An equal music, an alien world: postcolonial literature and the representation of European culture

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The Postcolonial representation of European culture can alter our (European) perspectives on Western arts. The case of the novel *An Equal Music* by the Indian writer Vikram Seth is particularly interesting. Although set in Europe (between London, Vienna and Venice) and dealing with European characters, situations, landscapes, and cultural myths, the book offers a peculiarly Postcolonial reading of our classical music. Therefore, by applying Said’s contrapuntal analysis to Postcolonial writing, I deal with ‘What the Postcolonial means for us’, taking into account, besides European Literature and Postcolonialism, also the relationship between European music and the Postcolonial sensibility, using Said’s and Kundera’s essays as keys to Seth’s musical and fictional world.

When the Italian translation of Vikram Seth’s novel *An Equal Music* appeared, one of the most influential music critics in Italy, Paolo Isotta, wrote in the most authoritative Italian newspaper, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 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. This was no small appreciation: firstly, because Isotta is not easy to please, then, because his review starts from the assumption that ‘music is a European thing, and that’s all’. Yet, this very affirmation creates some problems for the literary critic who has so far read Seth’s work in a postcolonial context. Actually, this novel is all set in Europe, between London, Vienna and Venice, there are no Indian characters and all cultural references are to European artists (classical musicians, of course, but also painters like Carpaccio). Moreover, if it is true that also in Seth’s novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, set in San Francisco, one could find references to...
Western pop and classical music, unlike in that work, it is even truer that in An Equal Music ‘there is no ironic distancing of the writer from the host society’.²

For all these reasons, the opinions on this book are radically divergent. Some critics appreciate Seth’s ability to rewrite ‘into his narrative the stylistic features and variegated textures of music’,³ while others wonder whether An Equal Music is an expression of that postcolonial condition which Kwame Anthony Appiah called ‘comprador intelligentsia’ and identified in African culture with the situation of writers who ‘In the West […] are known through the Africa they offer [while] their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world.’⁴ In other words, after being known in the West for the India he offered in A Suitable Boy, now Seth achieves fame both at home and abroad by presenting his own (invented?) Europe to his compatriots and Europe itself.

It is interesting to see that Seth’s Europe is ‘presented’ to the world through the vehicle of classical music. Seth had already shown his love – and knowledge – of music in his previous works. As Mala Pandurang remembers, ‘Seth studied the khayal under Pandit Amarnath at Shri Ram Bharati Kala Kendra, while on short visits to India. This familiarity with hindustani music comes across in those sections of A Suitable Boy that take the reader through the intricacies of ragas.’⁵ It is very likely that this love for Indian music later ‘led to his interest in Western music’.⁶ Yet some critics were rather puzzled to read a novel by an Indian writer utterly devoted to the exaltation of Western music. Actually, while almost all reviewers might agree with Shirley Chew that ‘like the Four Quartets, Seth’s novel can be said to aspire to the condition of music’,⁷ many of them wonder why, to compose his musical texture Seth prefers Western music to his own native one. Surely, since ‘as a writer Seth remains unpolitical’,⁸ ‘a novel like An Equal Music could be read as an attempt to supersede the reactive boundaries of nationalism and distinct cultural registers through a philosophy of “universal humanism” and an overriding concern for the “human voice”’.⁹ Moreover, if we agree with Milan Kundera that the novel teaches the reader to be curious about the Other and to try to understand different truths,¹⁰ it appears obvious that Seth is exploring the world of the European Other through the means of classical music. It is still Kundera – but in another context – who affirms that ‘no civilization has ever created such a miracle out of musical sound as has European music, with its thousand-year-old history and its wealth of forms and styles! Europe: great music and homo sentimentalis. Twins nurtured side by side in the same cradle.’¹¹ As a matter of fact, An Equal Music seems to be the fictionalization of this idea; we will return to the concept of homo sentimentalis. For the moment, we will try to discover what is the image of Europe that Seth’s book conveys through music.

Actually, it would be very easy to say that Seth looks at Europe through the eyes of an exile. His main character, Michael, although being an Englishman, does
not feel at home in London, where he lives, nor was he at home in Vienna, where he studied music. A native of Northern England, the opposite of a metropolitan man, he is shattered by the contrast between his provincial upbringing and his sophisticated musical aspirations. In this sense, he appears an outsider in his home country and, as Said wrote in his seminal study on exile, like all exiles, Michael feels ‘an urgent need to reconstitute [his] broken life[,] […] by choosing to see [himself] as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.’ ¹² Perhaps it would be a little far-fetched to see Michael as an alter ego of Seth, himself a sort of exile in London, yet the love of classical Western music which the two have in common could be read also as a more or less conscious attempt to grasp and become part of ‘a triumphant ideology’. What really distinguishes Michael from all the many characters who constituted the variegated universe of Seth’s previous novel, A Suitable Boy, is his extreme individuality, the sign of a Western problematic consciousness. As Mala Pandurang wrote, in An Equal Music ‘the warmth of the collective in A Suitable Boy has given way to the solitariness of the individual.’¹³

This affirmation might sound contrary to the importance given by Michael to his not being a soloist but a member of a quartet. He describes his experience thus:

> Every rehearsal of the Maggiore Quartet begins with a very plain, very slow three-octave scale on all four instruments in unison: sometimes major, as in our name, sometimes minor, depending on the key of the first piece we are to play. No matter how […] our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive our disputes about people or politics, or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it, it reminds us that we are, when it comes to it, one.¹⁴

“When it comes to it”: the sense of the whole experience of playing music together lies in this dubious incidental sentence. To what does the ‘it’ refer? And what happens when it does not come to it? Seth’s passage describes quite well ‘that state of serene anonymity achieved by chamber musicians when they lose themselves in the work they are playing’.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, for the Maggiore Quartet it is not a question of a collective experience, but more of four individuals who merge into the depth of music, thus annihilating themselves. Said writes: ‘So powerful is music’s alienation from society, so difficult and esoteric is its technique, so needless has it become of anything resembling an audience, that its reversed course toward silence becomes its raison d’être, its final cadence.’¹⁶ Indeed, in Seth’s novel, music is never a proper means of communication between individuals: when they try to use it to reach the Other, they face tremendous delusions. This happens to Michael with his precious Tononi violin, and to the woman he loves and her piano. It is again Said who stresses that ‘the social essence of pianism is precisely […] to alienate and distance the public’ and, at the same time, to ‘invite us into a utopian realm of acute awareness that is otherwise inaccessible to us […] break[ing] down the barriers between audience and
interpreter [...] without violating music’s essential silence.’ It is not by chance that the favourite piece of the Maggiore Quartet – and the most difficult for them to play – is a transcription of Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*. A large part of the novel is centred around the rehearsals for the Maggiore’s recording of it: the more they try to play it, the more Bach’s fugue has the power to make them forget their moods, passions and pains (at least for the brief moment of playing), ‘putting them in the presence of the extra-subjective Beauty of the Self’, as Kundera philosophically describes the effect of Bach’s fugues.

Actually, the only way in which music acts as a bridge between listeners and performers, or as a way of communicating experiences, is by provoking a flux of memories – personal memories which remain silent, in the inner soul, and cannot be shared, and ‘memories of other performances, a history of relationships with the music, a web of affiliations’. In a way, Seth’s novel is mainly about the individual performer’s relation with his art, his search for truth through music, his wish, to use again Kundera’s words, ‘to penetrate the mystery of immediate reality that continuously forsakes our lives.’ What we are faced with in *An Equal Music* is the anxiety of performance, the compulsion pushing a performer to play, his impossibility to ‘somehow bridge the gap between the unnatural refined, rarefied world of the recital stage and the world of music in human life’, other than in the brief moment of a perfect performance. Reflecting on the art of piano playing, Edward Said observes that ‘Surely we have all been tremendously moved by a piece of music, and have imagined what it must be like to feel compelled to perform it, to be disturbed into expressing it aloud, to be urged into articulating it, note by note, line by line.’ In his novel, Seth articulates this feeling, trying to describe what it might feel like to feel the urge to play, to be compelled to do it, not for an audience, not only to be part of a group of musicians, but firstly and mainly for oneself.

‘Music to me is deeper than speech’, Seth himself said. Coherently, in *An Equal Music*, he leaves more space to music than to narrative speech. As Shirley Chew notes, ‘the story in Seth’s novel [...] is left largely untold [...] In place of successive events of narrative, we have a succession of images that change from moment to moment across a variety of contests, accruing to themselves delicate clusters of significance; and in place of psychological adherence, we have swift patterns of mood and colour and tone that figure forth the confused layers and uncertain depths of the psyche.’ It is superfluous to point out that a similar way of writing is rather dangerous. While a number of poets, from the Romantics to the present day, although invoking, like Verlaine, ‘De la musique avant toute chose’, would surely agree that the most difficult enterprise a writer may embark upon is to render music on the page, maybe not a few of them would also, if secretly, agree with that character of Julian Barnes who says that ‘When music is literature, it is bad literature’. Writing of something which is ‘deeper than
speech’ appears like a contradiction in itself: the same Barnes character says that ‘Music begins where words cease’ and goes on: ‘What happens when music ceases? Silence. All the other arts aspire to the condition of music. What does music aspire to? Silence.’

Usually, ‘music has an important semiotic function in narrative […] it provides historical, geographic and atmospheric setting, it helps depict and identify characters and qualify actions.’ In Seth’s novel, however, this is not the case – at least, not completely. Since the action is mainly set in London at the present time, it is not German classical music that provides either the historical or the geographical setting, of course; nor does it help depict the characters. Certainly it provides the atmospheric setting and helps identify such characters as Michael and his musical friends, and qualify their actions. Music widens the narrative space by hinting at feelings that are too deep for speech. Yet, obviously, to feel those emotions the readers must know the music the author is referring to. Only if reader and author share the same musical encyclopaedia, does the narrative ‘soundtrack’ work, ‘reinforc[ing] what is usually already signified by dialogue, gestures’. One can wonder how many readers are able to understand the ending of this book, and to sympathise with the main character who, though having lost love, and work, feels blessed just because he can listen to Bach’s *Art of the Fugue* played on her piano by the woman who is no longer his lover.

‘Music, such music, is a sufficient gift.’ – he reflects – ‘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.’

In the same year as *An Equal Music*, 1999, another very important Indo-English author, Salman Rushdie, published a novel dealing with music and musicians, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which is set in the world of rock and pop stars. The critics and the reviewers have stressed a certain superficiality in his picture of the show business and ‘an excessive fixation on the cult of celebrity’, while asking ‘whether Rushdie’s Asian protagonists do not end up as largely passive victims of US mass culture’. Yet, it is undeniable that, at any latitude, most of Rushdie’s readers, sharing with the author the same knowledge of pop culture, do not fail to appreciate the sense of ‘a world in continual flux, subject to endless shocks and mutations’ that the book conveys. On the contrary, nowadays not many people, especially in the Western world, possess the refined musical culture needed to understand Michael’s reactions to a classical piece.

Into my mind comes an extraordinarily beautiful sound. I am nine years old […] A small, frail man enters to applause such as I have never heard before, followed by the strange, absolute silence of a multitude. He brings down a stick and a huge
and lovely noise fills the world. More than anything else I want to be part of such a noise.32

Maybe to enter into the spirit of this novel you must have had such an experience when young. Yet, unfortunately, for many of us the appreciation of classical music does not evolve from the stage of relishing a ‘lovely noise’! It is not by chance that in mapping ‘the cultural sites and experiences of globalization’, Rushdie chose to deal with rock music, a cultural phenomenon which has spread all around the world, not ‘aim[ing] at global integration, but […] nonetheless produc[ing] it.’34 Seth, on the contrary, starting from the very title of his novel, which is taken from Donne’s Valediction describing life after death, seems to address his work to the happy few who share his sophisticated knowledge of European culture. It is worth while having a look at Donne’s words quoted at the opening of the book:

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

All through his story, Michael strives to reach that ‘equality’ which Donne suggests will be attained only in death. The son of a butcher, coming from a village in the far North of England, his choice to study the violin appears at odds with his environment.

No one in the family had ever dreamed of going to the university […]
‘You want to be a violin player’ asked Daddy slowly.
‘A violinist, Stanley’, interposed my mother.
He hit the roof. ‘It’s the bloody fiddle, that’s what it is, the bloody fiddle.’35

Similar to Leonard Bast, that character who tries to overcome class differences by cultivating his love for classical music in Forster’s Howard’s End, Michael soon discovers that music has a different value for those coming from different classes, and that, instead of being a bridge between individuals, it can accentuate class differences. Even though he snobbishly refuses to take into account popular music, seeing it as the expression of a world he wants to escape from, he always remains a displaced ‘cultural exile’ in the universe of classical music. He never ‘finds a home’ in music, in the sense that another fictional character coming from the English province – Benjamin Rotter in Jonathan Coe’s The Rotters’ Club – does. Here is the scene in which Ben, a confused teenager with musical attitudes, experiences the epiphany of music at a rock concert.

It was the world, the world itself that was beyond his reach, the world absurdly vast, complex, random, measureless construct, this never-ending ebb and flow of human relations, political relations, cultures, histories … How could anyone hope to master such things? It was not like music. Music always made sense.
An equal music, an alien world

The music he heard that night was lucid, knowable, full of intelligence and humour, wistfulness and energy and hope. He would never understand the world, but he would always love that music. He listened to this music, with God by his side, and knew that he had found a home.\textsuperscript{36}

Contrary to Ben, Michael will never ‘find a home’ in his music – at least, not until the last page of his story (and even at that moment, one wonders if the ‘home’ he finds is much more than a precarious shack). Even if, luckily, he does not meet a tragic death like Leonard Bast, who is punished by Fate for having tried to overcome the barriers between the classes, Michael always remains an outsider. He never manages to feel at home in London. ‘London unsettles me’, he confesses at the beginning of the book,\textsuperscript{37} and at the end he realizes that ‘It is no longer, if it ever was, my home’.\textsuperscript{38} In London, he experiences the solitude of exile, ‘the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation.’\textsuperscript{39} As Shirley Chew has noted, the very structure of the novel, translating into narrative ‘the stylistic features and variegated textures of music and poetry of [Schubert’s] great song cycles’ conjures up ‘memories of loss [and] solitariness’.\textsuperscript{40} It is interesting to observe that also for Ben Rotter, himself a son of the province, classical music evokes a sense of loss. His first experience of it, dating from his early childhood, is different from Michael’s. If the latter wanted to merge in the ‘lovely noise’ of music, Benjamin links his first perception of classical music with the loss of a balloon at a fair.

As the balloon drifted implacably away […] the violin entered, and it too gathered momentum, took flight, spiralling into the hot Sunday sky, with innumerable loops and turns, until, like the balloon, it dwindled and faded, melted slowly into the infinite distance, leaving nothing behind but a yellow dot, burned on to the retina and an arching, unsupported sense of loss. A sense of loss that Benjamin has always felt could never be surpassed.\textsuperscript{41}

Actually, this is the very sense of loss which Michael feels throughout his life, and which becomes almost unbearable once the woman he loved in his youth reappears in his life, now the wife of an affluent American, and the lovely mother of a small boy. A very gifted pianist, Julia has stopped performing in public because she is going deaf. Her deafness gives a shade of melodrama to the whole story. Therefore, if, as Said observed, ‘there is an irreducible romance to the pianist’s art’,\textsuperscript{42} for Julia, this romance gets fused with real life, when she restores her relationship with Michael. Yet, the risk of transforming the novel into a pathetic and tearful love story is avoided because, as Mila Pandurang noted, ‘Seth’s narrative, which could have explored the depths of Julia’s emotional distress in her transition from the world of sounds […] to the world of deafness, is constrained by the web of ‘absence and vacant regret’ that a highly strung Michael waves around his lonely, near psychotic existence’.\textsuperscript{43} Seeing all the situations from Michael’s problematic point of view, Seth implies that, while even
a tragic occurrence like deafness cannot prevent a highly motivated, strong and self-assertive person like Julia from moving on with her life, a man obsessed by his origins and his class like Michael ends up living in the past, ‘having monologues with himself, with his violin and with musicians and composers long gone.’ In a way, at the end of the story silence awaits both characters. Yet, while Julia in her last solo concert reaches the apex of virtuoso pianism, ‘break[ing] down the barriers between audience and interpreter, and do[ing] so without violating music’s essential silence’, Michael who, since the beginning of the novel felt overwhelmed by London’s lack of ‘natural silence’, starts to suffer a different kind of deafness: “the more tense I am, the less well I hear”, he realizes. For both of them, music has lost any denotative connotation (if it ever had one): at the end, they both are aware not only that ‘music is a silent form of art’, but also that ‘its mysteriousness is deepened by the fact that it appears to be saying something’.  

Again and again I hear her name, and the word ‘deaf’, ‘deaf’, again and again […]

She plays without the music, her eyes sometimes on her hands, sometimes closed. What she hears, what she imagines I do not know.

There is no forced gravitas in her playing. It is a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely, inexorable, phrase after phrase, the incomplete, the unending ‘Art of Fugue’. It is an equal music.

One cannot help recalling Roland Barthes’ pages on pianism (‘I know at once which part of the body is playing – if it is the arm […] or if on the contrary it is the only erratic part of a pianist’s body, the pad of the fingers whose ‘grain’ is so rarely heard’ or Said’s conclusions on music (‘Music has to represent its own self-termination, and consequently its unrelieved silence’). Yet, Julia’s final deafness and Michael terminal loneliness suggest also that, as Julian Barnes wrote, ‘The logic of music leads eventually to silence’.

To conclude, let us go back to Kundera’s sentence: ‘Europe: great music and homo sentimentalis.’ It is obvious that, for Vikram Seth, music is one of the most important – if not the most meaningful – manifestations of European culture. Moreover, all through his love story with Julia, Michael appears a perfect narrative reproduction of the archetype of the ‘homo sentimentalis’, to the point that the reviewer in The Guardian was able to dismiss Seth’s book as a love story à la Eric Segal. While one cannot deny that sentences like ‘Under the arrow of Eros I sit down and weep’ belong more to the universe of Harmony novels than to high-brow literature, it is however undeniable that ‘the fullest effects [of music] are felt in a private sphere’, the most private of all being the sphere of personal affections. As Milan Kundera wrote in his novel Immortality: ‘Music taught the European not only a richness of feeling, but also the worship of his feeling and
his feeling self’, to conclude, almost aphoristically, ‘Music: a pump for inflating
the soul’.\textsuperscript{55} Accepting this definition, it does not appear peculiar that a soul inflated
by music chooses to sit under the golden Eros of Piccadilly Circus to weep for
the pains given by the arrow of Love! And it is even less strange that the beginning
and the conclusion of his passion are marked by the recurrence of a piece of music:
that \textit{Art of Fugue} which at the acme of their affair Julia swears she will never play
for anyone but Michael, and which, on the contrary, at the end of the book, she
chooses for a public performance. To a desperate Michael, who asks her ‘Why
are you playing the “Art of Fugue”? What are you trying to do?’, she simply
answers, ‘Why? Why not, for heaven’s sake. I love it too’,\textsuperscript{56} showing that music
has already inflated her soul even more than Michael’s.

The conclusions that Kundera takes at the end of \textit{Immortality} may apply also
to \textit{An Equal Music}:

\begin{quote}
And that’s life: it does not resemble a picaresque novel in which from one chapter
to the next the hero is continually being surprised by new events that have no
common denominator. It resembles a composition which musicians call: \textit{a theme
with variations}.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

As for the life depicted in \textit{An Equal Music}, some might find it an intellectual
theme, others a sentimental one. What really matters is that its variations are
catching and unpredictable: they can touch you, they can move you, they can make
you think. This is no small achievement for a novel. As one of the most promising
new American writers, Jonathan Franzen, suggested, one should think of the novel
as a lover: ‘Let’s stay at home tonight and have a great time. Just because you’re
touched where you want to be touched, it does not mean you are cheap; before
a book can change you, you have to love it.’\textsuperscript{58} And \textit{An Equal Music} is surely a
book you can love and be changed by.

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An equal music, an alien world

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