

Partita pour Glenn Gould: Musique et forme de vie. By Georges Leroux. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2007. 331 p. ISBN 978-2-7606-2061-2 27,95 \$

To what extent are life and art intertwined? Does the dedication to art require a withdrawal from life? Would a life lived fully in art constitute a withdrawal or actually provide access to the essence of life and the achievement of liberty and independence? What is the role of the artist in society? If one knew nothing of Gould, was unaware of his aesthetics, possessed no images of him in performance, would we appreciate his performances to the same extent? Given Gould's conventional and traditional training and upbringing, what was the source of his remarkable freedom of interpretation?

These are among the many questions that Georges Leroux poses in *Partita pour Glenn Gould*. He pursues the answers through personal reactions and meditations. This is not a traditional biography. Leroux admits freely that "Gould biographers, theorists, and critics will no doubt discover nothing new here" (20) and expresses his debt to them. He is clearly familiar with the conventional Gould materials (biographies, films, recordings, interviews, writings) but adds little in the way of new scholarly research. The brief bibliography is "limited to the essentials" (321) but fortunately preceded by a detailed evaluation of the materials Leroux found helpful in understanding Gould's life and thoughts. Although Leroux acknowledges the sources of direct quotations in the text, he does so casually without indicating page numbers or publication details. Leroux discusses aspects of Gould's biography, but mostly assumes that the reader is already familiar with Gould's recordings and the basic details of his life and career. Still, Leroux has no intention of presenting a portrait of Gould: he is concerned with Gould as an artist and attempts "to read his art in his life" (20). The result is a personal and philosophical "ensemble of perspectives concerning an artist who has never ceased to accompany me" (23) that allows Leroux to demonstrate the ways in which the form of Gould's life became the condition of his art. "All of [Gould's] life was in his art", writes Leroux, "and all of his art was in his life" (12).

Leroux presents his reflections in the form of a seven-movement partita in which the chapters correspond to specific movements, indicated as chapter headings, from J.S. Bach's *Partitas*. Each chapter is thus "intimately connected in expression and style" (28) to the corresponding movement. It is a clever device that allows Leroux to acknowledge the importance of Bach and the *Partitas* for Gould, to address specific topics concerning Gould's career, and to incorporate into his observations "the rigour of the suite and the possibility of fantasy" (27).

Chapter 1, "Toccate," addresses the concept of authenticity and the exterior difficulties faced by a performing musician. For Gould, this led to his decision to withdraw from

public performances, a decision that was as radical as it was liberating. “Allemande” treats the question of genius and Gould’s constant pursuit of perfection. Leroux further tries to understand the ways Gould’s originality emerged from a background that was so fully conventional. “Courante” is a reflection on Gould’s playing and acknowledges the essential role of the body in performance. Leroux focuses on Gould’s hands, arms and shoulders to discuss the physical distance Gould kept from others and the distress he felt at his inability to control fully his own body. In “Air” and “Sarabande,” Leroux discusses Gould’s reading interests outside of music—specifically Natsume Sōseki and Georges Santayana—to indicate how these reveal Gould’s interior thoughts. “Sinfonia” looks at Gould’s fascination with solitude and the significance of the *Solitude Trilogy*. For Gould, the isolation and solitude of the north provided a model for a balance between the nostalgia of community and the place of the individual in modern society. In “Scherzo,” Leroux returns to Gould’s retreat from public life and interprets it as a joyous decision rather than the result of trauma or disease. Finally, in “Gigue,” Leroux envisions Gould’s world as gleaned from the materials of his dreams, his solitude and isolation, and his fascination with Petula Clark.

Leroux focuses on Gould’s life as an artist and the role of the artist in society to build upon existing literature. Indeed, the factual details of Gould’s life and career have been covered thoroughly by several previous Gould biographers, including Geoffrey Payzant (1978), Otto Friedrich (1989), Peter Ostwald (1997), and Kevin Bazzana (2003). By taking a different approach that considers philosophical questions, Leroux adds a relevant title to the growing, and in some ways crowded, body of Gould scholarship. Still, one is struck by the extent to which Leroux celebrates Gould’s eccentricities and individuality. The form of Gould’s life was unusual by any standard. Although the conditions of his life undoubtedly contributed to his artistry, it is difficult to see his choices as a model for other artists. Are solitude, isolation, and withdrawal really necessary conditions for artistry? Are there no artists who have not taken this path? Leroux is also quick to dismiss more mundane alternatives that account for Gould’s choices and behaviours. Noting that Ostwald, among others, has suggested Asperger’s syndrome as a possible explanation for Gould’s fear of certain objects, lack of empathy, exaggerated isolation, and general obsession with control and rites, Leroux admits that “I am not really interested in designating a medical condition for what I see as a radical choice that both separates and protects” (63). *Partita pour Glenn Gould* adds a new layer to our understanding of Gould, but it also reveals much about our continued and growing fascination with this remarkable individual.

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