



EXTRAORDINARY
CANADIANS

Glenn Gould

by MARK KINGWELL



Aria

The voice: it is fast, precise, self-satisfied, a little pompous.

It is filled with awkward attempts at the wry aside, like the meander of a scholar who has been giving the same lectures too often, doing accents and delivering anecdotes too polished by previous telling. The voice is also ironic, amused, intelligent, resonant, mischievous. It is preoccupied with itself, but not evasive or merely self-indulgent. The speaker answers questions, relishing the thought of them, even questions deemed by the speaker himself to be fearful or intimidating.

There is crisp structure in the sentences, delivered in well-formed paragraphs, cogent and architectural. It is the music of Glenn Gould's spoken English, a cultivated Canadian accent from a half-century ago, a tone fled almost entirely from this nation now, the mixture of flat and orotund phonemes peculiar to the official culture of emergent nationhood, the language of the CBC, of diplomacy, of the academy. The consonants, especially t's and d's, are

clipped—as indeed are the musical consonants of his characteristic lucid and precise playing.¹ The vocabulary is wide, though sometimes musicological or precious: *aleatoric*, *motivic*, *thereunto pertaining*. The word *film* has one and a half syllables.

For Glenn Gould, the structure of speaking and the structure of thought itself were codependent, the mind's cacophony disciplined into a precise line by finding the right word, the artful compound sentence. The same is true in his voluminous, sprawling body of written work. Most important, it was true in his thinking about and playing of music. Glenn Gould above all sought structure in music, the “skeleton” of a piece, revealed in his interpretations, which were sometimes disparaged as “loose” because they were less formal than the academic standard. But they were never actually loose, only novel—loose in relation to a master-sense of the work, perhaps, but never in themselves. Nor was there any looseness in the music of his talk, either in form or content.

Aleatoric means that aspect of music subject to improvisation or chance. The term comes from the Latin word *alea*, meaning dice, those rolling cubes of chance. It was introduced into music theory in the 1950s to describe the work of, among others, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, but

it can be applied to much older music containing elements of randomness within larger structures. Glenn Gould, master of memory and technique, is not usually associated with improvisation in music, nor with these avant-garde masters; but the clue to understanding his music, and hence his mind, is contained here. For Gould not only played music, he played with it. He wanted to interpret a given piece so that it felt to the listener *as if he were making it up in the moment*. Achieving that effect required extraordinary measures of control and discipline, over himself and over as much of the world as he could command.

“For me it’s a great liability to have a live audience,” Gould told an interviewer on an album released in 1968. In emphatic sentences he was attempting to justify his decision, four years earlier, to stop performing classical music in public.

First of all, I resent the one-timeness, the non-take-twoness, of that particular experience. As a matter of fact, I can remember many times when I did give concerts on the North American concert circuit when my performance was going rather inadequately and rather haphazardly; maybe I hadn’t practised enough or I felt as if I was competing with my own

recorded version, if such exists—and I often felt that way!—and if I was, I was damned if I was going to practise for it, as a matter of fact. And if a performance were going that way, I was terribly inclined to stop—this is something that a psychiatrist would have marvellous things to say about, I'm sure—terribly inclined to stop in the middle and say, "Take two!" But one couldn't quite, without risking a scandal and very bad reviews, and so I never quite did. But I always wanted to.²

The interviewer prompted: Why not? Certainly it is unheard of in current concert culture, but surely an artist is entitled to stretch that culture. Gould laughed. They know they are not serious about this happening. His reply was a tease: "That would almost be worth going back and treading the boards for, if I could really do that!" Next question.

I was nineteen in 1982, the year Glenn Gould died, and had neither met him nor heard a single one of his records—on the latter point, not least because my taste in those days ran more to the Clash and Elvis Costello than to Bach or Beethoven. Like most people, I have come to know him—if that is the right word—only through his recorded playing and his published writings. Since Gould's death, the world

of music, or rather the world as it experiences music, has witnessed significant changes. Most notable of these is the ease of access to recorded music and its related consequence, the global jumbling of musical materials. Both are developments Gould would have welcomed: the first for its assumption of primacy in recorded music over performance and the second for its overturning of narratives of *musical progress*, with schools and periods succeeding one another according to a definitive account laid down by music history. What we should call the post-historical musical world—our world—is the one that Gould anticipated and advocated. At the same time, he was a self-declared puritan about art and frequently lamented music's corruption by commerce. Such are just the beginnings of his kaleidoscopic, contradictory, febrile, and brilliant mind.

Musician. Artist. Genius. Eccentric. National treasure. Celebrity. Pill-popper. Hypochondriac. Hermit. Icon. Puritan. Northerner. Joker. The story of Glenn Gould's life is one that has been told, and told well, many times and in many ways. In almost every case it has been told according to the imperatives, and fictions, of traditional biographical narrative. There is good reason to avoid doing so again.

The fiction of biography is precisely the kind of danger Gould appreciated. He was fond of play in other senses than

at the keyboard, shifting personae to the point where he interviewed himself in place of traditional essays, wrote imaginary reviews under fanciful pseudonyms, and adopted costumes, characters, and accents for prolonged horsing-around sessions in the studio as well as on radio and television. His notorious retreat from performance—a move he preferred to see as a step forward into recording and disseminating true interpretations rather than tired concerts of a narrow repertoire—took him out of the public realm even as it shrouded him in an irresistible mystery. He would not make himself available except via recordings and print.

And so, lacking one Glenn Gould, the public generates multiple ones, a succession of Gould-ghosts, all of them vaporous and partial. Meanwhile, cutting across this economy of reproduction, there extends a different multiplicity, the one comprising different cultural moments. Every generation of performers after Gould has to come to terms with the lofty standards he reached. Every generation of listeners has to negotiate the implications of his advocacy of recording over performance. At the time he stopped giving concerts, the issue was alive with a McLuhanesque energy and vehemence. This may strike later observers and fans as misplaced or even absurd, but if so, it is only because Gould, ahead of his time, had already done much of the hard early thinking,

the pioneering insight. In fact there can be no definitive resolution to either of these energies of multiplication and contradiction—manifold Goulds, manifold eras—and so any attempt to distill the variety of personae and interpretations into a single portrait of Glenn Gould would be false from the start, a depressing compression, as if, in the words of one writer, “a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages—bottled, like homemade chutney.”³

There is more to consider than just this standard objection, however, which might be levelled against any number of biographical projects. Gould’s life, lived in and through music, reveals that the unified self is not just a fiction from the outside in; it is also a fiction from the inside out. The outside-in illusion underwrites the notion of a correct, or even merely convincing, interpretation of a person’s life. I mean the notion of a singular self, somehow captured in the most valid representation of Gould, the one that “makes sense” of his genius as an opaque gift and of his eccentricities as the outward signs thereof. This has been attempted, and the resulting rival explanations lie before us.

The more profound, and more common, illusion is the inside-out one: the fiction that allows us to shape consciousness into a singular self in the first place, the projection of unified existence and consistent self-presentation. The two

fictions, life explained as linear because assumed to be lived thus, depend upon and reinforce each other. But that also means they stand, and fall, together. Any instability experienced from the inside out gives the lie to any, and all, attempts to *explain* from the outside in. A Gould tamed into linear narrative misses the point of Gould.

Glenn Gould was well aware of the play between these illusions, and even as he sought line in music, he worked to destabilize line in life. Indeed, we may read his seeking on the one hand as a result of the felt lack on the other, a tragic awareness of contingency. Gould's stated and published ideas suggest such a philosophy of multiplicity, though nowhere does he explicitly argue the position—perhaps out of a clever intuition that enacting the instability of self would be more compelling, and certainly more amusing, than arguing it.

Thus a recurring theme in Gould's published work—work that is spiked with insights and jumbled theories—is that larger narratives of progression in music, as in life, are unreliable, even fraudulent. For example, though convinced in early professional life, typically against the grain, that a neo-traditional stance was appropriate to the modernist times, he later came to distrust sweeping stories of schools and movements, of trends and counter-trends. They were, to

him, first the stuff of journalism and later, worse, the grist of music history's mill. At the same time, the unifying thought in Gould's philosophy of music—and it is primarily as a philosopher of music that I mean to treat him here—is that the single most important aspect of music is architecture, or line: the overall structure of a piece, revealed in its beauty by the act of playing. Not modulation, not timbre, not colour or tone. That is why articulation and phrasing are so central to his playing—“like an x-ray revealing a skeleton,” he said; it is also why the complexity of structure combined with the freedom of interpretation of J.S. Bach's expansive oeuvre drew him so often, and so movingly. Though he resisted the label of “Bach specialist,” Gould played Bach and other masters of fugue and counterpoint more frequently than the music of the thirty-odd canonical figures whose works he recorded.

This love of line was also what made him say that playing the Tudor master William Byrd gave him “great delight” or that, on at least three separate recorded occasions, his “favourite composer” was Orlando Gibbons—“certainly the composer with whom, at some mysterious spiritual level I won't begin to explain, I most identify.” Asked in 1970 by *High Fidelity* to list his “desert island discs,” Gould mentioned as first choice a Deller Consort recording of

Gibbons's hymns and anthems "because ever since my teen-age years this music (and for close to fifteen years this particular record by the Deller Consort) has moved me more deeply than any other sound experience I can think of. In fact, this is the only disc in my collection three copies of which I have literally worn out."⁴

These late-Elizabethan composers wrote few pieces for keyboard, and Gould recorded only one disc that features them—sadly, since his playing on this record is among his best, intellectual and moving in equal measure. Indeed, his engagement with Gibbons and Byrd may be easily dismissed as a footnote to his lengthy performance-based arguments with Mozart and Beethoven, two composers he claimed to dislike, or his extended meditation on Bach's contrapuntal genius. But Gibbons and Byrd—"the two northern masters," he called them, a term of high praise for this lover of northern climes and their chilly solitudes—offer purity of composition, a structure almost mathematical in its elegance, even as they presage large changes in music's orientation. As Gould put it, what we have here is "a reminder of those antecedents of the modern world which one could endeavour to extenuate in quite a different fashion than post-Renaissance tradition decreed."⁵

Gould followed the trail of an apparently stray, single B-flat note in Byrd's "Sellinger's Round"—a sign of something new in Tudor music, he argued, the harbinger of the modern developments to come. He suggested that the two Tudor composers "share an idiom but not an attitude," with Gibbons standing as the lugubrious Gustav Mahler to Byrd's exuberant Richard Strauss. Taken together, they reveal the line of beauty that made Gould love music, the love that made him a musician. Byrd and Gibbons also, as *fin de siècle* composers, occupy a moment of transition—something Gould clearly relished in them and in his own late-millennial circumstances. In their case, it was toward "that new key-oriented chord system to which, within a few years, most music would subscribe." What we take for granted, a conventional set of keys and chords, these two minor geniuses anticipated. What did Gould anticipate in his own transitional moment, which we may now, or soon, take for granted? I will endeavour to answer that question in this book.

We tread on uneven ground, however. Both music history and music are typically structured as forms of what we might call *experienced consequence*. They offer tales of temporal succession explained according to claims of causal succession. However useful or even necessary, such narratives are illusory. They construct, over the negotiation of actual moments in

time, an arc of larger meaning that could not have been available in the moments themselves, that is superimposed.⁶ Biography, too, is a form of illusory consequence. That is why I have decided to tell Gould's story—really a linked set of ideas about perception, consciousness, time, and silence—not as a story but as a single contested piece considered from a variety of angles.

François Girard's 1993 work, *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, revealed the pianist from a variety of angles. Why thirty-two? Devotees of Gould's recorded works know the answer immediately. In Bach's *Goldberg Variations*,⁷ the work allegedly composed as an insomnia cure for Dresden's Count Von Keyserlingk, to be played by his court harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, the variations consist of a tonally and rhythmically linked series of thirty variations on the thirty-two-bar aria announced at the beginning. The aria itself, possibly written for Bach's wife, dates from 1725 and is repeated da capo as the final element of the piece. Not only is the overall work a superbly realized exercise in theme-and-variation composition, it was and remains one of the most devilishly difficult pieces ever composed for keyboard.

The thirty variations range from subtle trills to elaborate deconstructions of the theme, arranged in nine interlocked

canons. The progressive variation of ground bass, rather than soprano melody, makes it an example of *ruggiero*, akin to the chaconne or passacaglia forms that Bach also created but with irregular inversions along the way—thus “a passacaglia worked out in chiaroscuro,” as Albert Schweitzer said. With the initial aria reprised as a coda, we have thirty-two works within the work: theme and variation and theme again. It is, Gould himself wrote, “the most brilliant substantiation of ground bass in history.”⁸ (The film’s thirty-two short sections do not exactly mimic the structure of the *Variations*; it is nevertheless an excellent example of fractured biography.)

Famously, Gould recorded the *Variations* twice. The first was in 1955, at Columbia’s 30th Street studios between June 10 and 16; the disc was released to immediate wide acclaim, cementing his already growing performance reputation. The second was in 1981, during April and May, just before the same studios were slated for demolition and just a year before his death at the age of fifty. The two versions have been much compared. Perhaps the simplest way to articulate the difference between them is that the 1955 version is the work of a young man, the 1981 that of a mature one. The first is arrogant, almost callow, with bravura displays of speed and chilly dexterity and an overall tone that is brilliant but somewhat uninflected. The second, recorded because

Gould said he wanted to try again to find line in the work, is slower, warmer, almost elegiac; the ground-bass unity emerges more clearly, as do the rubato and dynamic-range possibilities of the piano. Here the trademark humming of the player, clearly audible even on inferior playback equipment, offers a kind of harmonic counterpoint to the sound of the piano's struck keys, man and instrument conjoined in performance.

Or so, in retrospect, we might be tempted to see things. Which of these recordings one prefers is a matter of taste, or temperament, or age. Sometimes it is a matter of the time of day.

In 1955, labouring in the first of countless experiences in the recording studio, Gould struggled with the piece—not the technical details but, as so often later, with creating a version of the whole that matched his inner sense of the music's logic. The engineers at Columbia's studios in New York—who later would tell sometimes exaggerated tales of the young Canadian's evident eccentricities, his pre-recital ritual handsoaks in ice water, the peculiar hunched posture and proclivity for Polar mineral water and arrowroot biscuits—were at once impressed and frustrated by his perfectionism. This stubbornness in the studio would become a defining, to some degree a destroying, feature of Gould's life. And the

eccentricities would be co-opted immediately as publicity fodder: a June 25 press release from Columbia archly summarized the “rituals, foibles or fancies” of its young star, including the bottles of pills and twenty minutes of cold soaking. Also the collapsible chair, described as “the Goldberg (Rube) variation of them all,” with its four adjustable legs: “The studio skeptics thought this was wackiness of the highest order until recording got under way. Then they saw Glenn adjust the slant of his chair before doing his slightly incredible cross-hand passages in the Variations.”⁹

In the liner notes for the record, Gould’s earliest significant publication, he offered the following brilliant if somewhat earnest assessment:

We have observed, by means of a technical dissection, that the aria is incompatible with its offspring, that the crucial bass by its very perfection of outline and harmonic implications stunts its own growth and prohibits the accustomed passacaglia evolution towards a cumulative point. We have observed, also by analysis, that the aria’s thematic content reveals an equally exclusive disposition, that the motivic elaboration in each variation is a law unto itself, and that, by consequence, there are no plateaus of successive variation using similar principles in design such as

lend architectural coherence to the variations of Beethoven and Brahms. Yet without analysis we have sensed that there exists a fundamental coordinating intelligence which we labeled “ego.” Thus we are forced to revise our criteria, which were scarcely designed to arbitrate the union of music and metaphysics—the realm of technical transcendence.¹⁰

Gould would produce numerous personal manifestos and *ars poetica* summaries in later life. Indeed, the manifesto is high among his favourite literary forms, just as it was for the Evelyn Waugh character in *Put Out More Flags* who, we are told, “had always rather specialized in manifestos. He had written one at school; he had written a dozen at the University; once, in the late twenties, he and his friends Hat and Malpractice had even issued the invitation to a party in the form of a manifesto. It was one of his many reasons for shunning communism that its manifesto had been written for it, once and for all, by somebody else.” Gould never entirely outgrew the particular temptation for the young man, especially of intellectual inclination, to state his personal beliefs as a way of setting the world straight. The paragraph above, though characteristically difficult to follow, remains the clearest expression of his self-conception as a musician, and especially as an interpreter of Bach. Somewhere in the tension

between the analytic desire for architectural coherence and the non-analytic awareness of an underlying singular intelligence lies the secret to his life as a performer and artist.

The haunting *Goldberg* aria, not the most technically difficult section of the work, proved intractable. Having delivered masterly versions of the sections demanding tricky crossovers and transitions, Gould could not get it right. He and the engineers recorded it twenty times without avail. On the twenty-first take, Gould was satisfied. "It was a question," he said later, "of utilizing the first twenty takes to erase all superfluous expressions from my reading of it, and there is nothing more difficult to do."¹¹ The aria you hear when you play that disc is quintessential Gould: the technical assurance, hinting at the astonishing virtuosity to come, announcing an interpretation of almost clinical precision. But although it comes first on the recording, and is forever the single audible version of this section of this recording, there are in fact twenty-one renderings of the same piece of music. One is the chosen version, the official story. It could not be such without the other twenty. Where, or how, do they exist?

Not thirty-two variations then, but twenty-one takes: same score, different interpretations, seeking the acceptable one, the one to be released as well as recorded.

Other biographies have tried to explain Gould's personal eccentricities in terms of his music, or vice versa. Whatever the conclusion, they are all bound to a standard presumption of biography, that it has to make unified sense of its subject, to find a single narrative line through the life. But life, as Gould well knew, does not follow such linear progression, and even as he was devoted to line in musical compositions, he was hostile to the idea of progressive, sense-conferring narratives.

I take that hostility seriously in thinking about Gould's life and work. There is no unifying theme, no resolution to the tonic, in his life. His ideas about music govern that life, but those ideas themselves are contradictory, paradoxical, mischievous, and deliberately provocative. In fashioning a philosophical biography, I have abandoned standard narrative form and instead adopted a kaleidoscopic frame. Each of my takes is a version of Gould, always partial, always unfinished. Played over and over, always slightly different, always in search of aptness and insight, Gould is here the subject of a sort of bio-philosophical recording session.¹²