

The Idea of Gould. Edited by Rhona Bergman. Philadelphia: Lev Publishing, 1999. iv, 226 p., ill. ISBN 0-9673367-0-8. \$16 US or \$24 CN. Available in Canada at Atelier Grigorian, 70 Yorkville Rd., Toronto ON M4R 1B9 Tel: (416)922-6477 www.grigorian.com

The Art of Glenn Gould: Reflections of a Musical Genius. Compiled and edited by John P. L. Roberts. Toronto: Malcolm Lester Books, 1999. 400 p., ill. \$26.95 ISBN I-894121-28-7

For the legions of Glenn Gould fans, 1999 was a big year. Not only did Sony Classical and CBC Records produce still more retrospective Gould CDs, but there was a five-day international conference in Toronto which focused on the Canadian pianist's life and career, culminating in the awarding of the fifth Glenn Gould Prize in Music and Communications to the cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. In addition, the body of literature about Gould grew with two English-language additions: a self-published book by Rhona Bergman featuring transcribed interviews with 16 people who knew Gould, and a selection of Gould's own interviews and texts compiled and edited by John Roberts.

The Idea of Gould represents a personal voyage of discovery for its editor, a Philadelphia nurse who writes that her life was changed by listening to Gould's recordings of Bach's *Partitas* and the *Goldberg Variations*. Never having had the chance to meet him or see him perform "live," she set out to learn about him from various people who had had personal contact with him. The interviews published in this book are a tangible result of her quest.

While Bergman's epiphany as a result of exposure to Gould's artistry may seem

naïve to some, hers was not an isolated reaction. Others have said and written essentially the same thing. Visitors came in their thousands to the major exhibition drawn from the National Library of Canada's Glenn Gould Archive, which toured the country and travelled as far afield as Japan in the early 1990s. Many who saw the exhibition voiced sentiments similar to Bergman's: that Gould's performances of Bach had touched them as no other music or musician ever had.

In every venue, no matter how large or small, how dimly or brightly illuminated, that exhibition of Gouldiana, with its background soundtrack of Gould speaking and performing, produced a hushed, respectful mood, with visitors daring only to whisper if they spoke at all, as if they were in church. Such was the awe he inspired and the special place this genial eccentric occupied in people's hearts. Some spoke of their visit to the exhibition helping them to achieve a sense of closure because Gould's untimely death, just days after his 50th birthday in 1982, had caused them to grieve, deeply saddened that they and the world were robbed too soon of his rare genius.

Rhona Bergman's mission has been one of discovery rather than closure. As a

resident of the U.S., she was unable to share the Canadian experience of seeing Gould periodically on television or hearing his frequent radio broadcasts. She has known about him only since 1994, through hearing his discs and seeing 32 *Short Films About Glenn Gould*. So, apart from fulfilling her own personal need to “find” Gould, has her book accomplished anything of value to others? In my judgement, the answer is yes.

The Idea of Gould contains a great deal of information which will enrich our understanding of Glenn Gould the prodigy, the enigma, the oddball who wore overcoats in summer, who quit giving public concerts only nine years into a major international career, and who eventually communicated with even his closest acquaintances only by telephone. By and large, these are reminiscences that have never been in print before, though some of the personalities presented in the book have already been much quoted on the subject of Gould: these include the journalist Robert Fulford, Gould’s boyhood neighbour; the music critic Tim Page; Don Hunstein, the Columbia Records photographer; Robert Silverman, the former editor of *Piano Quarterly*, who published many articles by Gould; and Bruno Monsaingeon, who featured Gould in several of his *Les Chemins de la musique* films, and who has also published four books of his own translations of the pianist’s writings.

Fulford reports that “it was not unusual to see [Gould] walking home [from school]...singing and waving his arms about, conducting an invisible

orchestra.” Evidently, the pianist’s mannerisms of humming and conducting in response to music he was playing or hearing, which later drew barbed comments in the press, existed even in childhood, which suggests that they were not “platform antics,” as his own teacher and others contended. Fulford also informs us that “to [Gould], music was like architecture...he thought that very early in his career.” The artist’s eventual fame resulted to a substantial degree from his structural elucidations of the works he played, an “Apollonian” sensibility that contrasted dramatically with the “Dionysian” approach of the “grand tradition” of piano playing. Again, this was an ability he appears to have been born with, not an approach he cultivated just to be different.

The composer and pianist, Ruth Watson Henderson, who was in Alberto Guerrero’s studio at the Toronto Conservatory during the same years as Gould, describes him as a serious boy possessed of an unusual degree of self-confidence for someone so young, and an uproarious sense of humour. He would engage in prolonged debates with the teacher over interpretive issues but would also mimic Guerrero at the piano to devastating effect, reducing group classes to helpless laughter. Henderson speaks of Gould as “a little old man” who was “unlike any teenager I can ever remember. He never entered into any sports or social activities..., never went to any parties...” His serious and solitary nature, which occasioned much commentary later in his life, apparently also manifested itself in childhood.

In his mature years, Gould tended to give minimal credit to Guerrero, claiming that he was largely self-taught. He also insisted that he spent much less time practicing at the keyboard than studying scores away from it. With the following statement, Ray Dudley, another former Guerrero student, puts both these claims into doubt: "Glenn told me it took him 32 hours to tap out each variation of the Goldbergs prior to recording them the first time." Dudley is referring here to a slow exercise where the fingers of one hand are superimposed on the fingers of the other, tapping their way through a piece of music at the keyboard. This was a technique adapted to the piano by none other than Alberto Guerrero, and which, according to its practitioners, gives great clarity to rapid passagework, one of the most noteworthy aspects of Gould's almost miraculous dexterity at the keyboard.

Paul Myers, a producer for Columbia Records, talks of Gould's love of animals (he eventually left half his estate to the Toronto Humane Society), his hypochondria (which caused him to cancel many concerts during his brief touring career), his delight in polemics, and his ascetic nature ("He did not care what he ate, he lived from one year to the next in the same clothes...[and] he surrounded himself with severe, utilitarian furniture in rooms that were decorated with very ordinary pictures"). Myers also mentions Gould's "old-world *politesse*," a recurring theme in the book. For example, Judith Pearlman, the PBS producer who adapted *The Idea of North*, Gould's first "contrapuntal radio" program, to television, says he was "like an 18th-

century gentleman—he used to call me 'Madame.'"

Gould's affinity for contrapuntal music and radio is probably traceable to his unusual ability, as reported by Lorne Tulk, an audio technician who assisted Gould on numerous CBC projects, to "hear several conversations at once...in a restaurant, and...make sense of them...." From Verne Edquist, Gould's long-time piano technician, we learn that he preferred a nocturnal schedule because "daylight depressed him," a dramatically different reason than fear of the dark, as suggested recently by a Toronto psychiatrist.

Beyond its obvious strengths, *The Idea of Gould* is a rather quirky book which never lets the reader lose sight of Bergman's personal stake in the project. For instance, most of the interviews contain asides by the editor, some of them substantial, as in her disquisition on Joseph Campbell and his exhortation to "follow your bliss" in her interview with me about my experience as First Clarinetist of the ensemble which recorded Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* under Gould's direction in 1982.

Besides a "Prelude" and "Postlude," both of which give autobiographical details of Bergman's journey of discovery, interspersed among the interviews are brief mood pieces ("Spring," "Summer," etc.) revealing her profound response to Gould and the religious and mystical resonances she associates with his artistry. There are footnotes and a list of related readings, but no index of names and titles

found in the interviews, something that would have enhanced the book's value to researchers. Some photographs of Bergman and photos by her of some of the interviewees and of Gould-related objects (e.g., the Steinway piano now at the National Library in Ottawa, and the battered chair he sat on to play) are also included.

While the editor's overwhelming reverence for her subject might be a turn-off to some readers, this book will undoubtedly speak to those who, like Bergman, have experienced emotional or spiritual awakenings while listening to the recordings of a musician who strove via his discs "to make music in a more direct, more personal manner than any concert hall would ever permit." For the rest, its wealth of new anecdotal evidence on aspects of Gould's life and career will be reward enough.

The Art of Glenn Gould: Reflections of a Musical Genius, compiled and edited by John P. L. Roberts, a former CBC producer and administrator, is a more mainstream book containing a selection of texts either written by Gould or reproduced from broadcast or published interviews he gave. The main title is recycled from a CBC series Roberts himself created as the CBC's head of radio music in the 1960s.

Gould's own texts in the book include various scripts he developed for CBC radio and television, as well as liner notes from discs, concert program notes, texts for pre-concert talks, and formal lectures. Most of these are presented in groupings

such as "Composers: From Orlando Gibbons to Aulis Sallinen," "Ideas and Themes," "Music from Bach to Schoenberg," and so on. These texts present different aspects of Gould, from the unabashedly laudatory younger colleague of Krips and Richter, and the fervent proselytizer for Bach, to the unapologetic, one-time-only collaborator with the Juilliard String Quartet ("We weren't speaking to each other by the time the sessions came to an end..."), and blunt critic of Beethoven, whose *Hammerklavier Sonata*, according to Gould, was "the least grateful work pianistically that Beethoven ever concocted."

Of equal, if not greater, interest to the selection of previously unpublished or long out-of-print writings by Gould in this volume are eight interviews with the pianist, ranging from brief to lengthy, conducted by journalists and broadcasters during the periods 1959-64 and 1980-81. No explanation is given for the lack of interview coverage from the intervening years.

As a Gould scholar, I was fascinated to read the following from an interview of the pianist originally published in the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1959: "I hated to hear anyone play and use the pedals very much. I thought that was a vulgar thing to do. I was never told it was...but I discovered a very early dislike for the pedal...." It seems Gould may have been genetically predisposed to the lean, clear sonority, lacking any tell-tale sonic aura from the sustaining pedal, which became his trademark piano sound.

Regarding his unusual flat-fingered technique, which involved little arm or wrist action and greater flexing of the knuckle closest to tip of each finger than is normal with most pianists, we discover in a California radio interview from 1959 that "...the tactile sensation of playing the organ...gave [Gould] an approach to Bach on the piano..." He elaborated on that subject in an interview on CBC radio the following year: "I learned that when you play Bach [on the organ], the only way to establish a phrase, a subject, a motive of any kind, was not to do as one would do with Chopin—to make a dynamic crescendo or diminuendo in the middle of the thing—but to establish it by rhythmic gasps and breaths.... Something that was based, really, on the tips of the fingers doing the whole action for you....[T]his was entirely due to the fact that I was trained on the organ." So, the celebrated technique that some fan letters likened to "caressing the piano," and his decidedly unromantic approach to Bach, both owed something to his boyhood organ lessons with Frederick Silvester at the Toronto Conservatory. Self-taught, indeed.

With respect to his practice regimen, Gould was, not surprisingly, outspoken on various occasions. From an interview published in the U.S. in 1980: "...the business of sitting down and spending sixteen hours a day slaving away at the piano doing scales or something is absolute nonsense...." And from another published in Britain in 1981: "...I almost never practice and only do so when a film or recording session is coming close.... The actual practicing goes on in my head, all the time." While Gould's visual and

eidetic (or muscular) memory were extraordinary, and his practice routines no doubt evolved during his life, we saw already in the Bergman book that he spent hours tapping out the *Goldberg Variations* prior to recording them in 1955. His pianist colleague Gary Graffman insisted, in the Otto Friedrich biography *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989), that the Canadian was "practicing a lot" at Steinway headquarters in Berlin in May 1957, between Gould's triumphant Russian tour and his equally successful debut with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. The truth behind Gould's pronouncements on this subject probably falls somewhere between the extremes of no practicing and 16 hours a day.

There are abundant other finds in the interviews reproduced in this volume. It is a well documented and annotated book, and includes a useful index to the names and titles appearing in the texts. Mercifully, Roberts has opted to present all texts without the pervasive spelling errors which are so off-putting to read in *Glenn Gould: Selected Letters* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), the volume of correspondence that Roberts co-edited with Ghyslaine Guertin. Such errors were left in that book in a misguided effort to "give readers a more direct experience of Glenn's letters," as the editors put it, although Roberts admits in his preface to *The Art of Glenn Gould*: "These anomalies were largely the result of Gould's habit of dictating his written work to stenographers over the phone, and because he was always in a hurry[,] he

frequently did not devote much time and effort to proofreading.” Reproducing Gould’s texts “as is” in the earlier book also did not make allowances for typists’ errors or for letters mailed without being reviewed or signed by Gould himself. In any event, it was with no small measure of relief that I discovered Roberts had abandoned that policy for the present book. Quite simply, it would have done great damage to the book’s readability.

Both *The Art of Glenn Gould* and *The Idea of Gould* are worthy additions to the literature, particularly because they have

gathered and presented so much information for the first time. Our knowledge of the boy and the man has expanded with their publication, and that will help us gain a fuller understanding of factors that influenced his artistic and aesthetic decisions.

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