

VICTOR
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Mozart Didn't Like Gould Either: in Defence of *Andante grazioso*

The talent and virtuosity of Toronto pianist Glenn Gould have long been a source of pride for Canadian music lovers, and the devotion of his admirers has only grown more ardent in the years since his death. But Gould's interpretive legacy remains troubling to many music analysts. Victor Coelho feels that the standoff between Gould's defenders and his critics does a disservice both to the maverick and to the great composers he challenged.

Example One: Gould, Sonata in A major



IT IS a known fact that pianists who play like Glenn Gould do not win competitions. In the excerpt quoted above most musicians, whether professional or amateur, will recognize immediately the similarity to the first movement of Mozart's well-known Piano Sonata in A K331, but they will also know that something is definitely not the way it should be.

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There is nothing wrong with your set.

The work is certainly Mozart's, but I have re-notated the passage as it was performed by Glenn Gould on his recording of the Mozart sonatas. Mr Gould's performance characteristically ignores many substantive, important, and – dare I say, in this particular recording – *musical* elements (and directions) that Mozart indicates in his score of this, perhaps his most popular and frequently-analyzed sonata.¹ Appropriately, this performance of Mr Gould's is one of his most frequently-criticized recordings, so much so that it even put Mr Gould on the rare defensive during his now-famous interview with Bruno Monsaingeon in 1976.² It was in this interview that Mr Gould went on the record about his dislike for Mozart (he did not play the concertos since they were beyond fixing), and it included his priceless comment that the G-minor Symphony “consists of eight remarkable measures [the beginning of the development in the last movement] surrounded by a half-hour of banality.” The first movement of Mozart's sonata, written in the form of a theme-and-variations, begins in 6/8 time, with a tempo-marking of *Andante grazioso* that was supplied by the composer himself (see Example Two).

Example Two: Mozart, Sonata in A K331

Andante grazioso

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 6. The second system contains measures 7 through 11. The third system contains measures 12 through 15. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. Dynamics such as *p* (piano) and *f* (forte) are indicated. Fingerings and slurs are used throughout the piece. The tempo marking 'Andante grazioso' is written above the first measure.

For most pianists, the tempo marking is rather redundant, since Mozart's writing leaves no ambiguity whatsoever as to how fast the movement should be played. This is the aspect of inevitability in Mozart's music that continues to defy musical analysis: there is no other way it *can* be played, just as it is impossible to think of the piece without the unusual 10-measure phrase (8 + 2, rather than the usual 4 + 4) that follows the excerpt quoted above, despite its having two "extra" measures (see Example Two, measures 16-18). "Why does it sound just right?" asks Edward Cone, the dean of critical music analysis. "Here and elsewhere, Mozart's mastery of asymmetrical balance is a challenge to the analyst" (Cone 1987 138).

Almost two minutes into his recording, Mr Gould finally arrives at those extra measures, for he has taken the work not in a flowing and legato rhythm of six short beats to the measure (which is also unambiguously implied both in the writing and obvious fingering), but in a detached and staccato manner phrased in three very slow beats to the measure. Mr Gould manages to undermine the natural rhythmic and phrase structure of the original work by his unusual performance, and the effect of Mozart's brilliant asymmetry is neutralized by the unnecessarily slow tempo, which draws attention only to Mr Gould's playing, not the music. And more surprises await the listener in this recording. When Mozart writes a descending octave (at the ends of Variations 1 and 4, for example), Mr Gould plays them as ascending broken octaves, thus changing even the order of the notes written by Mozart. Throughout the work, tempo and articulation directions are shunned; Variation 5, marked *Adagio* and meant to be a perfect foil for the final *Allegro* variation, is taken at an *Allegro* tempo by Mr Gould, making the last variation anticlimactic.

A problematic interpretation of similar proportions occurs in another composition by Mr Gould, this one resembling Beethoven's Piano Sonata op. 27 No. 1 in E-flat (see Example Three).

Example Three: Gould, Sonata in E-flat



Once again Mr Gould's tempos hardly move. Carl Czerny, who is a reliable original source concerning the performance practice of Beethoven's sonatas, suggested in his edition of 1842 a metronome marking of 66 to the quarter note; almost a century later, Artur Schnabel's tempo of 72 to the quarter note was not much different. For Czerny, it was upon tempo "that everything else depends," and he warned that "the whole character of the piece will be distorted by a false tempo" (Czerny 72). Compared to these two standards, Mr Gould's tempos settle in at a painfully slow metronome marking of around 52 to the quarter note. Since "A written word is ... easily overlooked by the performer,"³ Beethoven is usually clear in his indications regarding tempo, articulation, and phrasing. In fact, pianists are only too keenly aware of Beethoven's insistence that they observe the tempos he provided. Anton Schindler, by far the most prolific writer of any of Beethoven's students, wrote that "When a work of Beethoven had been performed, his first question was always, 'How were the tempi?' Every other consideration seemed to be of secondary importance to him" (Schindler 423). In measure one, the tie plus the dot (a *portato*) stipulate that the chords "should be ever-so slightly separated," though, as Badura-Skoda notes with a wink, "this notation is often misunderstood by pianists ... who play the notes far too short" (Badura-Skoda 84).

What is most annoying about Mr Gould's performance of these chords is not simply that they are too short and too slow, but that the rising line in the left hand (see Example Four) is played as if there were no slur connecting the notes, in defiance of the original. Mr Gould plays this passage like the first example – staccato, thereby ignoring the intended contrast of the static first idea, consisting of lightly detached vertical chords in the treble, with its answer, a running, linear phrase in the bass. In short, Mr Gould's performance of this first movement is too slow, too staccato, and it fails to sketch a profile of the individual character of the two subjects.

Example Four: Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat, op. 27/1

Andante

MR GOULD'S devotees and critics alike will find the preceding discussion infuriatingly old-fashioned. I have taken this conservative path for several reasons. It is often said that Mr Gould cannot be judged on the basis of historical tradition, authenticity, or faithfulness to historical normatives. Fair enough, neither can Horowitz. But while advocates of Mr Gould's approach even concede that his notions of tempo are often problematic, they will stop short of allowing Mr Gould's performances and philosophies to be placed in the arena of serious stylistic and critical analysis – Mr Gould's own obsession with (and often brilliant expositions of) these topics notwithstanding.

It is true that Mr Gould "opens to us a range of alternatives in musical awareness to which we might otherwise be oblivious" (Payzant 147); these days we cosily call this "exploring one's options." But for Geoffrey Payzant to view Mr Gould's critics as simply representing the camps of "cultural snobbery" and "theoretical and historical irrelevancies," implies that Mr Gould's performances and analyses transcend "traditional" analysis and musicological debate – a closed door. Time and time again, criticism of Mr Gould's interpretations and writings, no matter how legitimately they are based on valid musicological and stylistic grounds, have been dismissed by the devotees without constructive dialogue: as always, we, the musicologists and theorists, *just don't get it.*

While devotees would find my marshalling of historical/stylistic evidence against Mr Gould's interpretations inappropriate, they would certainly applaud my attribution of Examples One and Four to him, rather than to Mozart and Beethoven. A classic paradigm shift has occurred in the field of "Gould Studies," as was made obvious from the recent Glenn Gould conference in Toronto. This might be chronicled as follows: previously, Mr Gould's anti-historical approach, and any subsequent defence of that approach, resisted accommodation within the deterministic paradigm that characterized intellectual and musicological scholarship. A crisis (Mr Gould's death) precipitated a rejection of that paradigm and its replacement with a new one, more toward the open-ended field of the lit-crits: Mr Gould was no longer an interpreter. He became The Author, embodying a perfect deconstructionist vision. Criticisms of Mr Gould's playing on the basis of historical propriety or appropriateness could thus be brushed off on the

basis of their belonging to the older totemistic paradigm. Indeed, it has become difficult even to evoke terms such as “musicality.” And these clothes fit Mr Gould. His writings confirm his uneasiness with inherited structures and norms of “real presences.”⁴ Commensurate with this philosophy was his manner of recording, to which he brought no a prioristic assumptions about the music.⁵ When Mr Gould took apart pieces of music and talked about (and to) them, his interest lay in the skeletal aspects, the primordial shapes that gave the work its organic structure, rather than in any striving towards authenticity. To him, authenticity was impossible. The act of interpretation became an integral part of the meaning of the work. These views are harmonious with those of deconstructive analysis.

Indeed, certain musical structures for Mr Gould were innately hierarchical and repressive (such as sonata and concerto form), and herein lies the danger in adopting a purely deconstructive profile of Mr Gould. These assumptions were based on the notion that adherence to historical, mimetic, or a priori notions of musical performance contributes to a performer’s enslavement by history. Perhaps this is a reaction to the historical performance movement, which to my mind has been the most invigorating trend in music over the past few decades and has had a much more profound effect in revitalizing older repertoires than Mr Gould’s recordings. Through their creative mixture of historical source study, musicology, and performance, the historical performance musicians have shown that authenticity can be in every way as liberating as dial-twiddling and splicing, the respect to a composer’s wishes every bit as ecstatic to the performer as the iconoclastic stance.

This essay, however, is not about Mr Gould’s interpretations. (Even when he is stylistically inappropriate – and some would say *because* of it – he is always thoroughly original, technically astonishing, and deeply involved with the music.) Rather, my aim here is to question how Mr Gould’s recordings and writings can be brought into the musicological loop of serious musical debate. This question has become more pertinent just in the last few months. The recent conference on Glenn Gould in Toronto (during October of 1992) and the simultaneous publication of an elegant, scholarly volume of Mr Gould’s correspondence has confirmed, as Edward Rothstein has noted, the presence of an academic industry being built around the Man, the Musician, and his Mind.⁶ But I would argue that the field of “Gould Studies” has been successful so far in stimulating perspectives mostly from semiotic-



Glenn Gould at the piano

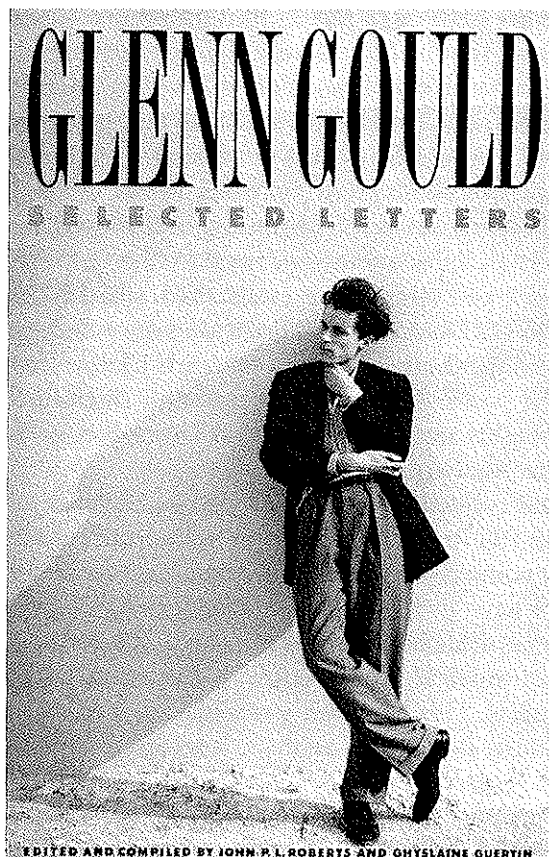
cians, music critics, audiophiles, and generalists. I would propose here that a more profound musicological and analytical agenda be advanced.

Mr Gould's recordings are not only analyzable within the traditional parameters of musical performance practice, as I have suggested above; they are in themselves analyses of the music, and thus sources that are open to analytical discourse, challenge, and, above all, musical criticism. While the devotees would argue once again about the futility of institutionalizing Mr Gould's methods within pre-established lines of musical inquiry, his voluminous output of recordings, writings, and broadcasts would appear to be legitimate sources for the "contemplation of a serious matter," to borrow a line from Charles Ives. Moreover, this would seem to be the only credible approach that

could test Mr Gould's many analyses of music, from the Renaissance to Schoenberg, in a manner that he himself would have encouraged. If his recordings truly were constructed (and constructed they were!) not as simple entertainment, but as aesthetic and analytical glimpses of a mind at work, should they not be treated as an analysis and reconciled with his written output about music? In other words, the performance "problems" I pointed out at the beginning of this essay are perfectly legitimate concerns. Subsequently, we need to find out what Mr Gould was trying to do, and once that is established, whether he was successful. Finally, do Mr Gould's musicological essays stand up to critical scrutiny? Knowing whether they do (though I know that some do not) ought to be preferable, within an academic discipline, to accepting his often weighty statements simply at face value, or as products of deconstructive analysis.

The recently-published collection of selected correspondence of Mr Gould, edited by John P.L. Roberts and Ghyslaine Guertin, is a fascinating and beautifully compiled volume that permits more of the kind of analytical work I have proposed above. The letters confirm that Mr Gould's primary musical concern, and the one that influences his entire conception of musical architecture, is the question of organicity, or thematic unity. This has been a traditional, if perhaps now outdated, issue in music theory and analysis. It received its most comprehensive study in Rudolf R eti's *The Thematic Process in Music* (1951), in which the principles of thematic unity and cohesion were investigated in dozens of musical works. The point is that the study of organic unity is so typical of the music analyst; it characterizes the work not only of R eti, but of Hans Keller, Deryck Cooke, and of course Heinrich Schenker.⁷ The music closest to Mr Gould was that which demonstrated ultra-cohesion through motivic and thematic unity, and his recordings were dedicated to revealing this "truth." In his quest to demonstrate the organic nature of music in his own analytical manner, Mr Gould's recordings literally became his own analyses of the music. The repertoire he played was chosen on the basis of the cohesive integrity of the thematic relationships, and in his performances of these works, everything – phrasing, dynamics, and most importantly tempo – was subsidiary to this unity:

the Brahms D Minor [concerto] has tended to become notable less for organic unity than for a coalition of inequalities. It seems to me that, particularly in the outer movements, it is imperative to find



tempi which, as much as possible, will support the inter-related thematic strands of the work, minimizing the sheer masculine-feminine contrasts of themes in order to stress the organic connection between them. (17 April 1962 *Glenn Gould: Selected Letters* 56)

It will come as no surprise to learn that Mr Gould's most controversial performances were attempts in which tempo, rhythm, and phrasing were manipulated beyond levels of convention, in the service of demonstrating the thematic unity of a given piece.

Mr Gould's intense study of composers such as Bach and Schoenberg can also be interpreted as an homage to the principle of

thematic cohesion, so evident in the work of both. This would also apply to Mr Gould's recording of works by the Elizabethan composer William Byrd, about whose music Oliver Neighbour (a Schoenberg scholar) has written a superb study showing the derivative nature of themes in Byrd's instrumental music and their thematic transformation.⁸

If Mr Gould was naturally drawn to music that was "organic" in construction, it is puzzling to read of his difficulty in coming to grips with the Beethoven sonata that is the most unified thematically, and most rigorously structured in terms of organic unity: the "Hammerklavier" Sonata, Op. 106. For Mr Gould it was the "longest, most inconsiderate, and probably least rewarding piece that Beethoven wrote for the piano" (*Glenn Gould: Selected Letters* 144-5). But it contains all of the ingredients that Mr Gould likes: there is a fugue in the development of the first movement, and a gargantuan one at the end; the entire first movement, moreover, is entirely structured on a sequence of thirds, beginning melodically with the opening bar and extending even to the harmonic relationship between the first key area (B-flat) and the secondary material in G.⁹ It would seem to be the most appropriate performance vehicle for Mr Gould, though it has never been a very friendly piece to pianists.

Whether Glenn Gould is actually successful at revealing the organic unity of a piece is an issue of much debate. When one is confronted with tempos as in Examples One and Three above, it is of little solace to learn that this was done in the service of revealing thematic unity. One must conclude that in these two pieces at least, we still don't get it: the organic relationships are obscured on every level by the unorthodox tempos, even if the pieces occasionally "work" or "hang together."

I HAVE ARGUED here that an approach that might very well uncover layers of musical meaning in Mr Gould's playing is to be found through interpreting these works in an historical fashion and through analysis. We can only speculate as to whether it would have made a difference to Mr Gould's (or our) conception of Beethoven's Op. 27 had he (or we) known that the work appears in the same sketchbook as some of the earliest drafts for the *Eroica* Symphony – perhaps the

model study for the examination of organic unity and thematic growth – as well as the complete sketches for *The Creatures of Prometheus*, which also uses the *Eroica* theme.¹⁰ Clearly, the composition of Op. 27 was conceived at a time when Beethoven was deeply exploring such relationships, ones that were already present in the first movement of the Second Symphony, which was finished a year after the sonata. In short, providing the same amount of context – historical and stylistic – for Gould’s recordings of music composed before 1850 as he himself provides for his recordings of Schoenberg and Hindemith would appear to be the most appropriate method of analysis. Moreover, careful scrutiny must be given not only to what Gould intended to do but to what he actually did, which can be safely approached through analysis. Ultimately, we will come to the understanding that Gould’s recordings cannot simply be interpreted through the semiotic notion of the “open score,”¹¹ but must be examined through the strength of the connection between the intent and his result. This means that in many cases Mr Gould will have failed in his analysis (i.e. recording): the venerable *Andante grazioso* prevails. But it will also show the many sparkling successes of his approach, as in his 1973 recording and commentary (i.e. analysis) of the three sonatas by Paul Hindemith.

Notes

- 1 A classic analysis is found in Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance*, New York: 1968, 11-31, esp. 28-31.
- 2 See “Of Mozart and Related Matters: Glenn Gould in Conversation with Bruno Monsaingeon,” in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, Tim Page (ed.), Toronto: 1976, 32-42.
- 3 See Paul Badura-Skoda, “A tie is a tie is a tie: Reflections on Beethoven’s pairs of tied notes,” *Early Music*, 16, 1988 84.
- 4 The phrase is borrowed from George Steiner’s immensely profound *Real Presences*, Chicago: 1989, to which some of this essay is indebted.
- 5 “I have, to be sure, gone on record many times as stating my preference for those sessions to which one can bring an almost dangerous degree of improvisatory open-mindedness – that is to say, sessions in relation to which one has no absolute a priori, interpretive commitment and in which the process of recording will make itself felt in regard to the concept which evolves” (17 June 1972). *Glenn Gould: Selected Letters*, John P. L. Roberts and Ghyslaine Guertin (eds.), Oxford: 1992, 178.
- 6 See Edward Rothstein, “Confessions of a Gould Devotee,” *New York Times*, 4 October 1992, H27.
- 7 On these and other music analysts, see Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, Cambridge, MA: 1985, 60-112.
- 8 Oliver Neighbour, *The Consort and Keyboard Music of William Byrd*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1978.

- 9 The fact that the secondary material appears in VI rather than V is also something Mr Gould would have liked, given his criticisms of sonata form as entirely predictable with regard to tonal progressions. See "Of Mozart and Related Matters," 38.
- 10 See Douglas Johnson, Alan Tyson, and Robert Winter, *The Beethoven Sketchbooks*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: 1985, 105-12; also Lewis Lockwood, "Beethoven's Earliest Sketches for the Eroica Symphony," *Musical Quarterly* 67 1981, 457-78.
- 11 Jean-Jacques Nattiez's brilliant work on this subject is the most comprehensive investigation of how this applies to music. See *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*, Carolyn Abbate (transl.) (Princeton 1990), esp. 82-7.

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