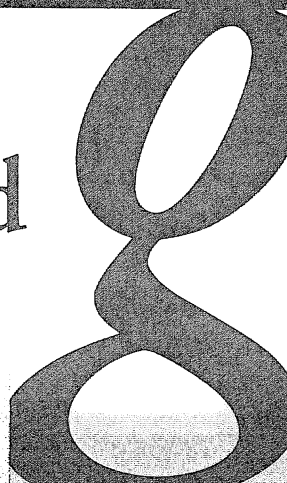


March October 1991

the international
Glenn Gould
society



The International Glenn Gould Society

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March/October 1991

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Glenn Gould's Pianistic Aesthetics

by
Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf

The *Aria da capo*, which concludes Bach's *Goldberg Variations* on the 1982 recording, Glenn Gould's "musical will", is a peaceful concord which leaves earthly counterpoints behind, an almost cathartic balance; played very softly, slowly and solemnly, with a euphony with an expressiveness which originates entirely from the pure economy of the coherence of notes, the slim, introverted and yet at once assertively intense tone, the perfectly balanced polyphony, the crystal-clear ornamentation, melodically and rhythmically enclosed in the event, rid of every youthful recklessness of the first recording from 1955, Gould's brilliant debut as a pianist – in short: clearly an interpretation beyond good and evil, although Gould does not play the piano the way it is required by performance tradition, and does not use the clavichord or the cembalo; he hums along, his sound plain, almost rid of sensuality; the rhythm has a transcending effect on the ethereal.

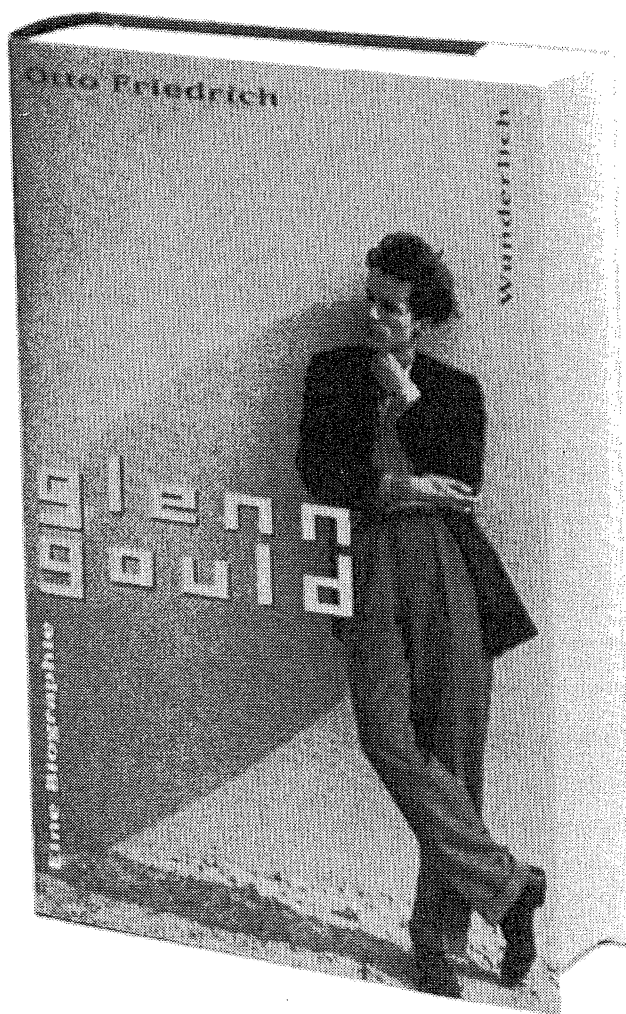
This exceptional level of artistic originality in itself calls for an analysis of Gould's "pianistic" aesthetics. The mannerism of his presentation – one might think of his interview entitled "Glenn Gould interviews Glenn Gould about Glenn Gould", his chorus composition for post-nuclear frogs, the elephants in the zoo as representatives of the ideal public, and the eccentricity of his way of life, the hypochondria, the way he maintained friendships over the telephone, the places where he lived which were inaccessible to outsiders, his nightly working hours – all that does not matter here. As it is, such characteristics are related to a way of expression of an absolute integrity, which is connected to the artistic productivity, of a subjective veracity, and also of a self-mocking dealing with the subjectivism of solitude so abruptly disconnected from the social order, and nonetheless hardly elements of an opportunistic "see what I can get away with". I am only interested in the musical-instrumental essence of Glenn Gould's aesthetics. Therefore, four notions as crystallization points will be assumed in the radical basic assumptions of my account: musical mannerism, technical perfectionism, structural immanence and a critical-actualizing interpretative approach.

Musical mannerism

Two distinct characteristics of mannerism are the extreme emphasis on the artistic element, of the artificiality of the artistic element by emphasizing certain one-sided aspects, and the circumstance that in his work, the author reflectively makes himself the subject of contemplation beside the actual material. Applied to Gould, this means first of all that it is noticeable all the time that he is the one who is playing, i.e. that to him playing is an expression of the complete artistic personality and not just subject to the cause of the performance of a composer's intention; furthermore, that certain contextual particularities are highlighted. The criticism that Gould acts as a composer, who willfully distorts the score by adding his own material, or that he allows himself certain liberties, has strangely enough been stated relatively early (the three times repeated mordent on the final chord of the E major Prelude from the second volume of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* is an example of this). However, not only minor details, but conceptions of complete works could also be struck by Gould's self-will. To his mind, many of Beethoven's famous works were mediocre rather than masterpieces; they did not deserve the esteem they enjoyed – in order to prove its insignificance, he recorded the first movement of the *Appassionata* in half tempo, as a result of which it has lost all passion and consequently has to stand up in its naked form. And in conformity with his belief that most of the time there is nothing to Mozart, he played him in a relentlessly positive way. In the first movement of the *Sonata facile* KV 545, one does not hear a sensitive interpretation as one would expect in Mozart, but a calculated, detached performance of what is in the score: the implacably hammered out and rhythmically strictly implemented Alberti basses at the beginning; the side-theme lingering restricted above the dominating sixteenth notes of the lower voice, which only in the reprise hesitantly gets a little louder; a clearly increased tempo, the quadruple time altered in *Alla breve*. Gould's understandably contested recordings (Mozart, often Beethoven, respected as always, but also for example Bach's *Chromatische Fantasie und Fuge*), together with the scathing judgments accompanying them, should not be taken literally: not as interpretations of the actual works, but as a demonstration of an attitude just like a determined evaluation.

His playing was also mannerist in nature. Gould used a Steinway which was especially prepared for him so as to improve the transparency of its sound quality; he made a rare and very unobtrusive use of the pedal and, no matter where he played, from his youth he was inseparable from his piano chair, which actually was a stool whose legs had been sawn off. What made him, like no other pianist,

Glenn Gould, Mythos Musik



Der Pianist Glenn Gould,
bereits zu Lebzeiten eine
Legende, wurde nach seinem
Tod zum Mythos. Sein Biograph
Otto Friedrich hatte als erster
Zugang zu bislang unge-
sichteten Aufzeichnungen und
Dokumenten des genialen
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choose a low and cumbersome sitting position is eventually a mystery. Beside the speculation that this pose could be the defensive reaction of an introverted young man, who wanted to reduce the distance to his instrument and make it appear larger to the outside world, it could have been for motives relating to sound which made the adolescent discover this possibility. The rhythmical beat of the fingers towards the keys alters: the fingers themselves, instead of the arms, the shoulders or the entire body play – the locomotion gets more efficient, verifiable and supports the richness of touch. Finally, another unique aspect of Gould's playing is his continuous soft singing, that is humming along with his music; this did not really please him, but he could have given it up only at the expense of his concentration. His repertoire turned out the same way. His favourite composers were Orlando Gibbons and Bach. Because of his universalism and for the sake of polyphony, Bach was in the centre of his pianism. He loved Wagner's music above all; and also German high and late Romanticism, especially Brahms and Richard Strauss. He had always been fond of the Viennese school (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern), while he considered Stravinsky or Bartók to be rather overrated. The time between Bach's *Art of Fugue* and Wagner's *Tristan* in his view formed a gap: the only compositions of Mozart he liked were the early works, and he liked only some of Beethoven's work. He only liked Mendelssohn's work which was not written for the piano; he liked Schumann's chamber music. The traditional piano repertoire, such as Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky did not exist to him: he thought of it as hollow virtuosity, emotional shallowness and poor in its form. In compensation he discovered the unusual and the eccentric: Grieg, Sibelius, Bizet, Prokofiev, Shostakovich.

Gould's generally recognized affinity with the structural justifies the use of the term "structuralism" in his case. This relates to the central aspect of his emphatic musical interpretation: the meaning and value, every effect and significance of the music, which is aroused by the composed tone coherence and not by the empirical, besides musical or emotional additions of the performer. The essence of music is something intrinsic, intensive, not something from the outside, which must be amplified by acoustic means. That is why, in the first movement of the "Mondscheinsonate" the sentimental accentuation of the melody and of the musically concealing, accompanying harmony does not matter, but the triplets thought to be just accompanying the middle voice are sustained as ones of equal standing, and the expression is nothing but a multiplicity of the alternating highlighting of all factors in the musical setting. As Gould's conception of music does not exhaust the structural aspect, one can probably also speak of immanentism of meta-historical generalization of what was called "absolute

music" in the nineteenth century. For instance, it is interesting that he has always considered the music of Richard Strauss to be absolute.

The sense of structure, together with the unique gift of a polyphonic ear, resulted in a performing technique, of which the essential aspects are the tonal differentiation (transparency and use of pedal), the non-legato-playing, the ornamentation and the polyphony. Rubinstein's wish to have been born with Gould's hands was based on the probably peerless multiplicity of timbre-like nuancing of his piano playing.

This is the result of several factors: the extremely low sitting position and the resulting finger position, the exorbitant culture of touch and an imagination aimed at the highest musical clarity. The need for transparency of the polyphonic composition of voices and its coherence to the entity only require a rare use of the pedal; that is why Gould hardly uses the pedal in Baroque music, and in the case of the Scriabin interpretations, he achieves as it were the quadrature-square of the circle: complicated construction of sound in the pedal and at the same time, its polyphonic stratification.

Gould's perfectionism

The perfectionist Gould was a musical genius, who, before he sat down at the piano, learned the works by heart as he read them; in this way he developed his musical imagination, to which his body and motion had to be adapted. Gould probably worked out casually, and only according to his ears, all motorial possibilities of his hands. By studying video tape recordings in slow motion, the following aspects of touch could be distinguished: the elasticity of the fingers; their position, that is curvature; the angle in which they are posed to the keys, the speed with which the keys are pressed down; the speed with which the fingers reach the keys, the height of drop and "flying course" of the fingers; the place where the fingers touch the keys. Other aspects concern the relation between the strength of the fingers and the arms, and the rest of the body.

Apart from touch, timbre is influenced by the dynamic and the various parameters as determined by the setting (register, function of every note in the polyphonic whole of the event), the relationship between notes and the shorter or longer pauses between them, the different degrees of molto legato to the staccatissimo (non-legato-playing). The secret of Gould's varicoloured playing lies in the possibility to combine from finger to finger absolutely independently these (distinguishing) parameters of tone production, at the beginning of the touch and of the degree of non-legato-playing. As with increasing density of

impulses (frequency of touch, shortness of individual notes) the risk increases that musical texture loses precision and transparency. Gould plays, as a rule, the notes more staccato, the shorter they are in their impulse consequences, even when the level of difficulty increases dramatically. Gould video tapes, when played in slow motion, prove that even in the quickest passages, he is still able to play the notes separately. Consequently, the non-legato-playing guarantees two things: clarity of the sound and colourful differentiation. (For the sake of completeness it must be mentioned that for the timbre in the non-legato-playing the releasing of the key, i.e. the speed of damping is also relevant.) The argument that the essence of non-legato-playing conflicts with the melodious aspect, because it tears the lines apart, does not relate to Gould's structuralistic approach, because internally the notes, by their small distance in time and their structural functional coherence, are linked in the polyphonic balance of the whole. As a polyphonician, Gould "sings" out every line, even if the line is very staccato. To him the piano is essentially a punctual instrument. "Punctualism" means that the music consists of individual acoustically separated tonal dots that cannot be connected to each other as in singing or in any melodious instrument.

In the piano, as with the harp or the glockenspiel, the tone fades away; once struck, it cannot be manipulated anymore. The connection to the next note can only be suggested, and it is up to the ear to make the connection aimed at, which it does all the time in piano music, without being aware of it.

Gould extends and refines the ornamentation, rising above the "rhythmizations", customary in Baroque music, in a more complex way, which leads to autonomous creations in a field in its own right. A characteristic example of this is the slow part of the overture of the B minor Partita from the second movement of Bach's "Clavierübung". A subtly articulated ornament is to him a part of the melody, not an embellishment, but something which is structurally necessary. The precision and the profile of the ornamentation is also to be attributed to his non-legato-technique. With the new function of ornamentation as an essential constituent of the melodic composition, Gould manages to solve a problem of twentieth century aesthetics, and about which Adolf Loos made probably the most pointed remark: *ornamentation is an offence*. In accordance with the aesthetics of autonomy, which does not allow non-functional elements of any kind, because they threaten to replace the integrality of the construction, he makes ornamentation functional by "re"-composing the individual ornaments and by treating them as if they were equivalent elements of the structure.

Glenn Gould is a pre-eminent polyphonic talent. The thrifty use of the pedal and the tremendously colourful differentiations allow him to model every voice

in the balanced total context, in polyphonus entities, in an extremely articulated way. Thus, the 21st Goldberg Variation proves that his polyphonus playing not only concerns the colourful differentiation, but also the microparametric styling (dynamics, agogics, articulation, phrasing, in short: the “songful expression”). It will not escape the notice of the observant listener that it is very difficult actually to follow all voices in Gould’s music simultaneously, as they are profiled as upper voice melodies. As Gould did not settle for the performance of the alleged principal voice, he brought the complete richness of melodic voices to safety, and whenever he was not satisfied with that which was scored as polyphonus, he added virtual voices, by highlighting prominently certain notes of different lines. The “melodization” of a normally unmelodic voice is essential to his polyphonic keynote: something simultaneous, like chords or rhythmical coincidences in the bipphony he sometimes arpeggiated separately, even if it was not present in the score. The result of this is that the latent structure, such as the inner fabric of a chord, is opened up and simultaneously lineated.

To Gould, virtuosity does not mean making an artistic-acrobatic display of the sporty mobility of the body, but it is useful to the representation of a musical expression: the first movement of Beethoven’s op. 111 or the “Goldberg Variations”: 5, 14, 20, 23 or 26 – all of them without losing tonal transparency, played in an insane pace – make that an extremity of a somnambulist and obsessed perfectionist, whose other side, his sentimental-lyrical one, was not documented better than by the 25th of the “Adagio-Goldberg Variation”.

Gould’s structuralism

Gould was a structuralist and at the same time a musician “par excellence”. From this combination sprang his permanency; and almost to be defined as his “personal style” is his striving for performance of the expression immanent in music, which goes together with the structural extension of sound. The resolutely polyphonus attack, in which all voices are equivalent, contributes to this as much as his refined styling ability, which from time to time results in extremely individual resolutions – sometimes risky and surprising, but never without musical credibility.

From the abundance of examples of structural extension, five can be brought forward: structural division of a line into two functional unities (Brahms), varied repetition (Brahms), extremely accurate performance of the score, hence undoubtedly those intended coherences (Berg), the diagonal polyphony (Beethoven) and also diverging interpretations at the same time (Bach).

In Brahms' *Intermezzo* A major op. 118/2 (Bars 38 ff), Gould divides the bass, moving in regular eights, into two alternating parts: a melodically emphasized part (sequence I – VI – IV – II – V) and a very soft, harmonically important part. In accordance with the principle that in art nothing is to be said twice in the same way, in the episode of the same *Intermezzo* (Bars 49 ff.), twice to be played, the upper voice is emphasized the first time; the second time, the middle voice is emphasized, above which the former almost fades, and the third voice, the triplet bass, sustains both times in moderate dynamics.

In the transitional theme of the piano sonata, Berg notates chord structures in the left hand for two voices over the melody in the right hand, as verticalised, quasi-melodic polyphony, which Gould plays properly, that is to say radically polyphonous. The motifs of the side-theme of Beethoven's "Sturmsong" op. 31/2 (first movement) are repeatedly separated by a quarter rest, in which an alternating bass dissonant is played, which Gould hammers out with great emphasis, so that the ear, concentrated on the melody, is distracted and oscillates – as it were diagonally – between the two voices.

Work in the recording studio finally made it possible to combine different interpretations of a piece into a final version, by means of editing. In the great A minor Fugue from the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, performances of the themes and the intermezzos are evidently diverse in character.

Gould, in this respect a modernist, expressively highlights new intrinsic correlations of the notated musical structures by organizing them all over again, while for instance in Bach, they are secondary, in contrast with pitch and rhythm and without function for the structure (timbre, articulation, dynamics, and tempi). The upgrading of these parameters to functional means of expression opens up new morphologic and syntactical correlations, which until now were just latent. This produces the advanced musical awareness, which is aimed at new music, and sensitive to such structural problems. For instance, with his choice of a relatively slow tempo in the C minor Prelude of the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*, Gould manages to avoid in the first part the etude-like aspect and by skilfully splitting up various articulations, he exposes the detailed structures, which are unnotated but audible to the analytical ear. From the middle of the fragment a hierarchic dynamic and graduation breaks through the setting and causes a virtual polyphony; above it some important notes are prolonged by sixteenths, which, transcending the normally strict setting in two voices, form a new line.

Critical-actualizing interpretation

Hermann Danuser calls such an interpretive approach a critical-actualizing approach – as opposed to the historical approach, which aims at the musically and stylistically faithful representation of a bygone situation, and from the traditional approach, which is aimed at the continuation that springs from a subjectivistic base from the nineteenth century. Gould can be justifiably related to the actualizing approach. What he plays, he plays as if it were new music, although he includes elements of both other approaches: the subjectivistic conception of music as an expression of the individual aspect, as well as the sense of the historical conception. The modernism of his playing, which actualizes music which has become historical to his contemporaries and the living present, and which therefore has a critical attitude, is confirmed by many observations: his preference for unpredictable, highly individual detail resolutions, for extreme fields of expression (virtuoso quick tempi in eruptive music, contemplative and slow in large-scale structures), the expansion of complexity by supplementary profiling of otherwise secondary and therefore most neglected lines (middle voices, bass, counterpoints). Generally, Gould's modernistic aesthetics do not allow interpretations which are swallowed up by an "organistic" totality, which combines all elements into a unity; characteristic for his aesthetics is rather the "not being heard" aspect and the factor of "not being swallowed up".

The enlargement of the structural richness by the accentuation of the polyphony, the x-ray-like highlighting of details, and in general the technical possibilities of gramophone recording result in an increase in intrinsic musical complexity. Gould's actualizing base is not only on the level of an advanced awareness of the problem, which Danuser sees in the Viennese school, but it anticipates one of the youngest developments of new music of the past 15 years, which are essential for the phenomena recorded in this way (enlargement of the structure, polyphony, "diagonal listening"). In the "complexistic" school a dense, overwhelming, polymorphous and rhythmically complex polyphony leads to an overburdening of the willing perception, which wants to follow all essential elements, but as this is impossible, it must form a totally new relation to the musical object. This is also true for Gould in his polyphonic playing in which the individual voices are emphatically profiled; the active ear is magnetically attracted by it, but it is neither capable of mastering the excessive supply, nor of concentrating on the details, because the rest is constantly asserting its right to be heard. Unlike the pianist Gould, who had to go and could go musically through the complexity, the listener can sit back and experience the

overburdening of his senses. This kind of complexity can be seen as a model in Gould's version of Wagner's *Meistersinger*-overture. Because of the particularly multi-layered texture, Gould transposed the orchestral part into a piano primo and a piano secundo, which he recorded separately. By means of a skilfully tonal, and above all dynamic progression, he achieved a profusion of accompanying textures beside the polyphonically related leitmotifs or main themes. It results in a polymorphous labyrinth, of which the spatial depth effect overburdens the ear, which tries to follow everything in vain. There is nothing left but to surrender to the "diagonal" oscillations from event to event, from layer to layer, or just simply to enjoy the sensuous pleasure, that the C major radiates at the surface.

Gould was a modernist, also in his enthusiastic relationship to technique. The "womb-like safety" of the recording studio offered him the ideal basis for perfecting his interpretive conceptions. The result is not, as usual, a temporary "now" of a concert situation, but a document of a musical situation which transcends the temporariness – as pure expressivity. The communication becomes anonymous: the achievement of the solitary interpreter is taken up in solitude by the listener. In doing so, Gould, who suffered from his lack of compositional creativity, was at least indirectly able to "materialize" his imagination and creative power, by integrating them in the (historical) works as the composer does in his score.

"Diagonal" listening

Gould's real "historic" achievement is both an instrumental and a musical one. He created a new kind of piano playing. The specific kind of tone production – sudden attacks with fast decreasing envelope – certainly makes the piano a punctualistic instrument, in which, as it is, every form of articulation resembles the non-legato form. Gould's instrumentalistic achievement is that he has raised to a principle the punctualistic non-legato-playing which is essential for the piano. His radical polyphonous approach which, as it were, never tires of the multiplicity of voices, his endeavours to intensify the expression by enlarging the structural and the achieved measure of complexity changes the ear, which cannot become comfortable neither in the vertical aspect, nor in the horizontal one as the lines are too much individualized, because too much is presented at the same time. The result is a "diagonal" listening, which permanently mediates between both dimensions, in which occur new unexpected sensory perceptions. "Diagonal" listening is Gould's musical achievement.

The *artistic ecstasy*, the intensity of the moment fulfilled with integrity, was the

word with which Gould described his artistic identity. To him music was not some sort of pleasing sensory stimulus, or an expression of certain feelings or a physical motorial pleasure in playing, but something explicitly spiritual, which the composer, the interpreter and the listener can share to the same extent. Much in his rich repertoire, from Gibbons to the new music, belongs, according to the structure and the calibre, to the greatest masterpieces in musical history, and Bach, the most polyphonic composer, was not only the centre of his creativity, but had also induced him to become a musician.

Gould, a representative of the aesthetics of autonomy, could only think and experience the music in a musical way. That is why it is difficult to describe what kind of emotionalism or expression emanates from his playing, what kind of melody treatment he prefers, because the expression is never primarily an external factor. That is why the intellectual criticism that his playing is dry, "rid of sensuality", and emotionless falls short: Gould is an immanentist. Anyone who wants to understand music from within sees in the alleged distance of the real feelings, an enrichment, the nearness and presence of dimensions of expression which can only be made by music itself. His originality is unique. The uncompromising retirement from the concert stage in favour of a medial communication, his exquisite repertoire, his mannerist "always–also–playing–himself", the consequent punctualistic handling of the piano, the brilliant polyphonic ear, his immanent idea of music as a spiritual inner self – those elements form a style, which is unmatched, because of the unsurpassable dignity of the results and the radicality of the innovations, which is essential when a new tradition is to be formed. According to Gould, musical performance could and even had to add structurally to historical music that which is latently immanent and hidden so far, on the basis of the complete authentic perception of the present. A musician must not just be a performer, a slave to the music, but an artist "par excellence", through whom an epoch–making joy of life is rendered into the music. In this respect Gould resembles the great composers, who were immortalized by their scores, as he is immortalized by his gramophone recordings. Glenn Gould, the genius of polyphonic transparency who expressed himself only in music, to me is the best instrumentalist since the invention of sound–recording. To him music was in essence "absolute spirit" in the Hegelian sense; in that respect he surpasses the majority of our century.

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Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, 'Glenn Goulds klavieristische Ästhetik',
Üben + Musizieren, (No. 5 - October 1990), pp 282-287

NOTES

- 1 This article is a summary of a lecture which the author has delivered in several places. Detailed explanations of the quoted musical examples have been omitted in favour of a concise description. In the meantime the Swiss cultural magazine "du" has published, in the issue of April [1990], a special about Gould, which is maintaining the myth "GG" rather than documenting it.
- 2 Cf. H. Danuser, 'Faithful representation in the musical interpretation', in *Funkkolleg Musikgeschichte*, SBB 11, Tübingen 1988, pp. 65 ff.