Where words fail, music speaks
An analysis of the literary significance of music

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Introduction

Writers across time have sought to represent music in words, whether as a minor motif in their works or as an overarching theme that stretches throughout. Some novels, as in one of the chosen texts - An Equal Music by Vikram Seth - is literally about music itself, seeking to make a point about music through a plot rather than using music as mere ornamentation or adorning motif.

Music is one of the most direct and esoteric of the arts, but why represent it in literary works? Victor Hugo may well have provided an answer to that - "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent". Despite its intangibility and its abstractness in form, music carries with it a galvanising power that captures emotions words can hardly express. Attempting to convey its intangible yet visceral power is a complex affair since the writer is not merely describing the sounds of music, but in some cases deciphering the composer’s intent and unravelling the emotions behind a musical composition.

This paper is concerned with the literary significance of music – how music is used in novels as thematic motifs, to develop form and structure and vehicles that communicate the ineffable. I have chosen three texts from across time periods – Howard’s End by E.M Forster, An Equal Music by Vikram Seth and Corelli’s Mandolin by Louis De Berniéres – and focused the discussion of ‘music’ to classical art music.

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1 Indeed we find a wide range of literary texts in which music has been incorporated – Contemporary writers who have written about music include Blanchot, Bakhtin, Kazuo Ishiguro, Vikram Seth, David Malouf and J.M Coetzee, James Joyce. Music has also played a major role in British literature, with Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, George Eliot and Ian McEwan among the writers who have used music in their work.
The Sound of Music: the aesthetic experience in narrative

“If a composer could say what he had to say in words, he would not bother trying to say it in music.”

- Gustav Mahler

For all the qualities that narratives can ascribe to music, the aesthetic experience remains a private and secret affair. Writers of literary music have offered the promise of an ‘open privacy’ through externalizing the private, visceral aesthetic experience, but the act of translating music to language remains most difficult for the literary text to grasp primarily because music seems resolutely non-verbal. In trying to represent Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in words, E.M Forster faces an uphill task of translating what had been so inexplicable for Beethoven that he had to say through music into literature. How is one to capture the sound of music in words, or externalize the aesthetic experience – which is so varied and complex – through words?

It is not uncommon for writers to perceive music as they perceive a painting, undoubtedly because the visual form proves less abstract than intangible sound-waves, and much easier for the aesthetic experience to be captured in words. This is exactly how Forster made Helen experience music – “she labels it with meanings from start to finish; turns it into literature”, and in doing so she saw goblins emerging out of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and “gusts of splendour, gods and demigods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death!”; so vivid were the images borne out of the symphony that she “stretched out her gloved hands as if it was tangible”.

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2 A leading composer and conductor of the 19th and early 20th century.
3 One of the protagonists in Howards End
In much the same way, Seth gives literary and visual dimensions to music by translating intangible sounds to tangible words – as in the following description of Schubert’s *Trout Quintet*:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{In a clear brook} \\
&\text{With joyful haste} \\
&\text{The whimsical trout} \\
&\text{Shot past me like an arrow}
\end{align*}
\]

In this way the reader is made to ‘see’ through language what a listener ‘sees’ through music, and the narrative becomes the product of a secondary translation. The aesthetic experience is not lost, only seen through multiple lenses. In other occasions, the aesthetic experience takes a more personal and individualistic overtone, in which the narrative delves deep into the inner psychology of the listener:

“…My eyes close. I am here and not here. A waking nap? A flight to the end of the galaxy and perhaps a couple of billion light-years beyond? Soberly, deeply, the melody grinds away, and now the minuet begins again…I can hear myself playing…the fiddle is under my chin, and the bow is in my hand, and I am.”

(An Equal Music, Vikran Seth)

Enigmatic as this may appear, Seth successfully externalizes a very personal moment suspended in time, allowing readers to feel the character’s metaphysical existence within the world of music. This becomes harder to achieve in a third-person omniscient narrative like *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, though not impossible.

Berniéres delivers the aesthetic experience through a more holistic approach. In his novel, he describes how Pelagia is drawn to the sound of Corelli’s mandolin, in
which music transcends pure sensory perception ‘the production of sweet sound’ to an ‘emotional and intellectual odyssey’. He draws readers into the realm of music through capturing Pelagia’s aesthetic experience in holistic narrative detail – the instrument, the captivating sound of the mandolin, the facial expressions of Corelli who was performing, the emotions evoked from Pelagia – covering if from different vantage points, transfiguring an abstract musical experience into a literary experience. The result is a composite three-dimensional musical landscape that conveys much more than the music itself.

As a matter of fact, the aesthetic experience exists in variations according to musical tastes. The same painting evokes different responses, just as the same Beethoven’s fifth symphony is received differently by the Forster’s characters in Howards End. There is Helen, who “can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music’s flood”, Margaret, who “can only see the music”, Tibby, who is “profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee”, and in a tongue-in-cheek way, Mosebach, who “remembers all the time that Beethoven is ‘echt Deutsch’”. The fictional representation dictating the musical experience is so variously dismantled that Forster openly wonders in his novel, if “the day will return when music is treated as music”.

\[4\text{ Meaning “Authentically German”}\]
The Musical Metaphor & its Thematic Significance

When music is treated as music, however, it becomes a musicologist’s narrative and not a novelist’s. No worthy novelist would draw musical references for the sake of doing so; rather, the inclusion of musical references serves definitive literary purposes: it may be incorporated into the surface content of the novel, used more forcefully as a terminus as the narrative moves towards its summation, or – as in Seth’s novel – be the kernel of the novel’s intent. Whichever the case, music’s literary significance must be examined within each novel’s context.

An Equal Music

Of the three novels, Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* is the only one about music through-and-through, in no small part due to Seth’s personal love for music. The romance plot speaks of a violinist’s search for a lost love ten years earlier, only to find her married, with a child and a devastating secret. The romantic plot however does not take centre stage; rather it is an accompaniment, a context in which Seth expounds the transcendental effect of music. His vision of music is one that is ‘a beauty beyond imagining – clear, lovely, inexorable…an equal music’; the whole narrative leads up to this apotheosis.

Precisely because music is the central thematic concern of the novel, many of its pages are assigned to a musicological discussion of specific music pieces and aesthetic experience in a para-textual way in that these discussions do not relate directly to the main plot. However, music is invariably the primary trigger for the turn

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5 Seth writes, in the author’s note to “An Equal Music”, that “Music to me is dearer even than speech”. Much of the musical experiences narrated in the novel are his own, stemming from his involvement with various musical quartets.

6 The Art of Fugue, left unfinished by J.S Bach on his death, hence comes to embody the promise of the novel’s title, taken by Seth from a sermon by John Donne.
of events in this novel in both uniting and dividing the lovers: The violinist’s accidental discovery of Beethoven’s Piano Trio in C minor led to his first sighting of his former lover, and in re-listening to it he relived moments that his inner being was yearning for. The music, as Seth describes, is ‘interfused in my [Michael’s] mind with so many extra-musical memories…’ At every turning point of the novel Seth uses music as the trigger that ‘shocks the coil of [his] memory’ – it brought the couple together, separated them, finally ending their romance altogether⁷.

At the end of it all, the message Seth conveys is not one about love or the emotions spawned from it, but one about music: “Music, such music, is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve?”, a message expressing Seth’s deep belief in the power of music and corroborating the aesthetic credo that underpins the novel. The Art of Fugue, left unfinished by composer J.S Bach on his death, comes to embody the promise of the novel’s title, taken by Seth from a sermon by John Donne and used as the novel’s epigraph⁸.

Captain Corelli’s Mandolin

Similar to the way that music becomes the element that united and divided the lovers in Seth’s novel, music is an important catalyst of action and the very ingredient that nourished the romance between Corelli and his lover Pelagia. Following the appearance of Corelli mid-way through Berniéres’ novel, Pelagia was inexorably drawn to Corelli’s mandolin playing; after years of separation it is through

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⁷ It was through music that Michael discovered Julia’s deafness, leading to a chain of events that led to their relationship’s declension, which ironically ended through Bach’s Art of Fugue.

⁸ “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” – John Donne.
music again that Corelli meets her grandchild Iannis who leads him back to Pelagia. The whole plot comes back full circle through music.

Whereas music is granted a strange paratextual position outside of the Seth’s novel and its medium, *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* imbues the musical element within it. The music becomes a metaphor not of any particular theme, but one that captures – very subtly – the novel in its entirety. As Pelagia listens to a “Pelagia’s March” (composed by Captain Corelli for her) one day amidst a long separation from Corelli, she travels down the vista of memories replete with love and death, heroism and skull-duggery, humour and pathos – all of which Berniéres brilliantly weaves into a musical metaphor that is *Pelagia’s March*:

The ‘*thunderous rolling of the kettledrums followed by a long lament on the cor anglais*’ was the shattering earthquake that struck Cephallonia and killed Pelagia’s father and the sorrow that came after it; the ‘*rattles that were just like the machine-pistols on the days of the massacres*’, and there was ‘*a slightly frivolous part that might have been crawling about, looking for snails*.’ As Pelagia’s March closes to an end ‘*there was still the same unsatisfying conclusion that just faded away to silence*’. This conclusion was to be made complete through the restitution of Corelli after a long separation. The whole of Pelagia’s March becomes a portrait or a reel of symbolic images from each stage of the story, building up a metaphor that sums up all.
Howards End

Howards End, unlike Seth’s novel, is not one about music. Most musical material are in fact densely concentrated in only one Chapter (Chapter V⁹), in which Forster describes in most visual terms Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and the characters’ response to it. Nevertheless, this ‘musical’ chapter is pertinent in laying out the main motif of the novel – “panic and emptiness’ which Helen blurted out when she relates her confusion to Margaret following Paul’s kiss. This phrase symbolizes the conflict of the ‘inner’ versus ‘outer’ life, in which two families – the Schlegels and Wilcoxes – collide, a theme intimately associated with the protagonists’ emotional experiences and somewhat resembling the phrase ‘fate knocking on the door’ (as labelled by Beethoven as the opening rhythm in his Fifth Symphony).

It is in this way that Forster exploits the extra-musical references of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony – specifically its association with fate and destiny – to further the novel’s motif, which rings throughout the text as it did in the symphony: In repeating ‘panic and emptiness’ throughout, Forster creates a sophisticated rhythm as that of thematic motifs used in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (dididi-dum theme). Each repetition takes on a different contextual meaning in the music, just as how each repetition of ‘panic and emptiness’ relate to difference circumstances of Helen and Margaret’s lives in Howards End. Not only is music a means towards fulfilment of the novel’s underlying theme “only connect”, it also crystallises the undercurrent of passion that induces Margaret to break away from family constraints. As in James

⁹ One might note that it is might be no mere coincidence that Forster discusses Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in his fifth chapter of the novel.
Joyce’s *Dubliners*\(^\text{10}\), music in *Howards End* is used to orchestrate and reiterate existing themes, without really contributing to new vital links in plot development.

The thematic significance of music is usually delivered in subtle means, using particular musical pieces as a platform\(^\text{11}\) to develop extended musical metaphors or orchestrate central motifs of the novels. In Seth’s novel this has been Bach’s *Art of Fugue*, in Captain Corelli *Pelagia’s March* and in *Howards’ End* Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*. The extra-musical references and ideas of these pieces provide a repository of rich material that novelists intricately weave into their tales, unleashing the galvanising power of music and words.

**Whereof we cannot speak...**

...thereof we must pass over – *not in silence* – but to music. Music begins where words end, and writers have come to realize the power of music in expressing the ineffable. If there is one thing in common among the three writers, it is precisely this awareness.

At the door of death, a truckload of soldiers due to be shot by German enemies began singing with Corelli, swaying indiscernibly to a final song found “it was easier to hum than to dwell on death; it gave the heart something to do”. The music was “something that came trickling out of his own soul... something fine and

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\(^{10}\) An example of such peripheral references is Polly Mooney’s song of coquettishness in *The Boarding House*. However, music does become an integral part of the stories in a few (though rare) instances.

\(^{11}\) This is not uncommon among writers who choose to weave in elements of music into their plots. Leo Tolstoy chose Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata to be the backdrop of a adulterous affair in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, James Joyce
glorious amid loss and separation, the deprivation and fear\textsuperscript{12}. In the face of an impending death and unutterable grief, music comes to represent a universal language that gives solace when all hope is extinguished. Music comes to speak a truth in a time of betrayal and deception; it says what words cannot say, as Berniéres writes:

“...it was the war that brought us together and the war that prises us apart. Pelagia is right, but who will be the first to say it? So far only Antonia\textsuperscript{13} has said it, ringing with ‘Pelagia’s March’, singing beneath my fingers.”

That was what Helen in \textit{Howards End} meant when she said that “Beethoven knew better\textsuperscript{14}, that there “music had summed up...her career”, in which ‘reliable walls of youth’ will collapse (as later proven so in her sexual relationship with Leonard Bast and pregnancy out of wedlock). In Beethoven’s symphony she saw globins that were ‘panic and emptiness’, who walked ‘...with increased malignity...quietly over the universe from end to end’. The music evidently was a powerful evocation of what was to come, and that to Helen was too ominous too bare – but they represented more truth than the words of man.

For the words of man are often of betrayal, and are better left unsaid – in which case music plays the devil. Tolstoy’s \textit{Kruetzer Sonata} places music at the centre of an adulterous affair, where a musical partnership often presages a sexual partnership, and the force of Beethoven comes to symbolise physical passion. Seth’s novel is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s in that it exploits the intimacy of music-making to advance the romantic – but illicit – relationship between the protagonist and his

\textsuperscript{12} Captain Corelli’s Mandolin, Pg 322
\textsuperscript{13} Antonia is the name of Captain Corelli’s mandolin.
\textsuperscript{14} Emphasized again in subsequent paragraphs – “…the globins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things’
lover. The affair begins with a duet that created a proximity that ‘constricts [their] spirits’ and brought them to a ‘state of exaltation’. In their ‘musical’ world moral rules do not apply, passions enjoy priority over reason and the lovers’ illicit relationship is justified through the intimacy of music-making.

The Sonata form

The idea that music has bearings on form and structure of literary works is not new. Literary critic Erza Pound famously described James Joyce’s Ulysses to be written in the Sonata form\(^\text{15}\) (a conventional form that classical music takes), though it is difficult to ascertain that James Joyce did intend it. In the case of Forster, however, there is good evidence of a deliberate attempt to craft his novel according to the Sonata Form. In a most detailed paper, Andrea Weatherhead parallels Howards End with Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and found amazing resemblance between both works in terms of how themes and motifs developed and recapitulated.

Forster’s intention of crafting his novel using the sonata form is made more apparent in his Aspects of the Novel, where he explains the connection between music and fiction:

\(^\text{15}\) Briefly, the sonata form includes three main parts: the Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. The exposition usually introduces two main themes that are tonally in conflict (e.g. one in tonic major and the other in dominant major). The sonata now has a dramatic goal, a conflict between the two keys, and it is in the Development that conflict is established and action heats up. Here composers may rapidly cycle through keys (none of them the ‘right’ key), intensifying the struggle between keys though introducing dissonance. Order is reinstated only in the Recapitulation, where the drama settles down and the first theme returns – slightly changed, but in the right (tonic) key. The tension eases, and concludes with the Coda, as in a denouement in the novel that takes place after the climax, bringing the story to a satisfying close.
“Music, though it does not employ human beings, though it is governed by intricate laws, nevertheless does offer in its final expression a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way. Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom.”

We hence have reason to believe that Forster wrote Howards End with a definitive structure (sonata form) in mind – that of expansion, not completion. The plot concludes with Leonard Bast dead, Henry ruined, Helen impregnated out of wedlock and Charles jailed – hardly a happy solution to the novel’s central conflict. Yet we have been warned – by Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony – that the goblins were there and would return, that the resolution would not be one we would like. Hence Howards End in all aspects embodied the elements of the symphony – ‘gusts of splendour, heroism, youth, magnificence of life and death…’

The same sense of ‘expansion’ and ‘incompletion’ is to be found in Seth’s work. As Stephen Benson notes in his analysis of An Equal Music, the fact that “The Art of Fugue” (a composition which comes to symbolise the novel’s central theme) was left uncompleted by Bach figures as an integral part of the protagonist’s experience, “not only for the vaguely metaphysical connotations of a final state of unendingness, but also as an analogue of the romance plot of the novel itself.”

The definitive feature of sonata form – that everything circles back upon itself – is also notable in Captain Corelli’s Mandolin, when the whole plot comes back full

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circle through music with the unexpected restitution of Corelli and the conclusion links back to the introduction to create a harmonious whole.

Conclusion

The literary significance of music in literature is often understated. While what can be shown in a selection of three works is sorely limited, the attempt to ‘read music’ in the novel allows us to see – literally and literarily – how music is received as music, and therein lies the rub. Within the critical context of the novel, fictional representations of music serve as one more performance, one more instance of music-making, only this time in the form of words. The nature of music itself is intriguing enough for musicologists to spend a lifetime studying; putting words to these beautiful – yet wordless – expressions enables us to re-imagine the relationship between music and literature: where words fail, music speaks; yet through words, music speaks again.

(3098 words)
Evaluative Commentary

As a classical musician and an amateur music critic who occasionally writes music reviews for concerts, I am often faced with the task of translating my musical experience into words. This, as I have figured, is sometimes a rather paradoxical task if we consider the saying that ‘music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent’, because what a music critic, or a writer writing about music in effect does is to express what is essentially inexpressible. On the other hand, there are the composers who do the reverse by representing literary works through program music - among the most famous are Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, Vivaldi's Seasons (based on 4 sonnets), Mahler's 3rd Symphony (based on Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*: the "Midnight Song"). Writings about these musical works are then a sort of ‘tertiary representations’ in that they represent music that are themselves a representation of original texts – something I found very intriguing and worth studying in my H3 Literature paper.

I started out by looking at the myriad ways in which music can be framed within a narrative by gaining exposure to an array of novels in which music has a part to play. Among these were Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Marcel Proust’s *Swann Song*, Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*, James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, and three others that finally became my primary texts. The experience was one to be relished; each novel had music cast in different lights, allowing me to appreciate the new dimensions that words confer to music. Above all I was interested in analyzing how writers imbue music into their texts, according them thematic significance.

The three primary texts that were chosen cover a whole spectrum of possibilities in which music could be represented in literature: Forster’s *Howards End*
speaks explicitly of music in but one chapter out of the entire novel, music in Bernieres’ Captain Corelli’s Mandolin runs throughout but with subtlety, while Seth’s An Equal Music is most thoroughly and unambiguously about music through-and-through. The treatment of music in these texts makes a good variety, each representing a different style and approach in conveying the aesthetic experience.

While working on my study, I realized I had been overly ambitious in the intended scope as initially stated on my proposal – which set out to study the uses of music in developing style, characterisation, mood, structure and themes. A study that covers all these grounds would have been most comprehensive and therefore desirable, but as I progressed with the analyses I came across so many thematic concerns to be grappled with that discussions on mood in particular was abandoned to give room for the more important and meaningful aspects: the musical metaphor, the aesthetic experience, the communication of inexplicable emotions and finally, form.

That form and structure of the novel had something to do with music started out as a pure hypothesis. One distinct characteristic of the novels that surfaced as an afterthought when I finished reading them was the fact that everything circles back upon itself – which led me to wonder if the Sonata Form which has been the definitive form for classical music could be a good comparison for the structure of the texts. A bolder conjecture was that the writers wrote their novels with the Sonata Form in mind. To my surprise, various literary criticisms confirmed my hypothesis – Erza Pound, for instance, explicitly described James Joyce’s Ulysses as being written in the Sonata Form. Deeper forays into the construction of form in novels led me to Forster’s Aspects of the Novel, which shed much light on the connection between the musical and literary form. While it would be too presumptuous to
conclude that the writers of all three texts craft their novels with the *Sonata Form* in mind, it is nonetheless reasonable to argue for the similarities between novels’ plot structures and the sonata form.

The fact that literary music is not even remotely classified as a genre in the way that detectives-fiction or war-fiction are poses problems: for instance, the little critical attention that it receives makes it difficult to find relevant material discussing the role or significance of music in literature. This problem was compounded by the fact that *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* and *An Equal Music* are contemporary texts written quite recently – this means that little literary criticism is available to support my arguments or interpretation of the texts, though I have fortunately found a few vaguely relevant ones. There was also much to be gleaned from extra-musical references in the novels – such as Bach’s *Art of Fugue* and Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* – for which there was a good corpus of musical criticism that I had come to rely on.

On several occasions during my first drafting process, however, I had indulged on excessive discussions on these extra-musical references (or on the sonata form), veering dangerously towards a musicologist’s critique. Most of these have since been revised and used more succinctly as supporting background information available in the footnotes.

One area in which I would choose to expand on should I conduct further investigations into music in literature is the impact of music on novels’ literary value. While I admired Seth’s skill in representing the aesthetic experience in *An Equal Music*, I felt that the way he crafted his plot is a somewhat contrived attempt to make music secondary to the plot when it appears in fact the other way round. One gets a
sense that his novel’s intention is to express his fondness for music, and the plot is but a pretext for accomplishing that. On the other hand, Louis de Berniéres makes sure that music comes to the foreground only when the plot necessitated it, while Forster highlights music only in one chapter and the rest of the novel becomes some sort of residual reverberation from that particular chapter. The latter two novels are on the whole more effective than Seth’s. In what way might music add to or subtract from the literary value of a novel? Answering this question might be a matter of taste and discussions might fall into subjectivism if one had not the astuteness of a literary critic, but it is nevertheless worth contemplating.

On the whole, the process of writing this paper has been a great pleasure given that it combines two of my favourite art forms: literature and music. I mentioned in my conclusion that where words fail, music speaks; yet through words, music speaks again. I hope that I have done just that through this paper.

(1091 words)
Bibliography

Primary Texts

Secondary Texts:

Other References / Literary Criticisms