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## The Gould Variations

Technology, Philosophy  
and Criticism in Glenn Gould's  
Musical Thought and Practice



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## INTRODUCTION

"Enough of Glenn Gould!" This is what my piano teacher, having heard my Gould-inspired interpretation of J.S. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C-major in the first book of the *Wohltemperierte Klavier*, in obvious desperation, cried out during one of my last piano lessons in the spring of 1995. The previous week I had asked her recommendations for recordings to listen to in order to make progress with this deceptively simple piece of music, the first real challenge in polyphony I had ever put my fingers on. I wanted to progress as efficiently as possible and also become familiar with the performance tradition of Bach's *Wohltemperierte Klavier*, one of the cornerstones in the standard repertory for the piano.

My teacher, an elderly Greek woman with a long experience in various conservatories, listed for me several pianists through whom I could gain a deeper understanding of the interpretation of Bach's music: Walter Gieseking for his sonorous richness, Sjatoslav Richter and Murray Perahia for their analytic playing, Andras Schiff for his energy and rhythmic drive, and Tatjana Nikolajeva for the sheer poetry of her playing Bach.

But no Glenn Gould. I wondered why. Looking at my teacher's strict and patronizing approach more than a decade later, I realize that she failed to see me as an individual, a pianist-novice with my own aspirations, goals, and opinions about music, and as a student capable of taking responsibility for my interpretative choices. Instead, she thought she knew best how I should practice, whom I should listen to – whom to exclude from my musical world in my process of becoming a pianist. Gould obviously was excluded.

I guess you know what happened. Gould's recording was the first one I picked up from the shelves of the local music library. This strange, wildly gesticulating pianist, whose nose seemed to almost wipe the dust from the keyboard as he played, was something I'd never encountered before. His tempos were sometimes outrageous, his dynamics often absurd, and his choppy non-legato articulation funny. In the Preludes and Fugues, he did things none of which were indicated by the score, and after a good while of careful listening, I found myself deeply irritated by this pianistic narcissism. I did not want this lunatic to be my pianistic role model! Instead I turned to Nikolajeva's recordings for the sheer joy of sound they let me experience. And yes, I finally did learn to play the fugue after weeks of intense practice.

I completely forgot about Gould for years. I was busy trying to find my own way to the world of Classical music, desperate to learn the norms and ideals of musical practice. In music history classes, I learned about the Great German Men: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and others, the musical *Genius*, which for some reason ex-

isted solely within Classical music, not folk or popular music. I also learned a fair amount of prejudice: I remember heated arguments with my friends on whether folk music or rock could ever begin to achieve the same kind of complexity and musical sophistication as Beethoven's symphonies. At that point, my unwavering conviction was "no," and to question this conviction in any way was beyond my intellectual reach at that time. Of course, my years in the conservatory also gave me a lot: aesthetic experiences, facility at the instrument, musical understanding, and first-hand knowledge of the cultural domain called "Classical music." And above all, I had become a musician, which had been the dream of my earlier life.

At a later point in my musical career, having realized that I would never be able to make my living as a professional pianist, I applied to the university in my hometown, Tampere. Even though I majored in ethnomusicology, I now realize that I never really left the conservatory: every assignment for courses I took – essays, term papers, presentations – dealt with Classical music. I never got into the world music groove; neither was popular music as an academic subject area my cup of tea. In my B.A. thesis, I tried to look at a conservatory student recital through ethnographic lenses, as a kind of a ritual in which values and norms of Classical music culture are being maintained and affirmed. I did some fieldwork, interviews, and documentation to gain "an outsider's view" to a domain I knew inside out from my studying piano at a conservatory. Later, in my Master's thesis (Mantere 1998), I replaced fieldwork with textual analysis: looking at how the legendary pianist Heinrich Neuhaus's (1888–1964) musical world-view is reflected in his well-known treatise, *The Art of Playing Piano*. The main theoretical goal in my thesis was to apply discourse analysis, a method very much in vogue in Finnish musicology of the late 1990s, to a musician's speech about his music-making. It is not too far from the truth to say that I am, in many ways, still writing the same thesis. The characters have changed, my thinking – I hope – has become more elaborate and theoretically informed and my writing clearer, but still – I look at the world through the eyes of a pianist, and most of what I have to say is targeted to readers equally fascinated with the wonderful world of the white and black keys.

A Fulbright scholarship, which I was awarded in 1999, brought me to the U.S. I was accepted to the graduate program at Brown University, a distinguished Ivy League institution on the East Coast. I learned a lot – Anglo-American scholarly ideals of clarity, logic, and common sense replaced in my thinking a fair amount of what I had for some reason come to think as sophisticated: academic jargon, paragraph-long sentences, and intense name-dropping. Looking at my writings from those years, I realize that I very seldom wrote a paragraph without a reference to Derrida, Foucault, Stuart Hall or Terry Eagleton. My teachers at Brown challenged me – reading my essays for courses I took, they wanted to know what it was that I wanted to argue, not how many books in continental philosophy (at

that time Foucault, in my mind, came next to God) I had read while preparing my work. It was a shock to see that sometimes I really did not know the answer. I hadn't realized that scholarly work can be a way of *living* intellectually with music, of making it meaningful, even of expressing oneself. Inspired by what I saw around me, I started to work towards those kinds of ideals. Gradually, that kind of an ideal of an intellectual life with music became very important for me.

Gould suddenly came back to my life. In one of the first classes I took at Brown, a seminar on T.W. Adorno's sociology of music taught by my great mentor Rose Rosengard Subotnik, we were trying to understand, equipped with a huge load of assigned readings, what this notably difficult German philosopher thought about reproduction, mediation, and the meaning of music in the modern world. More exactly, we were trying to find an answer to the following question in Adorno's musical thought: how could scholarly criticism of music that was at the same time informative and also truthful to the essence of music be possible within "culture industry," an unavoidable network of music's marketing and mediation, consisting of record companies, newspapers, institutions and concert agencies? Adorno's cynical and pessimistic views about music in the modern world seemed aptly to recapture the state of music in the world around us.

In this seminar, a Canadian graduate student brought up Gould. His take on this peculiar musician was to emphasize his role as a North American technology visionary whose revolutionary innovation was the idea that a given musical interpretation does not have to be bound to the concert situation, which, in Gould's mind, symbolically represented the worst side in human character, the inexhaustible need for competition. In other words, technology – itself a commercial phenomenon – could, Gould argued, paradoxically be a means to avoid music's commercialism itself. So it appeared that Gould and Adorno, in spite of everything that separates them, had at least an unwavering distaste for culture industry's concert life in common.

Gould obviously shared the same concerns with Adorno: the star cult in Classical music; technically flawless but superficial interpretations of works in the canon of Classical music; and narcissistic virtuoso display – all these irritated him to no end. Adorno, in turn, seemed to provide me with answers, or at the very least, new viewpoints, to questions arising from the tensions between critical and truthful ideals of interpretation on the one hand and the commodification of music by culture industry on the other. I was particularly haunted by one question: could a musician's interpretation of musical works be a type of musical *criticism*, an intellectual undertaking which not only aims at delivering the music to the listener, but also making it meaningful. I read all the texts by Gould and Adorno that I could get hold of, along with texts by such scholars as Lydia Goehr and Richard Taruskin, whose writings have always been of great help for my thinking. This

new idea of musical interpretation as a form of *criticism*, in Adorno's sense of the term, started to look like a fascinating prospect to take on in my scholarly effort to understand what Gould's musicianship was all about. Indeed, I was intuitively sure that his music-making was about *something* of musicological interest, even though I did not have any tools to prove this intuition worthwhile at that point.

At first I thought I had to (again) become a pianist in order to understand Gould. I imitated all of Gould's recordings of works I had studied before, and even tried my hands on a few new ones, such as Gould's strange recording of Mozart's Sonata in A-major (KV 331). I tried, in a quasi-phenomenological manner, to get a sense of how his playing must have "felt" in his hands. I did a number of gigs on the Brown campus on various occasions – I don't even dare to think what my listeners thought of a wildly gesticulating, loudly humming amateur, who was such an obvious disciple of a maverick deceased more than 20 years ago! In retrospect, I am glad that this phase in my development as a musician – interestingly enough, I did develop through these experiments! – was over fairly soon after it had started. You can only step in the same river once, and even then following the path you have chosen yourself, not, as I had done, so obviously in the footsteps of another musician.

The rest of the story is in your hands now. I took all the literature I had by and about Gould with me to my native Finland, got a job, and started teaching in a small university. I published articles on Gould and gave presentations in various conferences and seminars. In the spring of 2005, I spent a month in Ottawa, reseaching the Gould archives at the National Library. I listened to all Gould's commercial recordings (and a number of unpublished ones) – only to leave all of them out of my inquiry in the last phases of the whole process. In some way, though, all that music is in the background of all I have been writing about Gould – I can honestly say that most of the time I have been writing this thesis, there has been music playing in my head.

My trip to Canada gave me a lot to think about, most of which I had never known before. For instance, "Idea of North" – and most of all, the *Idealization* of it – that Gould so vehemently spoke about, has been, so I learned in Ottawa, a prevalent theme in Canadian arts and letters for at least two centuries; it was something that I had previously thought of as Gould's own ideological obsession but that now revealed itself as an aspect that made him, after all, "more Canadian" than I had ever realized. I spent a number of evenings at National Gallery of Canada, trying to focus my microfilm-worn eyes on Lawren Harris's, A.Y. Jackson's, and F.H. Varley's artistic depictions of what Gould spoke about: the North of individual freedom, the North of reunion with Mother Earth, the North as an alternative to the creativity-numbing lifestyle of the urban civilization.

Another eye-opening benefit of my trip was to realize how thoroughly Gould's ideas about information technology were embedded in the Canadian intellectual climate of the 1960s and 70s. Throughout his career, Gould not only read, wrote, and lectured about technology's potential contribution to musical life in the future but also was in continuous correspondence with intellectuals such as Marshall McLuhan and Jean Le Moyne. In this sense, I found it justified to discuss Gould's technological utopia, which it indeed was in the 1960s, within a larger ideological and cultural horizon – the post-war North American technological discourse. I also ended up playing with the idea of "Gould in the age of the Internet" – how, and to what extent, have Gould's prophecies of "creative listening" been made possible by advanced technology and become musical everyday for millions of people? I make some arguments about this as well in the coming chapters of this book.

Through the research of Gould, I have come to ponder larger issues as well: what is the meaning of tradition, conventions and institutions for artistic creativity? What is musical thinking after all? Is it something extraneous to "music" that we listen to, or irrevocably involved in our experience? Or neither? How about an artist's ethical responsibility – is it a responsibility towards himself, the composer, or the audience? Does it exist in the first place? What would be the normative basis for such ethics?

On the one hand, I am trying to understand and analyze the musical thought of one of the most significant musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; on the other hand, however, I have tried to summarize what I know about music and the interpretation of it. I hope to continue this intellectual journey and avoid taking anything related to music and life for granted.

The main character of my thesis, the Canadian pianist Glenn Herbert Gould (1932–1982) is one of the best known musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his native country he gained fame almost immediately<sup>1</sup> after having begun his studies at the Toronto Conservatory in 1940. (He never studied anywhere else). Gould-literature has been unanimous in emphasizing his talent and incredible maturity at a young age: at the age of 12, Gould graduated from the Conservatory with a professional

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1 Looking at Gould's early reception and fame in Canada in the 1950s, it should be kept in mind that Gould, as a native North American prodigy, was an exception in his time. Gould's hometown Toronto, in particular, was very conservative and its musical life colonial. As Bazzana (2003, 43–44) observes, most of the prominent musicians were British by birth, training or inclination, and most musical organizations were based on British models. Local composers were grounded in the English church tradition and late-Romantic musical idioms. This state of things made R. Murray Schafer, then a young composer in his twenties, to lament the "dummy culture ... with a British organist in every cuckoo-nest." (Ibid., 44.)