most frequently encountered in the novel's mirror images is that of the interval, in this case not to denote the distance between two notes, but the distance in time between events. As the human condition cannot be expressed with the mathematical precision Bach displayed, Seth does not attempt these intricacies. Nonetheless, the mirror images in the novel are deserving of exploration.

Although *An Equal Music* is arguably a literary analogy of *The Art of Fugue*, and the logical conclusion is that Seth most probably based the mirror images in the novel on the mirror fugues in *The Art of Fugue*, the use of mirror reflections in literature is by no means a new concept. In *The Mutable Glass* Grabes states that “Anyone investigating the history of the mirror-metaphor will be struck by the profusion of titles based on the mirror occurring in the literature of the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries” (1982:19). Obviously though, this literary technique predates even the thirteenth century, as Grabes further states that “The sheer popularity of the mirror-metaphor in mediaeval Latin and vernacular titles can hardly be ignored, inasmuch as it predates the widespread occurrence within texts of most applications of the metaphor and must have done much to foster its use” (*ibid*).

As *The Art of Fugue* dates from the Baroque era, it is interesting to note that the use of mirror images featured largely in the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Grabes argues that “The application of the mirror-metaphor thus met the central requirement of the then prevailing view of what constituted legitimate originality: that novelty of effect must arise out of, and retain its links with, tradition” (Grabes, 1982:223).

In *An Equal Music* there occurs notable balanced interaction between the literature, and another art form, namely music, and this combination of elements, also present in the mirror imagery, conforms to the Baroque view:

The mirror was more than just the chosen vehicle for many different conceits ...

The central aesthetic concern here was the interaction between the effects achieved by combining elements which were heterogeneous in many respects yet homogeneous in others. At least one specifically baroque genre – the masque – owed its existence to a preference for such interactions ... this stage-spectacle encouraged a balanced interaction between drama, poetry, allegory, music, dancing, architecture, landscaping and practical engineering

~ Grabes, 1982:225

The same philosophy concerning interaction between, and combining elements through mirror imagery, has survived into the present. In *The Mirror in the Text*, Dällenbach refers to mirror images as *mises en abyme*, defining the term as “a kind of reflexion” (1989:8), and maintains that these reflections “only attain their full power when they collaborate with painting, drama, music, the novel, the tale, the novella. All this seems to point to the fact that reflexion, in order to ‘take off’, has to work in alliance with a reality similar to that which it is reflecting: a work of art” (1989:71).

The reader may therefore infer that the complementary and reciprocal relationship between literature and music in *An Equal Music*, ensures and enhances the success of the mirror images.

One of the clearest and most alluring images occurs when Michael describes days of his childhood spent on the moors near Rochdale, and these are reflected in the mirror of a winter afternoon when he separates himself from his family to go for a lonely walk on the moors. The reader thus encounters the sequences which move in opposite directions, as mentioned by Smith, as childhood experiences move to those of manhood, and the downward interval of a child image reversed to an upward interval with its reflection of a man.

Michael describes his solitary times on the moors as a child as follows:

Within minutes I would be in the open countryside. Sometimes I would walk on the tops, sometimes just lie in the grassy hollows where I could no longer hear the sound of the wind. The first time I did this, I was held by surprise: I had never heard such silence before. And into that silence after a minute or two fell the rising song of a lark.

I would lie there for hours sometimes ... Sometimes a single lark would sing, sometimes as the voice of one thinned higher and higher into the sky, another's would begin to rise. Sometimes, when the sun came out after a drizzle, there would be a whole scrum of skylarks.

~ Seth, 1999:28

Many years later Michael climbs the moors to the exact spot high above the old inn where he used to lie on the grass as a child, deliberately recapturing the childhood moments:

The air is fresh and sharp and the ground is a subtle chart of tussocks and black earth: hundreds of different grasses, some tipped with feathery brush, some with minute white four-pointed stars; low bilberry bushes with their berries still green – all rippling with or resisting the flapping and rushing of the wind.

I crouch in a hollow; the wind slackens; I lie in it, damp though it is, and the wind dies, and the horizon dies, and there is nothing but silence and sky.

~ Seth, 1999:319

The melodic line though, the “invertible counterpoint” which Jones describes, remains with the larks, as their song seems to Michael to form a fugue:

From somewhere a cow lows; and then through it comes a wheedle-wheedle sound, a 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.

Now two, now three, and now, though the sky is scarcely brighter, legions of larks rise up from the damp earth in careless counterpoint, each retaining its self even as it merges with its fellows ...

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound
Of many links without a break
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake ...

Ah, now that, now that is it.

~ Seth, 1999:319, 320

When he and Virginie were lovers, she told Michael about a Beethoven composition, which the composer had himself re-arranged as a quintet. For Michael, who had never heard or seen the music, this becomes a holy grail, for which he will never give up searching. In the same way that he is longing to find Julia again, he longs to find this music, either the score or a recording, and this search gives an added sense of purpose to his fairly sterile existence. Eventually he manages to find the score in the Manchester library, and shortly afterwards, an old long-playing recording of the music in a small music store, after he has tried all the big well-known stores. “After the glass-and-chrome titans of Oxford Street, frenetic with escalators and decibels and security guards, Harold Moore's is a Dickensian haven” (Seth, 1999:39). Michael's finding the record and tracing the score set in motion a series of images of gain and loss – the literary melody of joyful gain, and it's sad melodic inversion of loss. He is ecstatic about his find:

I savour the precious record. The photograph on the sleeve portrays a large room, stately in brown and dull gold, the floor gleaming with elaborate parquetry, an uncluttered assortment of vases and paintings

arranged here and there, a chandelier, a Persian rug ... the whole suite full of light: a pleasing prelude to the vinyl delights within.

~ Seth, 1999:40

The gain though, shortly turns to loss, as from the top of a bus he sees Julia, and with feverish haste tries to pursue her in a taxi. The pursuit is unsuccessful, and when he stops the taxi to run after the bus, he inadvertently leaves the Beethoven record in the taxi:

I cross streets, moving where those around me move. The wind blows around small pieces of debris ... I close my eyes in shock. My satchel is on my shoulders but my hands are empty. I have left my record in the taxi. Under the arrow of Eros I sit down and weep.

~ Seth, 1999:43

There is, though, a reverse sequence to this double loss, as the taxi driver eventually, miraculously, delivers the record to the supervisor of Michael's flats, and Michael can, at long last, listen to and lose himself in the music, but also with the kindness of the taxi driver in mind: "I cannot trace him or thank him. But somewhere in this music, interfused in my mind with so many extra-musical memories, this strange action too has found a sort of home" (Seth, 1999:55).

When the score arrives from the Manchester library, the Maggiore get in an extra player, and play the music solely for their own enjoyment. They are enchanted, but Michael remains deeply aware of the loss of Julia:

for me there another presence in this music. As the sense of her might fall on my retina through two sheets of moving glass, so too through this maze of notes converted by our arms into vibration – sensory, sensuous – do I sense her being again. The labyrinth of my ear shocks the coils of my memory. Here is her force in my arm, here is her spirit in my pulse. But where she is I do not know, nor is there hope I will.

~ Seth, 1999:79-80

Julia though, is also found when she comes backstage after the playing of the *Contrapunctus I*, so Michael, vibrantly in love, finds that his life – for to him music is life – has been enriched by both Beethoven and Julia.

The mirror image, though, eventually reverses gain to loss, doubly hurtful, as he himself is responsible for the final loss of the Beethoven record. When Michael and Julia are walking in the park, after their return from Venice, she unequivocally tells him that they will never have contact again. The depth of Michael's angry despair is obvious when he also throws away the Beethoven record:

I will not kiss her. It is peace I need. I will go down to the water's edge and touch the smooth round stones. 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.

~ Seth, 1999:329

Certain of Dällenbach's remarks concerning the *mise-en-abîme* are especially applicable to the fiction Seth weaves around Julia's deafness, for which he draws inspiration from the history of Beethoven to draw an analogy and to create mirror images. Dällenbach states that:

We should note first of all that the reflexive work of art is a *representation*, and one with great internal cohesion. Given its figurative nature, it is suited to the fictional *mise-en-abîme*, which aims, by analogy, to relate two series of events to each other; its unity is virtually indispensable to the fictional *mise-en-abîme* in that this alone can allow the retro-prospective reflection to perform its linking role with relative ease.

~ Dällenbach, 1989:71

Julia's deafness progresses slowly at first, but then seems to gain momentum, and Seth does not only, through her deafness, draw an analogy between her and Beethoven to point to her prodigious talent, but employs her affliction to create a striking mirror image, the original being Beethoven, the mirror being Julia. Certainly, in the mirror, the reader encounters reverse images, such as that Beethoven was a man, while Julia is a woman. Also, he was a composer, while she is a performing artist. Although reflections in the mirror may be reversed, certain intrinsic elements remain unchanged, the most important of these being the deafness of both these musicians, and there are striking similarities between the emotional impact on both their lives, and between certain events. Beethoven went to Heiligenstadt in the forlorn hope that his deafness could be cured there. Michael and Julia also visit Heiligenstadt, but as a pilgrimage which they undertake to honour the great composer. Beethoven tried to hide his deafness from musicians, friends and relatives, but in the *Heiligenstadt Testament* referred to in Chapter 1, a letter to his brothers, he admitted the bitter truth:

'O ye who think or say that I am rancorous, obstinate or misanthropical, what an injustice you do me! You little know the hidden cause of my appearing so ... how cruelly was I frustrated by the doubly painful experience of my defective hearing! And yet it was impossible for me to say to people, 'Speak louder; shout, for I am deaf!'

~ Sandved, c.1950:183

Whereas Beethoven had written to his brothers, Julia writes to her lover to explain her deafness. Like the composer, she has also tried to disguise the fact that she is deaf. Where Beethoven had continued to conduct, she continues to play, even going so far as to accept a contract to perform with the Maggiore quartet, keeping the players in ignorance of her defect

until the last possible moment. After an interval of more than a century there sounds in her letter a faint echo of Heiligenstadt, and her distress only too clearly mirrors that of Beethoven, as she refers to both her and Michael's visit there, and to Beethoven's *Testament*, describing his grief when he could no longer hear a flute:

Do you remember our walks in Heiligenstadt? ... Well when you heard the robin sing in the Orangery the other day, that was what I felt, but it was not just humiliation, it was a sense of bitter injustice and deprivation and grief and loss and self-pity all mixed up in a frightful lump.

~ Seth, 1999:153

When the Maggiore quartet, accompanied by Julia, goes to Vienna, Seth introduces a sequence of images, all with betrayal as the central concern. It is fitting that these events should take place in Vienna, as it was there that ten years previously Michael had betrayed his and Julia's love when he flew to London for the sake of his music. The mirror images are of course now reversed, and she can be assured of Michael's utter loyalty, but Julia, whose integrity previously was unassailable, in Vienna betrays both her marriage and her child, as she has joined Michael not as accompanist, but as lover.

The images accumulate with the realisation that Michael is suffering from unbearable nervous tension. Veteran performer as he is, having played in ensemble, and having taken part in numerous concert performances, he is, at a crucial moment during the performance, betrayed by his nervous system, and suffers a breakdown. So badly is he affected, that he feels unable to go back on stage to complete the programme. Seth depicts Michael's feeling of helplessness, of being drained of all musical and nervous energy, by the reiteration of the colour "grey":

"I can't go on again" ...

"I just can't".

The grey walls; grey tiles; on the floor small matt grey tiles. A grey metal square on the wall. I bend down to look at my face. It is like death.

~ Seth, 1999:241

Julia also suffers betrayal, in her case from her own immune system which, instead of protecting her, has turned to attack: "The doctors have explained that the protective systems of my own body are treating parts of my inner ear – no one knows why or how – as hostile or dangerous, and destroying them" (Seth, 1999:151). In Vienna she finds herself so lacking in "the electrical impulses that once involved the serpentine cochlea" (Seth, 1999:239), and her body under such malignant attack from itself, that she is forced to make the momentous decision never to play with anyone else again.

This mirror-ball of images, flashing facets of betrayal, is most suitably displayed against the music of the *Trout Quintet* by Schubert, as the quintet is itself based on a story of betrayal. It was originally

based on the melody of his song *Die Forelle* (The Trout), written in 1817, which tells the story of someone watching a trout with its rainbow colours frolicking in the water. A fisherman then comes along, baits his hook and catches the little fish. The watcher at the river's edge feels deeply indignant at this act of betrayal by the wily fisherman when he sees the rainbow colours of the trout vanish when the fish is dying.

~ Sandved, c.1950:2103

Certainly Seth could not have chosen a more suitable composition to lend greater impact and an added perspective to the scene in the hall of the *Musikverein*.

Two other mirror images are also deserving of notice. The first occurs in Vienna when Julia drives Michael to the place where they had last met ten years previously. "We are headed for the scene of our last meeting, years ago ... We drink in companionable silence, not embitterment" (Seth, 1999:234). Ostensibly the mirror reflects a perfect image – the same two lovers in the same place, and as much in love as ever, but the reader cannot but be aware that behind the surface image lie ten years which have wrought many changes, and that they, especially Julia, inhabit different emotional worlds. "Against the lamps, I note the veins of translucent leaves. A lit twig shines light against the sky. Beyond that, the night is black" (Seth, 1999:234). This cameo is emblematic of the "lit twig" of the peaceful moment they share, but also fore-shadows that the future will probably bring the "black night" of separation.

A further image occurs in Venice. Ten years previously, in Vienna, Michael had deserted Julia. In a reversal of roles, in Venice she decides to leave him to return to her husband and child, and Michael finds and reads the letter in which she promises James, her husband, a quick return. "I feel ill. I feel like a thief who has entered a house to find in it goods stolen from his own" (Seth, 1999:291). Horrified at the thought of losing Julia, Michael, beside himself with the precognition of grief, during the last night they will ever spend together, hurts her. Where in Vienna he had abandoned her, thereby hurting her emotionally, in the reverse reflection in the mirror, in Venice he inflicts physical hurt and bites her shoulder: "... tonight in the bitterness of my passion ... My tongue is as brutal as my teeth ... The bruises remain on her shoulder. They will turn yellow and stand out for days. How can they be talked away?" (Seth, 1999:292).

On this sad and bitter note, with its reverse image of physical tenderness turned to physical cruelty, Michael realises that a chapter in his life has irrevocably come to an end, for “an egg may not be unboiled nor trust resealed” (Seth, 1999:293).

This chapter has undeniably invoked the literature on mirror images and on the subconscious processes of the author on the one hand, and of the composer, on the other.

The next chapter will investigate the vital role of place in *An Equal Music*.

Chapter Four: An Exploration of Place

The importance of place in *An Equal Music* should not be underrated, as place is not only allied to events and the emotional ebb and flow in the lives of the protagonists, but in this novel, steeped in music as it is, certain places also have come to represent specific composers. Throughout the novel therefore, the setting remains notable, as the reader accompanies Michael and Julia on their journey, in the literal sense of the word, but also on an emotional and musical journey.

Literature defines setting as follows:

Setting is the natural, manufactured, political, cultural, and temporal environment, including everything that characters know and own. Characters may be either helped or hurt by their surroundings, and they may fight about possessions and goals. Further, as characters speak with each other, they reveal the degree to which they share the customs and ideas of their times.

~ Roberts & Jacobs, 1995:230

Concerning the importance of lending verisimilitude to a character by placing such a character in a certain setting, *An Approach to Literature* states the following:

Furthermore, a character does not exist in a vacuum. The person has an environment: he inhabits a place with special physical and social qualities. The degree of importance of place, like that of the importance of character, may vary from instance to instance, sometimes immediate and compelling, and sometimes recessive and scarcely visible. But almost always there is a relation between people and places ... Place is, in one sense, person

~ Brooks, Purser & Warren, 1975:79

Literature agrees with the above by maintaining that “one of the major purposes of setting in fiction is to lend **realism**, or **verisimilitude** to the story. As the description of location and objects becomes particular and detailed, the events of the work become more believable” (Roberts & Jacobs, 1995:233).

The validity of these statements is proved, for instance, by Seth's description of the main protagonist's simple surroundings, and of his almost monkish existence, despite the presence, when the novel commences, of Virginie in his life. There is a definite allusion to celibacy by Michael's referring to his flat as a “soundproof cell” (Seth, 1999:4). With only music to alleviate the pain of his longing for Julia, his small flat on the eighth floor is emblematic of his isolation, but the description of the flat aids the reader in finding him a “more believable” person:

I often think how lucky I am to have what many musicians do not – a roof above my head that I can call my own ... I was fortunate to find

my flat when I did ... Its three small, ceiling-sloped rooms, for all their quirks of water and heat, are a refuge of light ... I love the view. There is no one above me ...

~ Seth, 1999:24

Michael grew up in the country town of Rochdale, and Seth invests him as character with credibility in that he remembers the open moors with deep nostalgia, and finds solace in nature, even if only the countryside provided by a park:

In London, high up though I am, there is no natural silence. Even in the middle of the 600 acres of park, I can hear the traffic all around, and often above. But some mornings I take a camp stool and walk over to the sunken garden near the Orangerie. I sit down in one of the gaps in the tall lime hedge and look out across the sinking ledges of colour to the calm oblong pool. Among the water-lilies the fountains play, obscuring any noise that the hedges have dampened. Squirrels run boldly about, small mice timidly. A pigeon coos fatly at my feet. And – in the right season, at the opposite month of the year to this – the blackbirds sing.

~ Seth, 1999:28

Michael is of course the first person narrator, but the use of language by Seth, the author, emphasises the statement made in *Writer's Mind* that the “superb use of language to express the author's mind through physical description” (Cohen, 1995:77), is a writer's ploy to create atmosphere, and Seth certainly creates an atmosphere in which the reader becomes well aware of the riches of Michael's musical life, which form a sharp contrast to the aridity of his existence otherwise. Seth sets the scene of a lonely man sitting in an isolated spot on a little stool, his heart filled with longing for Julia, and, considering a passage in *An Approach to Literature*, this apparently incidental scene in the park assumes greater importance:

We often think of the scene of a piece of fiction – if we think of it at all – as little more than a detail, mechanically necessary of course, but without further significance. Sometimes, after we have finished a good story or novel, we do become aware that it has a characteristic “feel,” that the world it has created carries a characteristic “atmosphere,” and we become aware, too, that this atmosphere is a component of the whole effect.

A story occurs, after all, in a particular place, and places provoke, however minimally, certain feelings.

~ Brooks, Purser & Warren, 1975:10

Certainly the author in this instance has, by setting the scene in a particular place, managed to evoke feelings of loneliness and of the sense of loss which will eventually permeate the whole of the novel.

In *Writer's Mind* Cohen makes a profound statement, namely that “Description is the writer's mind imposed on the outside world” (Cohen, 1995:76). The imprint of Seth's mind is

clearly noticeable in the music with which the novel is suffused. Authors, Cohen remarks, “build their scenes like painters covering the canvas with dab after dab of carefully chosen colour, arranging the details in the order in which they might strike the observer's eye” (Cohen, 1995:77). Seth's canvas consists of Western music, as music colours all events, and touches the lives and emotions of all the characters on all levels in *An Equal Music*.

Cohen also maintains that “a character's growth ... may happen overnight or may take a generation; it may all occur in a bedroom or it may require a world tour” (Cohen, 1995:19). This remark causes the reader to realise that all of the love story of Michael and Julia could actually have been enacted in Michael's flat, or, at most, in London, but because Seth finds it imperative to paint the canvas with music, the reader finds simultaneous journeys taking place – the main protagonists' emotional journey, and a parallel musical journey to various cities, because those cities are epitomised by various composers. These cities, and the musical experiences, will act as milestones on the emotional journey.

Although the love story began ten years earlier in Vienna, the reader is only drawn in when Michael and Julia meet each other again and resume their relationship in London. Prior to meeting Julia again Michael's days are occupied with one musical experience after another. The first composer mentioned is Schubert, as Michael hums one of the last songs Schubert had composed, the words of which clearly reflect Michael's state of mind:

I see a man who stares upwards
And wrings his hands from the force of his pain.
I shudder when I see his face,
The moon reveals myself to me.

~ Seth, 1999:4

As will be demonstrated throughout the novel, despite his longing for Julia, and in the midst of any emotional turmoil, Michael always finds consolation in music. As he finds that Schubert can echo his depression, the composer and the Tononi violin can also lighten his mood.

“I have not played Schubert for more than a month. My violin misses him more than I do ... I will play his songs.

The Tononi seems to purr at the suggestion. Something happy, something happy, surely:

In a clear brook
With joyful haste
The whimsical trout

Shot past me like an arrow.

I play the line of the song, I play the leaps and plunges of the right hand of the piano, I am the trout, the angler, the brook, the observer. I sing the words ... The Tononi does not object ... Schubert does not object.

~ Seth, 1999:5

In the most delicate way, Seth indicates that the compositions of Schubert will play an important part in Michael's life, and although the music of the *Trout* sounds happy, he is singing the words of a song of betrayal, and will eventually play the *Trout* quintet at a significant moment when his mental equilibrium is in a state of extreme fragility.

The composer next brought to the reader's attention is Bach, as Michael's lover and student Virginie has a lesson. Technically perfect, her performance of the Bach E major *Partita* is as sterile as their relationship. Michael reprimands her that the music is "not just one damn note after another" (Seth, 1999:7), and has already admitted to himself that "She is not the woman with whom I want to share my life" (Seth, 1999:6). Therefore, while he is trying to infuse Virginie's playing with some life, Bach has actually evoked memories of Julia, and she is occupying his heart and mind:

As for the one I remember, I see her with her eyes closed, playing Bach to herself: an English suite. Gently her fingers travel among the keys ... The beloved eyes turn towards me. There are so many beings here, occupied, pre-occupied. Let me believe that she breathes, that she still exists, somewhere on this chance sphere.

~ Seth, 1999:7

Probably there are faint intimations in this scene that both Bach and Julia will come to play a great role in Michael's life.

The next two composers he meets on his musical journey are Haydn and Brahms, and it is interesting to note how subtly Seth stresses the fact that music strongly influences the emotions. The mere succession of notes exercise a mystical influence of their own. The same concept is explored by Tame in *The Secret Power of Music*:

Researchers have discovered that consonant and dissonant chords, different intervals, and other features of music all exert a profound effect upon man's pulse and respiration – upon their rate and upon whether their rhythm is constant, or interrupted and jumpy. Blood pressure is lowered by sustained chords and raised by crisp, repeated ones ...

It has been found that the tension of the larynx is affected by melodies, becoming, for instance, tightened during a descending series of chords. Since the larynx is very sensitively influenced by the ongoing stream of man's emotions and thought processes, its reactions to music are probably indicative of what is basically an effect of music

upon the psyche. We can see, then, that music affects the body in two distinct ways: directly, as the effect of sound upon the cells and organs, and indirectly, by affecting the emotions ...

So real and open to practical usage are music's psychological influences that the art has been applied throughout the ages in order to bring about emotional and mental effects.

~ Tame, 1986:137-138

The Maggiore quartet are rehearsing quartets by Haydn and Brahms, and obviously Haydn affects each player very positively. They feel themselves in alignment with the composer and the music, and therefore themselves become a harmonious entity. "The Haydns are glorious; they give us joy. Where there are difficulties, we can understand them – and therefore come to an understanding among ourselves. We love Haydn, and he makes us love each other" (Seth, 1999:11). In sharp contrast, Brahms affects the quartet adversely, as each player reacts emotionally and mentally to the different tonalities of this composer: "Not so Brahms. He has always been a cross for our quartet ... I feel no affinity for Brahms. Piers can't stand him, Helen adores him, Billy finds him 'deeply interesting', whatever that means" (Seth, 1999:11). Each player has different feelings about Brahms, and these feelings lead to dissension and abrasive comments. Tame also comments on music and feelings: "Who can doubt that music influences our emotions? It is surely true that music is only listened to in the first place because it makes us *feel* something ... feelings – of uplift, joy, energy, melancholy, violence, sensuality, calm, devotion..." (Tame, 1986:146) Certainly Brahms incites the quartet, if not to violence, to strong feelings of frustration and disharmony, as Michael states that "it isn't usually like this. Most of our rehearsals are much more convivial. I blame it on what we're playing" (Seth, 1999:12).

The next composer Seth introduces is Beethoven, as Michael undertakes his quest to search for the elusive string quintet which the composer had re-arranged himself from a piano trio. This search is accompanied by his first sighting of Julia after ten years, and it is significant that finding the Beethoven and finding Julia resemble reversed mirror images. He finds the quintet, only to lose it again, and then it is restored to him and will permanently remain in his possession. Ten years previously he had lost Julia, then finds her again in London, and will eventually lose her forever. When Michael can at last listen to the quintet, he finds himself transcended into "a world where I seem to know everything and nothing ... While my ears sing to the quintet" (Seth, 1999:54).

It is understandable that Michael finds this such a spiritually uplifting experience, since Beethoven held to the belief, as he testified in a letter, that his art was a "sacred struggle to fulfil the duties imposed on me by humanity, God and nature" (Sandved, c.1950:191).

Anchoring his work in spiritual and moral ideals, Beethoven had the following sentences, which he had written himself, on his writing table:

I am all that is,
I am all that is, was, and ever shall be.
No mortal has lifted my veil.
He alone is of Himself, and to Him alone
All things owe their origin.

~ Sandved, c.1950:191

Tame also stresses the spiritual component in Beethoven's music, and it is this which temporarily enables Michael to forget his longing and loneliness when he listens to the quintet:

The 'secular' works of Beethoven, more than those of any other nineteenth-century composer, have frequently been noted for their fundamentally spiritual nature. His nine great symphonies contain numerous themes and tonal references pertaining to the path of self-transcendence and its challenges. Moreover, Beethoven's final five string quartets are considered by many to be the most mystical pieces of music ever created by man.

~ Tame, 1986:74

Michael mentions that the Maggiore will rehearse a programme of twentieth-century quartets by Bartók, Shostakovich and Britten, but apart from demonstrating the versatility of the Maggiore's repertoire, these composers are not mentioned again, as they are completely overshadowed by the glory of Bach, and the offer from the Stratus company to record the whole of *The Art of Fugue*, after the quartet's playing of the *Contrapunctus 1*.

This conglomeration of composers mentioned while he is living in London serves not only to underline Michael's musical genius, but also to point to the fact that his life consists of many loose threads. There is no singularity of purpose. Apart from making music, he drifts aimlessly. These threads are drawn together though, in Bach's *Contrapunctus 1*, and in his meeting Julia again, and, as has been discussed, these two events coincide. Through the music Michael lives moments of sublimity when “we are one: with each other, with the world, and with that long-dispersed being whose force we receive through the shape of his annotated vision and the single swift-flowing syllable of his name” (Seth, 1999:90). After the performance, Julia comes backstage, and thereafter Michael's life is firmly focussed on the desire to rekindle her love for him. Probably that is the most important role assigned to London – that it serves as the starting point of their journey. At this point the reader has realised that it will be a circular journey, and that London will eventually also signify the point of no return in their relationship.

The names of the various composers, though, serve another purpose. Through those Seth has splashed bright daubs of colour on to the canvas of music which he has decided will form the background to the novel, as hereafter only one main composer is allied to each place.

Rochdale is very important, as the town with its surrounding countryside marks definite stages in Michael's emotional growth and musical development. He describes an idyllic childhood, filled with birdsong, on the moor. It is also in Rochdale that Mrs Formby helps him to widen his horizons immeasurably by introducing him to the world of music. Rochdale and its environs are singled out to demonstrate stages of development in Michael's life only, as Julia never accompanies him there.

His musical experiences in Rochdale are largely linked to the composer Ralph Vaughan-Williams, and Seth could scarcely have made a better choice than Vaughan-Williams, together with Mrs Formby, to introduce Michael to the world of music, as Vaughan-Williams is the ideal composer to epitomise the idyllic English countryside in which Michael spent his childhood years. The composer would certainly himself have heard the larks sing, which inspired him to write *The Lark Ascending*.

Like Michael in the novel, Vaughan-Williams had also been born and reared in the English countryside, in “the Gloucester village where his father was rector. Despite the Welsh-sounding name, Vaughan-Williams (1872–1958) was an Englishman” (Sandved, c.1950:2133). He pursued his studies in England, and “Concurrently with his Royal College course, Williams studied at Trinity College, Cambridge ... In 1897 he decided to give up his organist's post and study abroad” (Sandved, c.1950:2133). Despite, or perhaps because of his studies abroad, Williams remained quintessentially English, and became ever more interested in the English music idiom: “The decade before the First World War saw the emergence of Vaughan-Williams as a composer of mark, thoughtful, technically accomplished, and original in outlook ... The *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, first performed in 1909, gave further evidence of Vaughan-Williams' preoccupation with English musical traditions” (Sandved, c.1950:2135).

Williams was truly a man of the country and the countryside, who even looked the part. *The World of Music* quotes Stephen Williams as stating that “he looks like a farmer ... a big, heavy, lumbering figure, usually dressed in rough tweeds, who looks as though he is on his way to judge the shorthorns at an agricultural show (Sandved, c.1950:2137). More importantly, he displayed a deep interest in folk music, the music essentially of rural England, and, through his compositions, gained recognition for that. G. Jean Aubry states in *The World of Music* that Williams was

One of the first composers to bring English music, after a period of 200 years, back to the plane where it belongs ... He was one of the first to take up a sensible attitude towards his country's folk music. He did not content himself, like so many others, with choosing themes from folk music and turning them to use in a symphony or quartet ... but through them and through himself he brought to light the English spirit and achieved the creation of that relationship of violence, sentiment and character that is peculiar to it.

~ Sandved, c.1950:2138

Obviously, therefore, for Seth to have allied, for instance, a composer from Europe or America to his idyll of the English countryside, would have been incongruous and inappropriate.

Music, though, always has a spiritual content, otherwise it remains “little black insects clustering along five thin lines” (Seth, 1999:79), mechanically translated into sound. This spiritually uplifting quality is unquestioningly present in the compositions of Vaughan-Williams, as Tame categorically states in *The Secret Power of Music*: ... good music is designed to expand our consciousness, and such an activity demands of us ... a definite attitude of creative tension (Tame, 1986:127). “The works of Ralph Vaughan-Williams ... combine past tradition with new musical forms, an unmistakable 'Englishness' and a wonderfully poetic lyricism, a deep love of nature and what is at times a soaring mysticism. Among his greatest works are ... the superb piece *The Lark Ascending*” (Tame, 1986:133).

Rochdale is the place which marks the beginning of Michael's enchantment with music and the violin, but it also serves as a retreat where he experiences calm, away from the pressures exerted on emotions and spirit, and where he can distance himself slightly from the constantly draining demands of love and loss. When he, an established musician, at Christmas time visits his father and aunt, he always also visits Mrs Formby. First he takes a walk to the hills, and the reader is drawn into a scene of great peace, where Michael is also at peace, despite the emotional storms he has weathered in Vienna and Venice, and the knowledge he carries with him that Julia is irrevocably lost. Both physically and metaphorically Michael finds a safe haven in the hills to listen to the larks:

The air is fresh and sharp and the ground is a subtle chart of tussocks and black earth: hundreds of different grasses, some tipped with feathery brush, some with minute white four-pointed stars; low bilberry bushes with their berries still green – all rippling with or resisting the flapping and rustling of the wind.

I crouch in a hollow, the wind slackens; I lie in it, damp though it is, and the wind dies, and the horizon dies, and there is nothing but silence and sky.

~ Seth, 1999:319

The following day he takes Mrs Formby for a drive, and for the first time the peace of Rochdale is rudely interrupted when she tells him that she has decided that her nephew will inherit her Tononi. Michael is now faced with a double loss – that of Julia, and of the beloved violin, but in this situation Rochdale points to emotional growth and strength of character, in that he feels shattered, but thankful for the time that he has had with the violin. From this moment, though, fear clouds his days as he realises that he may at any moment be notified that he has to relinquish his violin.

His final visit to Rochdale takes place when Mrs Formby has left him the Tononi in her will. It is not only a visit to his father and aunt, but also one of tribute and thanksgiving. Michael has lost Julia, but has emotionally so far matured that he displays no feelings of rebellion, but rather of calm resignation. When he visits Mrs Formby's grave, it is in a spirit of immense gratitude, and in recognition of the great debt he owes her, not only for the violin, but for the doors of music which she opened for him. It also marks the long distance he has travelled musically, from the child who listened to *The Lark Ascending*, to the intricacies of Bach. “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” ... I play it till my part runs out...” (Seth, 1999:379).

Rochdale is singled out to illuminate the eventual musical as well as the measure of emotional maturity Michael has attained. The musical maturity is immense, but taking into consideration his nervous breakdowns, his strength of character is questionable. He and Julia together continue their journey from London to Vienna. In this city they had lived together ten years previously, and Michael had deserted her there. Although Seth describes their memories, and the renewal of a serious relationship, he concentrates on the recital of the Maggiore in the hall of the Musikverein, best to illustrate the music and their emotions, where, of course, the quartet plays the music of Schubert, surely the most typical Viennese of the composers of classical music. In his biography of the composer, *Schubert*, Joseph Wechsberg writes: “He was 'ein echtes Wiener Kind' – a genuine Viennese child. Born in one district of Vienna he spent most of his life in the city and died in another district” (Wechsberg, 1977:95, 96). Schubert loved his city, and on a visit to Hungary to teach the children of Count Esterhazy, it was obvious that he was very homesick. “In the autumn of 1818 he wrote, 'I now see that I am really lonely ... My longing for Vienna grows daily’” (Wechsberg, 1977:120).

Not only is the music of Schubert associated with Vienna, he was also one of the first great Romanticists, and it is therefore highly appropriate that the two lovers should be playing his music. The Romantic era though, must not be confused with a love story. *The Great*

Composers define Romanticism as “a movement of intellectual thought in reaction to what contemporary artists believed to be the worship of reason by the Classical era ... they rejected what they saw as the cold reasonableness of composers like Haydn. In place of order, the Romantics exalted emotions, beauty and instinct ... Romanticism loved the natural world for its wildness and unpredictability and found artistic and spiritual inspiration in Nature's untamed beauty” (Buxton & Lyon, 1987:Introduction).

There is also a deep spiritual content in the music of the Romantics, and it is this which carries Michael through when he suffers his nervous breakdown during the concert. Thoughts are rushing wildly through his mind – on the one hand he is deeply disturbed that Julia's deafness will prevent her from playing with anyone else ever again, and on the other he is obsessed with the glory of Schubert, his short life and suffering, and that Schubert had never even heard the quintet which the Maggiore is playing performed. Clearly, Seth knows the history of Schubert well, which is why he interlaces, with such ingenuity, Schubert's tragic history with Michael's disturbed thoughts:

But do not flee; applaud these players, then drink your Sekt, good burghers and return, for after the interval you will hear what I myself would have been pleased to hear through gut and hair and wood, not merely through the music of my mind. But it was the year I walked to Haydn's grave; it was the year I died ...

~ Seth, 1999:240

Part of Michael's perturbation also stems from the fact that Schubert did not receive the recognition he deserved, as “ the earth took my syphilis-riddled flesh, my typhoid-ravaged guts, my vainly loving heart many times around the sun before my quintet for strings was heard by human ears” (Seth, 1999:240). It is sadly true “that few of Schubert's works were published at the time of his death. The list is pitifully small. None of his symphonies ... only two piano sonatas, one string quartet out of fourteen, no other chamber music...” (Wechsberg, 1977:191).

Michael bemoans the sad, syphilis-riddled, impoverished state of Schubert, but he himself is sick – with nerves and longing. His and Julia's journey has taken them to Vienna, where he hopes that good memories from the past will convince Julia to place their relationship on a permanent basis. He has though, to contend with the fact of her deafness, and it is in these circumstances in Vienna that the validity of a statement concerning setting and character in *Literature* is proved: “Setting may intersect with a character as a means by which authors underscore the importance of place, circumstance, and time on human growth and change ... The way characters respond and adjust to setting can reveal their strength or weakness” (Roberts & Jacobs, 1995:233-234). Michael's emotional journey over ten years has

not carried him far enough to display sufficient mental stability, spiritual maturity, and strength of character to face the issue of Julia's deafness with all its implications, and to withstand the pressure. If London had been a place of joyful re-union, Vienna is a place of mental turmoil and sadness. The only consolation amidst the “fear of what may come in the sunless night” (Seth, 1999:242), is that Julia agrees to accompany him to Venice.

In the same way that Schubert is typical of Vienna, Vivaldi epitomises Venice, and it is therefore logical that Seth should choose to let Michael and Julia follow in the footsteps of this composer. In *Baroque Festival* the statement is made that “Venice, the violin and Vivaldi ... these three are inseparable” (Buxton & Lyon, 1987:41), and to Michael and his violin Vivaldi's Venice provides deep musical contentment. He and Julia visit “the Pieta, Vivaldi's church – or rather, the church that stands where his church stood. On this spot my violin must often have played” (Seth, 1999:263). They go into the church the next day, and it is with infinite joy that Michael plays the *Largo* of Vivaldi's first *Manchester Sonata* with her:

It is rapture, and it is over soon. Nothing lovelier has ever been written for the instrument, and my violin clearly feels it has been written for it – to play here. Where else, after all, should this be performed? It was on this spot that Vivaldi tutored the young girls from the orphanage, and made them the best musicians in Europe. And since the piece was discovered in manuscript just a few years ago in the very library in Manchester from which I learned much of my musicianship, I feel it has been written for me as well.

~ Seth, 1999:269

The World of Music explains Michael's allusion to the young girls from the orphanage:

Although he never actually entered the church, Vivaldi took holy orders in 1703, and thus acquired his nickname of *il preto rosso* (the red-haired priest) ... he returned in 1713 to his birthplace, Venice. There he was appointed director of music at the Ospedale della Pieta – a foundling school for girls, with a good choir and orchestra – and held this post until 1740.

~ Sandved, c.1950:2158

Like the music of Bach, the music of Vivaldi, which Michael plays with such ardour, dates from the Baroque era, and it is maintained that “the two main ingredients of the Baroque, at least in architecture and music, are complexity and harmony” (Buxton & Lyon, 1987:Introduction). There is a certain irony in this statement, concerning the relationship between Michael and Julia. Certainly, like Baroque music, it is fraught with complexities, but in Venice the harmony comes to an abrupt end when Michael discovers a letter she has written to her husband, physically hurts her, and again suffers a breakdown when she catches her flight to London.

Throughout their relationship Julia demonstrates that she is the stronger character. Reserved and self-contained, she still freely gives of herself to Michael, and loves him devotedly. If he has to live with loss, so does she, not only having to sacrifice her love for him for the sake of her husband and child, but she also has to contend with the greatest tragedy which can strike a musician – her loss of hearing. Yet even this she bears with quiet strength. When Michael asks her whether deafness may sometimes be an advantage, and she has told him that she cannot hear distracting sounds from an audience, she adds just one sentence:

“But I can't hear the sound of rain on a skylight either”.

If I didn't know her, I wouldn't have recognised from her voice how deeply this trivial loss seems to hurt her.

~ Seth, 1999:251

It is with the same quiet determination that she has decided to cope with deafness and yet continue to play that she decides to return to her husband and child and to sever all connection with Michael. Venice therefore, for them becomes the city of parting.

They meet again when both have separately returned to London, but she stands firm in her resolve that the relationship has ended. Their journey has come full circle, and London, the place of re-union, now features as the place which signifies as the final parting of the ways. When Michael attends her recital of *The Art of Fugue* and stumbles out into the rain, it is obvious that he has also achieved a certain measure of maturity, enough to realise that he is bound to follow the road of music alone, but that music will always be his personal consolation and fount of strength.

As has been demonstrated, the role of place is of the utmost importance in *An Equal Music*, and enhances the deep understanding of music creation and production, and its intersection with literature.

This statement will be reinforced in the following concluding chapter.

Conclusion

In the discussion on the fugal form, the *Oxford Companion to Music* states that “All the voices having thus made their appearance ... they wander off to the discussion of something else, or (more likely) of some motif or motifs already heard ... At the end the piece veers round to the original key” (Scholes, 1944:337).

This statement may be regarded as an apt description of events in *An Equal Music*. The “voices”, or characters, are introduced to the reader in London, thereafter they “wander off” both literally to various places, and metaphorically with all the emotions and musical experiences which come into play, and then return to the “original key” of London for the conclusion of the story.

However, as Scannell in *How to Enjoy Novels* maintains, the reader has come to expect certain literary elements in a novel, namely “language, plot, character, dialogue, atmosphere, imagery and symbolism, entertainment, and discrimination” (Scannell, 1984:21-35). Of all the aspects Scannell names, characterization has to be one of the most important. *An Approach to Literature* also stresses this point: “Character ... is always involved in fiction ... the germ of fiction is conflict, conflict eventuating in significant action, and ... character is always a dynamic of action, even in stories that, apparently, appeal only to our interest in action and our curiosity about the outcome of action” (Brooks, Purser & Warren, 1975:79). In *An Equal Music* it is to a great extent Michael's inner conflict which dominates the story, therefore his is the most fully rounded character the reader encounters, characterization reinforced by the element of first person narration. This method of narration of course implies that a particular point of view, in this case that of Michael, has been adopted in relation to all people and events – this determines, to a certain extent, the reader's reactions, as the presentation may be sympathetic or less so. For that matter, an article on the internet in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* states that “Readers and critics ... occasionally complained that Michael, the protagonist, was simply not a likeable (or unlikeable) enough character to sustain interest throughout a substantial novel...” (Wikipedia, 2008). This criticism probably stems from the fact that as the story unfolds, the realisation crystallises that Michael is not a strong character. He shares his longing and love, but he also shares major nervous breakdowns with the reader, where he clearly demonstrates a lack of mental stability and the strength to weather the emotional storms, as, for instance, the breakdown he suffers in an excess of empathy with Julia's deafness on the stage of the *Musikverein* in Vienna.

Literature defines round characters as follows:

The basic trait of **round characters** is that they *recognize, change with, or adjust to* circumstances. The round character – usually the

main figure in a story ... undergoes a *change* or *alteration*, which may be shown in ... the discovery of unrecognized truths.

~ Roberts & Jacobs, 1995:133

The changes Michael undergoes are clearly marked by his nervous breakdowns, with the previously unrecognized truths of his weakness, but also that only music can redeem and strengthen him.

Julia comes to the fore as the stronger character, but is less rounded than Michael, as the reader is only allowed insight into her thoughts and actions when filtered through Michael's mind. Yet her strength is demonstrated by the way she copes with her disability to the extent that she even continues to pursue a musical career. It is also impressive that, although she loves Michael deeply, she is determined to forsake that love because she acknowledges that in the first instance she owes responsibility and loyalty to her husband and child. More than anywhere else, this is underlined by her decision to play the *Art of Fugue* at her solo performance. The music she had promised Michael she would share only with him, she shares with the world – a clear indication of the finality of her decision to build a life without him. The question arises of how she and Michael view each other. Undoubtedly they are enchanted, each with the other, but this remains a novel drenched in music, and therefore, although they see each other as human beings with lovable characteristics, and with desirable physical attributes, they also are aware of each other as musical entities.

The individual members of the Maggiore quartet, although lending interest to the novel, are also primarily musical entities. They are not entirely cardboard characters, but only the musical dimension is illuminated. When asked in an interview why he had made Michael a member of a quartet instead of a solo performer, Seth answered:

Basically, a quartet is a very odd structure. There are four musicians: two violins (which adds a bit of complexity and competition), a viola player, and a cellist. The music they make has to be cooperative – you can't have a virtuoso sticking out. And yet, though there's cooperation on stage, there may be bitter rivalries, dislikes, intrigues, and conflicts among the four players. They spend more time with each other than with their families – very often on the road and often under pressure on stage. It's a bit like a platoon under fire or a marriage of four people – with all the complications that a marriage of two people entails multiplied in more combinations than I can calculate. Using a quartet also allowed me to introduce other characters to enrich the background of the novel's main story, the love story between Michael and Julia.

~ Bold Type, 2008

As the background to the love story consists mostly of music, it is understandable that Seth accentuates the musical aspects of the quartet, and that characterisation is of secondary importance.

One of the most important aspects of novel writing Scannell mentions is that of language. A fiction writer's selection of words is of cardinal importance. *Literature* states that the “selection should be accurate and explicit, so that all actions, scenes, and ideas are clear. If a passage is effective, if it conveys an ideal well or gets at the essence of an action vividly and powerfully, we may confidently say that the words are right” (Roberts & Jacobs, 1995:264-265). Even as early as the end of the eighteenth century, the renowned author Jane Austen demonstrated her awareness of the importance of well chosen words in both dialogue and narrative, in a work of fiction, and readily defended her point of view in her novel *Northanger Abbey*. She concludes one chapter with a clear and unambiguous statement by the narrator, eloquently defending both the writing and reading of novels – not the Gothic novels which then enjoyed great popularity, but rather the novels which aimed to entertain, but also to develop greater understanding of the human mind, and which stressed the complexities of human relationships, such as Austen's own novels:

Some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.

~ Austen, 1817:29-30

With regard to language Scannell maintains that “the major novelist uses language with that almost obsessive regard for each word's rightness – its meaning, associations, sound, colour and texture – that the best poets display” (Scannell, 1984:22). In the case of *An Equal Music*, it really is a poet carefully weaving the fabric of the language, as Seth does not primarily regard himself as a novelist. In an interview which Asia Source conducted with Seth, the interviewer posed the question that Seth had written in several different genres, namely that of fiction, poetry, translation, travel, and libretto, and wanted to know in which particular genre Seth felt most at home, to which the author replied:

Poetry, always poetry. I have written lyric poetry throughout my career. The books appear sporadically, but that is only because composing poems to form a book takes a number of years ... I think, in answer to the question that you posed, poetry is something that I've always considered myself, primarily, or at heart, to be at home in. And I sometimes look at my work and wonder how on earth I strayed into prose. I think the reason is that after I wrote *The Golden Gate*, which either you could see as a long poem, or you could see as a verse novel, I discovered that I had the taste, and the stamina, for writing novels, and I subsequently wrote two more.

Wikipedia also notes that when detailing all the languages at his command – his native Hindi, Welsh, German, French and Mandarin, Seth described English as “my instrument” (Wikipedia, 2008), therefore it is interesting that, although choosing his words with infinite care, as this study has proven, Seth does not mirror the intricacies of the fugue anywhere in the language. For that he trusts to the sequence of events and the overarching form of the novel itself. There are no long, convoluted sentences, or even the slightest degree of incomprehensibility. Rather some sentences are very short, although fraught with meaning, as, for instance, Michael's cynical remark that “All of us would rather be by ourselves but the Maggiore must smile to live” (Seth, 1999:90), referring to the perpetual financial straits in which most performing musicians find themselves. Another example occurs in the lightly sarcastic humour of “lieder-singers whose heads sway like daffodils on the stalks of their necks” (Seth, 1999:162). This remark does not stem from a feeling of superiority on the part of the author, as he is himself a lieder-singer. In an interview with Bold Type Seth acknowledged that his love of the music of Schubert began when he was writing the extremely long novel, *A Suitable Boy*:

There were a lot of Indian musical characters in the novel. In the evening, when I wanted to be by myself, I found that the moment I started playing an Indian musical instrument or singing an Indian song, I was drawn back into the world of my novel. It wasn't a form of relaxation, but work by other means. That's when I began singing Schubert songs. I didn't know them well then, but I love them now. They're wonderful melodies.

~ Bold Type, 2008

When Michael has apparently lost both Julia and the Beethoven Quintet, the ineffable sadness is strikingly portrayed in “Under the shadow of Eros I sit down and weep” (Seth, 1999:43). More words would have been redundant, and would have robbed the sentence of its impact.

The novel mostly consists of gentle, lyrical prose, especially in the descriptive passages, where they concern either music, or Julia, or both:

The quintet exists without us yet cannot exist without us. It sings to us, we sing into it, and somehow ... the man who deafly transfigured what he so many years earlier had hearingly composed speaks into us across land and water and ten generations, and fills us here with sadness, here with amazed delight.

For me there is another presence in this music. As the sense of her might fall on my retina through two sheets of moving glass, so too through this maze of motes converted by our arms into vibration – sensory, sensuous – do I sense her being again ...

But where she is I do not know, nor is there hope I will.

~ Seth, 1999:79-80

Throughout the novel, there runs the leitmotif of loss, therefore the tone is plangent – a plainsong of sadness.

If the sense of loss is pervasive, the music is much more so. Seth unequivocally states that “Music to me is dearer even than speech” (Seth, 1999:Author's Note). It is therefore understandable that, as an expression of the author's love of music, it would permeate the novel, as a transcendental and redemptive force, but also as mercilessly demanding. The success with which Seth masters the difficulties of intertwining characters, events and music becomes evident in, for instance, the article in Wikipedia:

Musically knowledgeable readers, especially those who perform, were with rare exceptions unstinting in their enthusiasm and praise. Paolo Isotta, one of Italy's most significant music critics, wrote in the influential newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* of the Italian translation that no European writer had ever shown such a knowledge of European classical music, nor had any European novel before managed to convey the psychology, the technical abilities, even the human potentialities of those who practise music for a living.

~ Wikipedia, 2008

Although Seth does not introduce all forms of music into the novel – for instance the symphony, the opera and operetta, and many other forms are never discussed, he certainly introduces many aspects of music and music making. Through the characters he accentuates the spiritual aspects, and through the journeys they undertake, he introduces composers and paints the canvas of his novel with this art form.

Not pertinent to the discussion of voices or the exploration of place, and therefore not discussed in previous chapters, Seth also stresses the very real financial difficulties performing artists experience. He hints at this quite early in the novel when Michael wryly remarks that “the Maggiore must smile to live” (Seth, 1999:90). Obviously a musician has to possess an instrument of excellent quality, as one of inferior quality would lead to poor performances, which would not satisfy a critical audience. The price of such instruments though, is usually far in excess of musicians' income. The author addresses this important issue through Piers, the leader of the Maggiore quartet, who when needing a new violin, asks Michael to accompany him to the auction rooms. Not only must an instrument be of excellent quality, but a relationship of such intimacy exists between musician and instrument, as in the case of Michael and his Tononi, that the artist must be able to see the instrument as an extension of him or herself.

They go to Denton's auction rooms, where Piers has seen a violin:

he has seen and held and heard one that he loves ... It has a grand uncomplaining tone, slightly too penumbra'd with richness and resonance for me, but Piers loves it with the passion of sudden and, yes, attainable love. With all his savings and borrowings he can just about reach the estimated price. The auctioneer's 15% will stretch him on the rack, but he knows that this is what he must have. He will spend years paying it off.

~ Seth, 1999:336

Piers has decided that his absolute limit will be forty-eight thousand pounds, and finds the tension almost unendurable when someone else relentlessly bids against him. "It is all Piers can do not to turn around to face his unseen rival, who is so precipitately gobbling away huge chunks of his savings and earnings with each bid" (Seth, 1999:340). So determined is he to acquire this violin which he loves, that he is eventually willing to raise his bid to seventy-four thousand pounds, but is outbid, and "Piers is sighing a long, half-sobbing sigh. In his eyes are tears of frustration and despair" (Seth, 1999:341). In such high regard does the musician hold his instrument, that he would have been willing probably to pay off the seventy-four thousand pounds for the rest of his life.

Seth courageously introduces the theme of Julia's deafness. This will remain a controversial issue, as certain readers, as well as musicians, will find the concepts of a musician performing at the highest level of excellence as Julia does, and that of deafness, irreconcilable. The author though, assures his reading public that he has done in depth research concerning this affliction. In an interview Seth was asked whether he had done any research to portray the complications of deafness for a musician, to which he replied:

How can a musician be deaf? After I decided to bring Julia's deafness into the novel, I found a number of musicians who were quite hard of hearing. I also interviewed doctors about deafness, so that the symptoms were correct and the pacing of the onset of the disease was correct. And I took lip reading classes for thirteen weeks ... I have got a better understanding of how people who can't cope through their ears cope through their eyes and, in the case of musicians, also through their mind's ear.

~ Bold Type, 2008

Certainly throughout the novel Julia's deafness is very convincingly portrayed, and of course it heightens the dramatic tension inherent in her and Michael's relationship, and arouses the reader's sympathy for a musician facing such an ordeal.

Seth even approaches certain aspects of music from a political angle. In an interview conducted by Nermeen Shaikh of AsiaSource, he states that politics has to some extent, been present in all his books, "And even *An Equal Music* has as a backdrop the decline of northern towns as a result of years of neglect" (Shaikh, 2008). With this comment Seth refers to

Michael visiting Rochdale, and sharing with the reader his indignation at the disintegration and decay of an erstwhile thriving community: “It is a town with its heart torn out. Everything speaks of its decline” (Seth, 1999:71). Although not mentioned in the interview, Seth includes the way in which cultural activities, and especially music, have suffered because of a lack of government funding. Michael describes how there had been a system of loaning instruments to children whose parents could not afford them, and free tuition had been available, but that was “all scrapped with the educational cuts as the budgetary hatchet struck again and again ... If I had been born in Rochdale five years later, I don't see how I – coming from the background I did ... could have kept my love of the violin alive” (Seth, 1999:71).

At a later point in the novel, when he is deeply disturbed by the loss of Julia, and has taken the momentous decision to leave the Maggiore, his confused and bitter thoughts turn again to children being deprived of music:

They are tearing music out of the lives of poorer children. Now children, say your L M N. Literate, Musicate, Numerate. Now once again, all together: Illiterate, Immusicate, Innumerate. These sainted powers will starve you of music as surely as the damned. Leave music to those who can afford indulgences. In twenty years no butcher's son will be a violinist, no, nor daughter either.

~ Seth, 1999:346

Seth allows the action in the novel to flow effortlessly from place to place, and each city, from London to Vienna to Venice has its own social structure, language, history, and rich cultural history. This is emblematic of the fact that music is universal in its appeal, embraces all cultures, and effortlessly transcends all boundaries of time and space. *The Art of Fugue*, which has outlasted two and a half centuries, remains an outstanding example with which to prove this point. During the course of the novel, this great composition with all its intricacies, mirrors all the complexities of Michael and Julia's relationship, and emphasises certain stages in that relationship. As has been demonstrated, it is the cause of their meeting again after an interval of ten years. It also marks the depth and joy of their love when Julia presents Michael with her handwritten manuscript of the *Contrapunctus I* while they are in Venice, and is linked to his bitter longing for her when back in London:

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.

~ Seth, 1999:347

Approach to Literature states that at the conclusion of a novel, “the end itself represents a shift in, or a clarification of, human values” (Brooks, Purser & Warren, 1975:79). The validity of this statement is proved when Michael hears Julia playing *The Art of Fugue* for the last time. It has marked the milestones in their relationship, but the last satisfying cadence of togetherness is lacking, and at last, in a “clarification of values”, he is ready to accept this final separation. The beauty of the music overshadows his pain. “It is a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely, inexorable, phrase across phrase, phrase echoing phrase, the incomplete, the unending 'Art of Fugue'. It is an equal music” (Seth, 1999:380). Michael's shift in values has taken place. The feverish quality has vanished from his love for Julia, to be replaced by resignation and the realisation that his mental and spiritual energy, and his love, will in future be channelled into music. Music will enslave him, but it will also remain the greatest redemptive force in his life. Ironically, when he stumbles from the hall, physically his vision is blurred by rain and tears, but with the clear sightedness of the cathartic moment he acknowledges at last that

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.

~ Seth, 1999:381

This study has concentrated on the logical and rational integration of the art forms of literature and music, and their reciprocal roles in *An Equal Music*. Although only certain aspects of a novel so unique and rich in its exploration of the relationship between character and music have been illuminated, the researcher trusts that this study will serve as an incentive to other researchers of literature to explore different aspects of *An Equal Music*.

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Appendix I

Letter of consent: Recording of *An Equal Music*

Subject: Permission request - The Art of Fugue

Date: Tuesday 26 February 2008 18:02

From: sbrear@abrsm.ac.uk

To: mdb@wbs.co.za

Dear Mrs Botha

Thank you very much for your letter of 2 February, which has been passed to me.

Your dissertation sounds very interesting, and your request reminds me that I have still to read 'An Equal Music' - there are so many books to be read! We can grant you permission to use a few pages of the mirror fugues, and Davitt Moroney's performance of them, to illustrate your dissertation. Please make sure you don't make any more than four copies in total, and print the following acknowledgments:

[For the printed music:]

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[For the recording:]

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With best wishes

Sarah Brear

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