

PIANIST GLENN GOULD'S OFTEN DISMAL WRITING

Jason Blake

Abstract

Glenn Gould was known to the world primarily as a pianist. His Bach interpretations were lauded, his Mozart generally lamented, and his often curious musical views met with suspicion. Despite the fact that it was his primary occupation, Gould considered himself to be much more than a pianist. He produced a number of radio and television documentaries on subjects ranging from musical topics, to life in the north of Canada. He considered himself to be only a part time pianist, and he longed to be recognized also as a writer. After briefly introducing Glenn Gould as a Canadian cultural icon, this paper examines the lesser-known part of his oeuvre, and points out some of the stylistic shortcomings of his writing, before addressing the following question: "Why bother to read him?"

The Anthology *From Ink Lake: Canadian stories selected by Michael Ondaatje* reveals some questionable editorial choices. The problem is not the "Canadian," since Canadian literary tradition has always found room for those with tenuous links to Canada. Indian-born writer Bharati Mukherjee long ago chose the United States over Canada, her work regularly appears in anthologies of both American and Canadian literature. If Canadian pedantic types point out that Carol Shields and even Ondaatje were not born in Canada, it is generally to prove a point about a multicultural nation. The problem lies with the "stories" part of the title – Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant, two short story magicians, are included, but many of the works in *From Ink Lake* are extracts from novels rather than short stories proper. Ondaatje can be forgiven this minor subterfuge, even if his title implies traditional short stories in the sense of fictional narrative prose we can consume in one sitting. The table of contents reads like a list of both anglophone and francophone Canadian literary all-stars, regardless of whether their prose genre was really the novel.

The oddest inclusion in *From Ink Lake* is pianist Glenn Gould's 1967 "The Search for Petula Clark." It is an odd conclusion because it is not fiction but an autobiographical dissection of the English pop singer's music. Even Ondaatje himself seems desperate to justify his decision, and he almost apologetically notes, "as for Glenn Gould's comic deconstruction of Petula Clark, it seems to me as fictionally playful and literary-wise as the fiction of Julian Barnes in *Flaubert's Parrot* [...]" (Ondaatje, xvi). Parallels or not, the piece is more of a short travel essay or series of jesting philosophical observations –

Gould describes a solitary highway journey into Northern Ontario, reflecting all the while on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and especially the then ubiquitous voice of Petula Clark belting out “Downtown” or “Who Am I?” over the CBC airwaves.

This paper has two modest aims: to introduce classical pianist Glenn Gould as a Canadian cultural icon and then to examine in brief his often dismal writing, before considering the question of “why bother to read it?” It is usually unfair to poke fun at musicians’ writing skills. Their job, after all, is to let the piano or saxophone or ukulele do the talking. Although many musicians have taken up the writer’s pen, their written work generally piggy backs on their music. Gould’s did too, but he is different in the sense that he very often departed from strictly musical topics. This is most obvious in the three contrapuntal radio documentaries that make up his *Solitude Trilogy* – “The Idea of North” (1967) on living in the far north of Canada; “The Latecomers” (1969) on Newfoundland, the last province to enter the Canadian confederation; and “The Quiet in the Land” (1977) focusing on Mennonites; and Those interviewed individually for these documentaries are edited into what seems like a conversation, and their voices are played at simultaneously in the style of musical counterpoint. There are traces of Gould’s desire to go beyond the typical also in his radio documentaries on anti-fascist Catalan cellist Pablo Casals,¹ and, bizarrely, with conductor Leopold Stokowski on the possibilities of alien life. Since these documentaries were primarily aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, this part of Gould’s art was less known outside of Canada. The rest of the world was happy just to hear his piano playing.

Gould regarded himself as a “writer and broadcaster who happens to play the piano in his spare time” – a self-description that would baffle fans in New York, London, or Berlin (Introduction). The statement is partly tongue in cheek, but there is some truth to it; moreover, it is an open expression of Gould’s desires. Gould had retired from the concert state at age 32, perhaps as an effective cure for stage fright and his visceral fear of flying, but ostensibly to dedicate himself to composing, writing, and producing radio and television programmes. He did continue to record some 80 records, though he planned to give up even that some time after his 50th birthday in order to devote himself more fully to other pursuits, especially writing. A mere week after turning fifty, Gould died of a stroke in October, 1982.

It has been over a quarter century since Gould died, yet he remains one of the few bright lights in a waning classical music market. In 2007 there was a year-long exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau (across the river from Ottawa), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City showed a series of Gould films in 1987. François Girard produced the 1993 feature *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*; Bruno Monsiegeon’s 2005 documentary *Au-delà du temps/Hereafter* creatively and spookily used old footage and voiceovers to make it seem like Gould was the film’s narrator; and, as I write this, the Toronto International Film Festival is premiering *Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould*, a documentary that “investigates Gould’s

¹ Gould states that it can be more rewarding to talk about something beyond the interviewee’s area of obvious expertise: “it’s been far more instructive to talk with Pablo Casals, for example, about the concept of the *Zeitgeist*” (Gould, 315). Cryptically, even for the apolitical Gould, *Casals: A Portrait for Radio* (1974) does not discuss the cellist’s refusal to play in totalitarian Germany, Italy or the USSR, and his self-exile from Franco’s Spain.

personal life, specifically his long-running affair with painter Cornelia Foss, his [non-recreational] drug intake and how his public façade began to take over his existence” (*Genius Within*). Kevin Bazzana’s 2004 *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould*, which purported to be a cultural biography examining Gould as a product of his puritanical Canadian surroundings, was hailed as a gem. This has not deterred Penguin Canada – again, as I write this – from releasing philosopher Mark Kingwell’s *Glenn Gould* for its “Extraordinary Canadians” series of biographies.

Dying, quipped one music industry executive, “was a great career move” for Gould (qtd. in Bazzana, 3). It also offered Sony Music Entertainment the chance to repackage and remarket, rather than simply re-release, anything Gould had recorded for Columbia Records, which Sony purchased in 1987. In a word: to charge full price for old products. Though all of Gould’s recordings have been reissued, including his often-silly Mozart sonata recordings justifiably panned by critics, much of the hysteria has focussed on his 1955 recording of Johann Sebastian Bach’s Goldberg Variations. For it was this recording that rocketed the 22-year-old Torontonion to world fame, and his stellar interpretation of the then seldom-played work engendered the half-pun “Gouldberg” variations. Those too young to remember long-playing records will have no problem finding a CD version. In addition to simple re-issues, the Variations are available as part of 1992’s mammoth “Glenn Gould Edition” (to mark the tenth anniversary of his tenth), 1999’s box set “The Original Jacket Collection – Glenn Gould Plays Bach” (with nostalgic reproductions of the original LP cover pictures), 2002’s “A State of Wonder: The Complete Goldberg Variations (1955 & 1981)” (Gould re-recorded the piece just before he died, arguing that the first recording was a poor one); 2003’s “Goldberg Variations (1955 Version) – Expanded Edition” (which apparently *expands* the 38-minute recording in some manner), and 2005’s “The 1955 Goldberg Variations – Birth Of A Legend.” Since copyright has expired on the 1955 recording, the Naxos label has released the prosaically-titled “Goldberg Variations / Partita N. 5 (Gould).” For sheer bizarreness and technical innovation, however, the laurel goes to Zenph Studios 2006 re-performance of the Goldberg Variations. The 1955 recording was fed into a computer, and then a robot of sorts replayed the music in the same manner on a Yamaha piano tuned to replicate the original Steinway on which Gould played in Columbia Records’ New York studio. The idea was to have “Gould” play in stereo sound and without the incessant humming and half-singing that accompanied all of his recordings.

Though the epic list of Gould products in the previous two paragraphs is not exhaustive, it should serve to underscore the uniqueness of this performer. The excitement around other famous pianists, such as the late Vladimir Horowitz and Sviatoslav Richter, is limited to CD re-releases and the occasional traditional film or print biography. Gould’s cultural resonance can be gauged in another simple way: there are literary allusions to Glenn Gould and his manner of playing Bach in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (“He decides on the ‘Goldberg’ Variations. He has four recordings here, and selects not the showy unorthodoxies of Glenn Gould [...]” (257)), Joyce Carol Oates’ “The Skull: A Love Story” (“Already by the end of the second day he’d tired of Bach performed by Glenn Gould. The pianist’s humming ceased to be eccentric and became unbearable”) (196), and in Thomas Harris’ *Silence of the Lambs*, the cannibalistic Hannibal Lecter is a Glenn Gould fan. Austrian Thomas Bernhard’s novel *Der Untergeher* (translated into

English by Jack Dawson as *The Loser*) is about a would-be concert pianist who drifts towards suicide after hearing a certain Glenn Gould play a few notes of the Goldberg Variations and realizing he is nowhere near as brilliant.

In Canadian literature, Gould tends to appear more vaguely as a musician and more prominently as a High Culture Persona. In Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version*, for example, Barney Panofsky merely recalls his wife "listen[ing] to Glenn Gould," with no reference to a particular work (364). The point appears to be this: classical music plays no role in the protagonist Barney Panofsky's life, but even he is away of Gould. In Ray Robertson's hockey novel *Heroes*, Bach's Goldberg Variations make an appearance, but they are played by someone named Glen (sic) Gould (92). There is thus an impression of bluffing, or name-dropping. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* picks up the issue of the name and its spelling, as Crake explains the unusual spelling of his first name: "My dad liked music [...] He named me after a dead pianist, some boy genius with two n's" (70). This is something of an inside joke to Canadians, since, given Gould's stature in Canada, the reference would be immediately recognizable to most; only in Canada was the public aware of Gould as a prodigious boyhood talent. Moreover, "Crake and Gould share more than a name: both are (like Atwood) animal lovers and, in an interview in *Maclean's* in 2003 (Bethune), Atwood surmised that Gould, like Crake, suffered from Asperger's syndrome, a variant of autism that seems to be characteristic of many creative high achievers."²

The difference in kind between allusions to Gould by non-Canadian writers, and those by Canadians, illustrates the different ways in which Gould was received. No music fan should prefer a pianist only because he or she comes from one's soil – that would be pure chauvinism. Gould was a very vocal Canadian, in love with the far north (which he had never seen), and most others were vaguely and indifferently aware of that fact. Two quotations from Edward Said, who, in addition to being one of the leading literary critics of the late 20th century, was also an accomplished pianist and music critic for the general interest magazines *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's*, and most regularly *The Nation*. He was also a Glenn Gould aficionado. Two of Said's back-handed compliments draw attention to Gould's nationality and cultural background. When praising Gould's often unusual and always provocative musical philosophy and ideas, Said writes, "he was far from being a pastoral idiot-savant despite his affinity for the silence and solitude of the North" (Said, 10). Regarding Gould's lifelong refusal to play the warhorse romantics like Chopin and Schumann, Said notes: "That material was a lot for a young and in effect provincial Canadian pianist to have given up at the very outset" (Said, 271).

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and Glenn Gould appeared to be a happy marriage. When he burst on the international music scene in 1955 Gould's two hands proved, for many, that Canada did have a high culture, and soon enough Gould was permitted television and radio space to drone on about Arnold Schönberg and Johann

² Atwood is not the only one to confirm post-mortem that Gould had Asperger's, which is a convenient way of accounting for both Gould's mannerisms and his genius. Ioan Mackenzie James cautiously notes "some of the eccentric behaviour [Gould] manifested in childhood and during adolescence [...] is suggestive of Asperger's syndrome" (195), and that experts do not agree on whether Gould had the syndrome. This does not prevent a Gould chapter in *Asperger's Syndrome and High Achievement: Some Very Remarkable People*.

Sebastian Bach. Gould would work for hours for virtually no remuneration. Because of his enthusiasm, because of his stature as a Prominent Canadian, and because he came cheap and often worked overnight when the studio was empty, “The CBC authorities were inclined to let Gould do pretty much what he wanted” (Friedrich, 208). In other words, if he were not Glenn Gould, much of his work would never have been allowed on-air. Gould’s highfalutin discussions of composers old and new may not have been to everyone’s tastes, but at least they were educational and potentially edifying. If this fit the CBC’s perceived role as a “bastion of uplifting national culture against the onslaught of American popular culture” (Vance, 362), it also fit the critique that it broadcasts things many Canadians do not want to see. Gould has entered the popular Canadian imagination in a way akin to Slavoj Žižek’s fame in Slovenia: even those who may not own or be able to recognize a Gould recording will recognize the man and personality. Gould was forever on the air, talking music, always from a script, and far too often dressed up as ridiculous characters like the New York music critic Theodore Sotz, the esteemed English maestro Sir Humphrey Price-Davies, and the avant-garde German composer Herbert von Hochmeister. These antics and skits, complete with absurd accents and juvenile humour, are embarrassing,³ and it is inconceivable that a young pianist out of New York or Berlin would have been given the same opportunities.

GOULD AS A WRITER

The line between Gould as a writer and Gould as a (non-musical) performer is a thin one. Many of his writings were actually meant for radio, and Gould often read them on the CBC. There is thus an oral quality to all of Gould’s writing – unfortunately, it is Gould’s brand of orality, which consists of labyrinthine sentences that sound like they belong in a dreary academic treatise. Gould had an astounding ability to filter and produce information, and it is a wonder that he himself does not get lost in his Germanic syntax, digressions, qualifying thoughts and general wordiness. In an interview on his contrapuntal radio documentaries, Gould states: “The average person can take in and respond to far more information than we allot him on most occasions” (Gould, 380). Even if this is true, Gould often appears to be intentionally difficult, to hide even straightforward ideas in endless phrases. This section of the essay examines some of the usual shortcomings of Gould the writer, before ultimately addressing the question: why bother to read him?

A personal ad found in Gould’s apartment after his death provides an insight into Gould the man and Gould the writer. The self-described “puritan” seeks a partner and, like all good personal ads, this one reveals as much about the seeker as the sought:

Wanted: Friendly, companionably reclusive, socially unacceptable, alcoholically abstemious, tirelessly talkative, zealously unzealous, spiritually intense, minimally turquoise, maximally ecstatic, loon seeks moth or moths

³ Gould said that these masks helped him overcome a “degree of inhibition” and that, once he slid into character, “[he] found it no problem to say what [he] wanted to say in a humorous style” (Cott, 87). Unfortunately, any legitimate arguments were lost behind the poor jokes and odd costumes.

with similar qualities for purposes of telephonic seduction, Tristanesque trip-taking, and permanent flame-fluttering. No photos required, financial status immaterial, all ages and non-competitive vocations considered. Applicants should furnish cassette of sample conversation, notarized certification of marital disinclination, references re low decibel vocal consistency, itineraries and sample receipts from previous, successfully completed out-of-town (moth) flights. All submissions treated confidentially, no paws [?] need apply. Auditions for (all) promising candidates will be conducted to, and on, Avalon Peninsula, Nfld. (qtd in Bazzana, 321)

The first sentence is part autobiography, part self-roasting, for Gould was a teetotalling recluse who loved to talk on the telephone (it is a safe bet that “telephonic seduction” is a not a reference to phone sex). Other requirements are self-referential to the point of being nonsensical for those not intimately familiar with Gould’s biography: “minimally turquoise” is perhaps a nod at Gould’s dislike of bright colours and shows his love of always choosing the less simple word. The entire text is also a clever spoof on the personal ad genre, since he begins with the banal and self-evident “friendly” before launching into what seems like thesaurus-fuelled prose. Though this is essentially a playful search for a lover or soul-mate, Gould admits the plural “moths” – before ominously referring to “Tristanesque trip-taking.” Wagner was a composer Gould adored, but openly suggesting the *Liebestod* that was the demise of the lovers Tristan and Isolde would scare off the hardiest potential candidates. Gould hated formalized competition (though he loved impromptu word and guessing games), so anyone involved in competitive professional pursuits is out of the question. There is typically Gouldian humour: a “cassette of sample conversation” seems coldly absurd and distant, but such technology-buffered correspondence appealed to Gould.⁴

This personal ad was scribbled on a scrap of paper, and since it was perhaps nothing more than intellectual doodling it would be unfair to dissect it aesthetic terms. It is, however, indicative of Gould’s prose. Gould is a writer that makes the reader work. There is that egregious wordiness that so often is the enemy of wit; then there are, even in articles ostensibly meant for public consumption, cryptic allusions and alienating surpluses of musical terminology; Gould excels in abstractions, but even when he conjures up metaphors to aid his philosophical cause, the reader is often none the wiser; not least, there is a complicated playfulness and sometimes very corny humour. Humour is relative, subjective, but on the printed page Gould is just not funny. For the reader willing to get at Gould’s point, there are further problems: is he being sincere? Is he trying to shock us to make a point, or merely for the sake of shocking? Even if these accusations are not original, their harshness invites some justification and examples.

Filmmaker Bruno Monsiegeon has praised Gould’s “*textes littéraires, o la richesse de la langue est quelque chose de phénoménal,*” and states earnestly that Gould could have become one of the major English-language writers of the 20th century (Le

⁴ Gould’s faith in technology was absolute, not only because it allowed him to keep the world at bay. Stereos of the future, he thought, could limit the metaphorical distance between lofty performer and listener by enabling the listener to control performance speed and dynamics by twiddling dials. A more extreme example of his faith: “A war [...] engaged in by computer-aimed missiles is a slightly better, slightly less objectionable war than one fought by clubs or spears” (Gould, 355).

privilege). *Monsaingeon* is a minority of one. All other commentators, even otherwise sympathetic biographers, are less kind to Gould the writer. Otto Friedrich calls him “an intelligent but rather inhibited literary amateur” (Friedrich, 113); Geoffrey Payzant talks about “his early ponderousness and obscurity” (144); Kevin Bazzana notes “the verbose, tangled prose that had plagued his earlier writing” (466); at least one anonymous Youtube poster accurately wrote “bla, bla, bla” in response to Gould talking. Even those who champion Gould provide slim praise. *High Fidelity* prefaced Gould’s famous essay “The Prospects of Recording” – which lays out his belief that “the public concert as we know it today would no longer exist a century hence, that its functions would have been entirely taken over by electronic media” – with a caveat: “[This] is a lengthy and occasionally difficult essay, but we consider it well worth our space and your attention” (The Prospects). The most damning of all, precisely because he turns cartwheels *not* to insult the style, is Edward Said’s remark on a speech Gould once provided: “Even allowing for a certain confusion between various imperfectly deployed metaphors, it is possible to decipher the sense of what Gould is trying to articulate here” (Said, 270). Said himself slips into Gouldese as he implicitly states that Gould’s prose is obscurely Byzantine.

Gould’s writings were lamed by verbosity, and throughout his life he continued to confuse big words and unusual words with eloquence. This misconception was evident already when Gould was a schoolboy, and his essays prompted teachers to quip, “you are using words for their own sakes,” “waste of words” (Friedrich, 29) or, “I am a busy teacher and have better things to do with my time than to read papers that require one to constantly have to refer to a dictionary for half of the words used” (Bazzana, 53).

Here is Gould alluding to the 1957 game show scandal involving Columbia professor Charles Van Doren, who was fed the answers when he appeared on *Twenty One* (the event was famous again in the 1994 movie *Quiz Show*). The passage, by no means one of Gould’s worst, is complicated:

And the commendable pragmatism with which Van Doren shed scholastic credibility in the interests of better program building afforded an object lesson for anyone concerned with the future of television and, in particular, for those of us perplexed by the less than cordial relations between musical performance and the camera. For just as television, despite the proliferation of closed-circuit teaching aids and ‘Twenty-One’s’ ingenious approximation of a final semester’s nervous prostration, cannot invalidate the classroom, neither can it stimulate, for all its undoubted capacity to attract that substantial audience which no longer frequents the concert hall, the antiquarian charm of a public musical display. (Gould, 369)

The point towards which Gould is stumbling in this excerpt from a short article on television in music is that “The concert is dying because it not longer adequately ministers to the needs of music in the twentieth century and not because television is waiting in the wings [...]” (ibid). The Van Doren analogy is a witty, even promising one, but it dominates much of article without adding much clarity to the underlying argument.

Given that many of Gould's pieces were published either as liner notes for his records or in industry magazines or journals like *High Fidelity* and *The Piano Quarterly*, the concentration of musical terminology is understandable and even appropriate. However, even when aiming at a general, less specialized audience, Gould was unrelenting. Not for him a vulgarization of classical music or a serving up of sugary biographical anecdotes. Kevin Bazzana sees this as more an inability than a conscience choice or sign of respect for viewers' intellect: "He could not tailor his prose to suit his audience, and aside from the odd flippant or slangy remark, his texts were often too technical and long-winded, written in that peculiar, knotty Gouldese that is often difficult to assimilate at spoken tempo" (Bazzana, 227).

Here is a quotation by a young Gould talking on the CBC in 1966 on "Conversations with Glenn Gould: Richard Strauss." Though he appears to be speaking freely, the words are scripted:

Well, you see the problem with Strauss' harmony, and indeed Strauss' problem, was that he came to the latter part of the 19th century at a time when harmony was in great disrepair, when Schönberg, and Gustav Mahler indeed, to a certain extent, were pulling harmony to pieces, were pulling all the pat formulas of Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, the academic romantics so to speak, to pieces, simply by a certain sense of indulgence, and I think it is to Strauss' very great credit that he managed to tighten up the bulwarks through which they had been poking holes, Strauss [sic] and Mahler; now this is to say nothing whatever against Strauss [sic] and Mahler, it's simply a question, against Schönberg and Mahler, rather, it is simply a difference of approach, a sense of containment about tonality. Strauss was a self-satisfied man as far as the whole princip[le]...., working motifs, of tonality are concerned [...]. (Richard Strauss Burleske)

This is a difficult passage to transcribe because even where grammar demands a period or semi-colon Gould presses on with nary a pause, making it difficult for lay-people to follow this relatively straightforward passage.

Even "The Search for Petula Clark" (included in the Ondaatje story anthology and probably the best of Gould's writing) occasionally shows the stamp of Gouldese. When I read this piece with my fourth-year Literary Interpretation class, many students commented on the alienating effect of passages like this:

Well, come to that, almost all pop music today *is* relentlessly diatonic – the Max Reger-Vincent d'Indy chromatic bent which infiltrated big-band arranging in the late thirties and forties ran its course when Ralph Flanagan got augmented sixths out of his system. [...] For the Beatles, a neotriadic persuasion is (was?) a guerrilla tactic – an instrument of revolution. (303f)

There was a general sense that Gould was merely showing off his knowledge, even as he discussed popular topics. The "well" – duly written into the transcript that Gould read aloud on the CBC – is at best a register clash; at worst, it makes Gould sound like a pompous politician attempting to curry favour.

As indicated in his singular preference for Petula Clark over the Beatles, Gould had some peculiar ideas about music. In fact, though a rabid fan of Barbara Streisand, he rarely ventured beyond the classical world, and even as a child he had no time for jazz or other popular forms of music. His favourite composer was one Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625); he had little respect for romantics like Chopin or Schumann. But he reserved most of his dislike for Mozart, “a bad composer who died too late, rather than too early” (Friedrich, 141). As he explained in a 1974 interview,

The Sonata K. 332 was the first I began to study, I think, and I simply couldn't understand how my teachers, and other presumably sane adults of my acquaintance, could count this piece among the great musical treasures of Western man. (Gould, 33)

Rather than avoiding Mozart, he recorded the complete piano sonatas, always with a view to providing a completely new take, to exposing what he saw as weaknesses in the music itself, and often infuriating. (The above words scandalizing Mozart's name appeared on the CD liner in a recent repackaging of Gould's Mozart for the 1999 “Glenn Gould Jubilee Edition” – even this clear statement that he has no love for Mozart is rolled into the marketing machine.) The Gouldian logic was that Mozart relied too much on his gift for improvisation and this led him to create music that was full of clichés – and Gould was out to convince the world of this in piano recordings, even if it meant ignoring what Mozart had written, and in print or conversation. His music sounded like “inter-office memos [...], [I]like an executive holding forth upon the ramifications of a subject no one in the front office is much concerned with anyway. ‘Yeah, well, Harry, as I see it, J.B. has got this thing about replacing the water cooler...’” (qtd. in Friedrich, 143). This is a failed attempt to be clever; moreover, it makes no sense. The simile, which a polemicist should employ to aid thought and clarity of argument, does not help. If Mozart is the memo-writing executive, what could “the front office” possibly be? Gould is entirely correct that water coolers are found in offices, but that is where the sense ends. Two strains of thought intertwine with Gould on Mozart: the first is his insistence of being right; the other is his awareness that he is being unconventional. He is also entirely and playfully aware that his aggressive stance will not convince many.

The esteemed Canadian journal Robert Fulford, who was a boyhood friend of Gould's, has written that the pianist was not really of our time. He recalls a conversation in which Gould dismissed modern music, specifically the jazz that Fulford adored:

He was twenty-five years old and sounding like an octogenarian crank whose tastes had been formed in the last century. And yet all the time, as he went through this absurd conventional dance, his eyes were sparkling and he was laughing at himself. He was beginning to explore eccentricity as a mode of life. (Fulford, 45)

In other words, though Gould's basic conviction that jazz represents inferior music is sincere, he remains well aware – and insouciant about the fact – that Fulford regarded him as an un-hip relic and that his arguments were untenable.

Kevin Bazzana points out that when Gould “let fly at his *bêtes noires*, he often revealed a surprising ignorance of his basic sources and a willingness to accept trite

and spurious ideas. His musical rationales for disliking late Mozart and middle-period Beethoven – and Schubert and Schumann and Chopin – were feeble” (Bazzana, 274). This means, of course, that were it not for his being *Glenn Gould* sounding off, very little of his writing would have been published. The result of this is a double standard: although Gould must have been cognizant of his key position as musical genius – hence music expert, hence authority on all things musical – he never seemed to realize that he was hired as a writer and commentator because of his hands and mind at the piano keyboard. The “other Gould” was hired because he was the boss’ son, so to speak.

The offer made to Gould by the editor of *Piano Quarterly* in the early 1970s must have been irresistible: “You can write about anything you want. It doesn’t have to be about music – anything you want to write, I’ll publish. Carte blanche. No editing and there’s no limit to the length” (Friedrich, 112). Though he would receive no money, this guaranteed him even more control than he had at the CBC. And control was of absolute importance to Gould. He is known to have scripted entire interviews, writing both the questions and the answers for a conversational set-piece that would then be broadcast as an unintentional spoof on spontaneity. This of course requires a docile interviewer willing to allow Gould the role of puppet master. For obvious reasons, few interviewers would admit to such obedience, and Bruno Monsiegeon is careful to point out in the accompanying notes to his *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist* DVD, “contrary to what has been written here and there, our dialogues were not scripted. They were improvised and completely spontaneous, all the while following a carefully thought-out dramatic sequence” (6). The film evidence bears this out. In contrast, it is hard to believe that Tim Page’s 1982 interview on Gould’s re-recording of the Goldberg Variations was a natural conversation. There is a striking telepathic quality to it, including off-cue laughter that occasionally precedes the witty riposte, the “interviewer’s” references to some of Gould’s own pet references (like conductor Leopold Stokowski), and the general stiffness of the conversation, complete with intrusive interjections of “uh, huh,” and contrived “well, Glenn” lead-offs (“Highlights from”). Especially for those familiar with more flowing Gould interviews, it is as if Gould *wanted* listeners to know that this was a charade.

Geoffrey Payzant’s 1978 work *Glenn Gould: Music and Mind* examines Gould’s tremendous body of writings as a proper philosophical and aesthetic unity, rather than a series of ramblings and staged arguments. In the introduction, Payzant nevertheless admits the possibility that “Gould has all along been playing a secret game with us, and at some level does not intend to be taken seriously” (Payzant, x). In other words, it is not a case of either/or. Three pages from the end of his book, Payzant remains cautious about Gould’s writings: “one cannot deny that Gould puts barriers in the way of our taking him as seriously as we might: his facetiousness, his clowning, his early ponderousness and obscurity, his vaulting arguments, his outrageous exaggerations” (144). Gould himself wrote a review of *Music and Mind*. There he notes, with the professional athlete’s use of the third person, “the author’s obvious determination is to prepare his portrait without being interfered with, or influenced by, the conversational connivance and media manipulation at which Gould is allegedly a master” (Gould, 448). Yet again, Gould assumes a double position. This seems particularly good natured in light of Payzant’s final chapter: “Talking Nonsense On Anything Anywhere.”

The most fascinating insight into Gould as a playful creator and Gould as a man bursting with ideas are his self-interviews, especially “Glenn Gould Interviews Glenn Gould about Glenn Gould” (1974). In this interview, which initially appeared in *High Fidelity*, Gould/Interviewee lampoons his own desire for control and his yearning to be more than a pianist. He is open to discussing any topic, “apart from music, of course” (315). The self-interview is brilliant because it feigns self-analysis, accurately presenting Gould as a hypochondriac well aware of his condition (he had stated famously, “They say I’m a hypochondriac and, of course, I am.”). This is also as close as Gould came to admitting that he knew, at least in 1974, that for all his forays into print and other types of art, in the minds of most he was primarily a pianist.

Edward Said remains convinced that Gould’s “prose was intended as an adjunct to his playing [...], as well as the vehicle by which he advanced a comprehensive, if sometimes whacky, world-view” (128). Evan Eisenberg writes similarly in *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* about Gould’s uniqueness and passion as a performer, and that “his writings, if we had noticed them, could have given us a little more of that ecstasy, along with hints on how it might be understood” (83). Each of these critics puts forth the idea of Gould having produced a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whereby the total art is not music and drama, but music and writing about music, and talking about music, and being interviewed about music. Both Said and Eisenberg approach Gould as a pianist who happens to write, they do not comment on Gould as a producer of documentaries for the CBC.

A question that arises is this: if Gould is so an infuriating writer, why bother to read his work? There are better authors out there, and our short story time is better spent on writers like Alice Munro or Mavis Gallant – to return to some of my favourites from the Ondaatje anthology mentioned at the outset. This, however, is a matter of fictional apples and non-fictional oranges. Moreover, in those finer short stories, Munro and Gallant disappear into the work. We can – and perhaps should – enjoy them without any knowledge of the author’s life. This is difficult and less rewarding with Gould. “The Search for Petula Clark” is all the more satisfying when read with an awareness of Gould’s quaint love of Canada’s north, his own ubiquity on the CBC’s airwaves, and his general refusal to acknowledge the value of popular music. “After several hundred miles of this exposure [to Clark’s voice],” writes Gould, “I checked into the hotel at Marathon and made plans to contemplate Petula” (301). It is strangely prescient that serious contemplation of popular culture is now a fully-fledged intellectual business.

Gould’s ideas are sometimes radical, sometimes boorish, but rarely boring. His statements on the benefits of recorded music, as opposed to what he saw as the circus-like atmosphere of live concerts, have proved wrong in practice but right in spirit: “We must be prepared to accept the fact that, for better or worse, recording will forever alter our notions about what is appropriate to the performance of music” (Gould, 337). It is easy to gauge the results of this situation – lip-syncing pop stars, or concert goers obsessed with mechanical perfection, even over musicality, at the keyboard.

Music now surrounds us in ways never before imagined, but the sonic bombardment that assails us in every café, shop or public space has not led to keener listeners. Although technology grants us immediate access to music, it has not limited the distance between virtuoso performer and active listener. Gould’s predictions and hopes that that

there would be a democratization of performance have not come to pass – few listeners exploit technological possibilities to co-create the listening experience. On their own, Gould’s theories and philosophies are best regarded as time pieces – we can look back at them and see where he was correct, where wrong. Even his playing, especially his occasional lack of regard for what Mozart or Beethoven actually wrote, is from a time past. Combined with his playing, his musical views form a remarkable whole. When Gould argues that “all the basic statements have been made for posterity” and that the artist must therefore recreate the work by “contribut[ing] a totally new view,” he comes close to putting the performer ahead of the work (Will there?). But in these days when famous music is reduced to a sound bit, and trivialized as a cellular phone’s ring tone, Gould laughably slow version of “Ronda alla Turca” maintains a liberating freshness, especially when supported by his quirky reasoning. Perhaps it is better than it sounds.

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

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