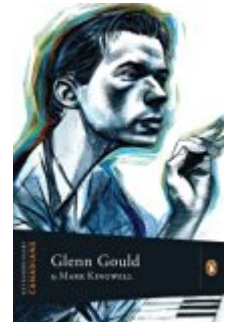


Mark Kingwell. *Glenn Gould.* Extraordinary Canadians Series. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009. xii + 237 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-670-06850-0.



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This will be a positive review. I mention this fact from the outset because Mark Kingwell often has a devil of a time with the details in *Glenn Gould*, even as he captures the spirit of the quixotic pianist. In spite of several gaffes, the book, written for Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians biography series, is clearly a valuable and original addition to the mass of writings about Gould. Readability and exposure are the twin aims for the slim volumes in this series and Kingwell, an unlikely Gould expert, provides both. Despite his academic background, he knows how to write for a general audience.

Gould died in 1982 at the age of fifty, at a time when Kingwell's taste "ran more to the Clash and Elvis Costello than to Bach or Beethoven" (p. 4). He had become famous as a classical pianist back when Canada generally regarded itself as a cultural backwater. His professional career was beginning at about the same time the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (better known as the "Massey Commission") released its 1951 report on the dire state

of the arts in Canada. That Canada managed to publish just fourteen books in 1948 quantifies what many Canadians intuitively felt. Tamas Dobozy's 2006 short story "The Inert Landscapes of György Ferenc" captures the spirit of the time, albeit through European eyes: "Glenn Gould's fame,... my father was certain, derived entirely from the fact that he was Canadian, because Canada just didn't have many good artists and so had to elevate to cultural prominence the few mediocrities it produced (in Hungary, he insisted, players of Gould's calibre were 'to be found on every street corner')." [1]

The ludicrous judgment uttered by the Hungarian artist is precisely what Canadians feared, and it took recognition from below the 49th parallel and Europe to prove to us that the strange young pianist from Toronto was truly special. Gould was soon transformed into High Cultural Icon, spouting unusual and provocative theories about Mozart's weaknesses as a composer, or Beethoven's weak middle years. Especially after he began to produce radio documentaries for the

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Gould began to play down his main vocation, regarding himself as a "writer and broadcaster who happens to play the piano in his spare time." [2] But without his genius at the keyboard, no one would have heard of Gould the writer or broadcaster (and even today relatively few outside of Canada know of these other pursuits).

Kingwell does not give short shrift to the lesser-known aspects of Gould in this study. Unlike most biographers, he zeroes in on Gould the writer and raconteur, and he avoids both the generally mundane details of the reclusive pianist's life and anecdotes about his strange behavior. Those unfamiliar with Gould's life, his genius, and his weird and wonderful ways should look elsewhere for the bare facts and gossip (for quality of prose, Otto Friedrich's 1990 *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* is unsurpassed; and Kevin Bazzana's 2005 *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* seems the more complete). Kingwell is not attempting to add biographical detail to the most-catalogued life in modern classical music. He states as much in the first chapter and writes, somewhat cryptically, in the acknowledgments, "I have tried to create a vision of [Gould's] thought suitable to the contradictions and complicated pleasures of the post-historical world" (p. 225). In this, the meandering philosophical study has succeeded.

Kingwell does not start with the music. Chapter 1 begins with Gould the talker--"The voice: it is face, precise, self-satisfied, a little pompous" (p. 1). From the outset we can see that this book will be different. Of the twenty-one short chapters, only "Aria" and "Quodlibet" bear obviously musical titles; this is fitting for a book that is a potpourri of philosophical musings on the theme of Gould. There is little focus on the music itself, and almost no interpretation of or critical comment on Gould's zany studio recordings of Mozart's sonatas, or his habit of departing from the letter of the music.

To put it mildly, Kingwell is not out to impress anyone with his musical insights--"Other biographies have tried to explain Gould's personal eccentricities in terms of his music, or vice versa" (p. 18); not this one. Kingwell instead decides to put his philosophical mind to use analyzing topics like "Silence," "Memory," "Communication," and "Art." How these pertain to Gould is not always evident. When Kingwell offers his stimulating thoughts on "Silence," it seems misguided for a pianist who produced over eighty records (he was no reticent Radu Lupu in this regard), for it was Gould's lack of silence that prompted Geoffrey Payzant to label a chapter "Talking Nonsense on Anything Anywhere" in his study *Glenn Gould: Music & Mind* (1978). In Gould's case, a refusal to give live concerts and a love of solitude did not equal taciturn ways.

There are indulgences, such as when Kingwell duly notes a synchronicity: "my own birthday, incidentally, and not far off on the year (1963)" (p. 202). This is also the first Gould biography to comment on the "justly forgotten *Saturday Night Live* sketches about a store that sells only Scottish items" (p. 222). At the same time, for those familiar with Kingwell's excellent pieces on fishing, his restraint in objectively noting Gould's visceral dislike of the sport is admirable. Similarly, I noticed no reproduction of Kingwell's *Walrus* and *Queen's Quarterly* articles even as he worked the pet topics of "Play" and "Architecture" into chapter headings.

Glenn Gould is a philosophical roller coaster, and Kingwell makes fleeting references to, among others, Slavoj Žižek, Pierre Bourdieu, Arthur Danto, Johan Huizinga, and Kant, inviting (demanding?) the reader to go beyond the usual ways of listening to Gould's life. Some of the strongest passages occur when Kingwell unpacks or closely examines Gould's often tortured prose and occasionally contradictory lines of thought. Here Kingwell considers a particularly knotted sentence from Gould's 1966 essay "The Prospects of Recording":

"One might see at its end a Nietzschean injunction to make one's life a work of art. Or it might be offered as a sort of aesthetic theodicy, with the deliberate echo of Wolff and Leibniz at the beginning" (pp. 172-173). Rather heady stuff for a popular biography.

Kingwell is more leisurely, even pedantic, when explaining things musical. This carefulness is puzzling in a book that will attract more music-savvy individuals than philosophers. Some of the lines read like encyclopaedia entries, and sound borrowed and stilted against Kingwell's usually delightful and free-flowing prose. For example, he takes a fair amount of time explaining that Alfred Deller, the "counter-tenor who died in 1979," had formed a consort named after him. Not surprisingly, the Deller Consort focused on "the many [Renaissance vocal music] pieces featuring that ethereal male range equivalent to contralto, mezzo-soprano, or soprano" (p. 191). What counter-tenor would give the bass the limelight at his own party?

Some traditional ambiguities and half-truths in the Gould literature are perpetuated. Kingwell emphasizes the exhaustion-fueled decline in Gould's playing that occurred in the late 1950s: "For when Gould ventured out on November 15 for a concert in Florence, he was booed for the first time in his professional life after playing a Schoenberg Suite" (p. 72). This does not jive with the universally positive reviews of the concert, which mention explicitly that the few hisses were aimed at Schoenberg, not Gould.[3] In a sloppier instance, Kingwell sexes up the murky facts of lineage while misspelling Gould's mother's name: "née Grieg [sic]—she was a distant cousin of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg" (p. 20). This differs greatly from Otto Friedrich's version of the family legend: "Florence Greig ... was proud to claim a dim connection to Edvard Grieg." [4] Kevin Bazzana, another source Kingwell praises, is equally cautious as he quotes Gould's claim that

the composer "was a cousin of my maternal great-grandfather." [5]

There are a few musical howlers that managed to slip by the copyeditors, common knowledge, and commonsense. We learn that young Gould "'made his professional debut' in 1947, performing all four [sic] movements of Beethoven's concerto no. 4" (p. 49). As in virtually every other mainstay piano concerto, there are only three movements in that piece. This could be a harmless typo, but when it is coupled with other errors, one begins to doubt whether Bach and Beethoven ever did find space alongside the Clash and the other Elvis in Kingwell's collection. Kingwell also writes that Gould ignored many repeats in his famous 1955 recording of Bach's "Goldberg Variations," and then observes that Angela Hewitt's recording of the work "is almost a half-hour longer than Gould's 1981 version—that is, the slow" one (pp. 199-200). Slow tempi are one thing, but *half an hour*? This is primarily because Hewitt plays all of the repeats. Her recording is longer primarily because she is playing more music, so to speak.

Kingwell wisely plays down Gould's eccentricities (they have been related before and ad nauseam), but he grandly misrelates one at least twice. He writes of Gould's "pre-recital ritual handsoaks in ice water," and, elsewhere, "he admitted he had soaked his hands in ice water before [a voice] recording, just as he did before performing on the piano" (pp. 14, 177). Warming up to the extreme, Gould was known for soaking his hands in near-boiling water, as well as for walking around the recording studio in gloves. Anyone who has ever tried to zip up with frozen fingers will realize that playing piano with frigid digits is a bad idea, even for geniuses.

In criticizing Gould's string quartet (opus 1), Kingwell opines: "It was ... composed in a classical style that, in the year of its origin (1953), any ardent advocate of twelve-tone avant-gardism such as Gould should have abhorred" (p. 46). Regard-

less of the composition's quality, this "should have abhorred" is off the mark apropos Gould, who regularly praised *Zeitgeist*-defying composers like Richard Strauss. Strauss, wrote Gould, "makes richer his own time by not being of it [and] speaks for all generations by being of none." [6]

There is another curious omission, even if it is more of the *Treppenwitz* variety. In his insightful discussion of progress in the light of Gould's love of technology, Kingwell refers to "the most haunting example, the reduction of performance to mechanical speed and technique: the robot player" (p. 165). A page later he writes that Gould's playing "was technically outstanding but never mechanical—even the blistering 1955 *Goldberg Variations* was a marvel of expressive thought in action" (p. 166). Why Kingwell did not mention Zenph Studio's 2006 rerecording—by a robot!—of the 1955 version at the CBC's Glenn Gould Studio is a mystery. Gould the technology lover would surely have been tickled, though Gould the notorious control freak might have had concerns.

Late in the book, Kingwell asks: "How did a performer of other people's music, however brilliant,... achieve a status of almost mythic dimensions?" (p. 187). Why does he attract the "busloads of Japanese pilgrims, the academic conferences, ... the coffee-table books, films, commemorative stamps, devotional tattoos"? (p. 187). By this point, given Kingwell's wide-ranging discussions and overt rejection of linear narrative and its implicit causality, we do not expect an answer—"we must not over-estimate our ability to explain, even as we seek illumination of the life lived" (p. 189). To my mind, the strongest part of this book is Kingwell's willingness to let some things remain unsolved, including genius. In the end, he, like other Gould commentators, opts for wonder: "There is, I think, no better word for the exhilarating, demanding, and self-justifying experience of encountering a Glenn Gould interpretation" (p. 194). This is refreshingly honest from a popular philosopher.

In the chapter "Genius," Kingwell introduces and half-mocks current theories on "the Great Names" in the history of art: "In popular sociological texts of our own day, the exceptional is made ordinary, success analyzed in order to demystify it and make us all feel better" (p. 51). He defines his slippery terms, scoops out conveniently appropriate definitions, and pronounces Gould a genius. The label is confirmed, but no pat answers are offered for why; simple answers would break the spell. Coffee table books and gushing films have arrived at the same conclusion, but never with such nuance and intelligence.

The most enjoyable, focused, and funniest chapter is "Illness," which dismisses the post-mortem diagnosis that Gould had Asperger syndrome. (Trendy analytical trends of the past included the belief that Gould was gay, which did even less to explain his gifts or bizarre ways.) Kingwell begins bluntly: "It is not possible, now, to confirm the suspicion that Gould had Asperger syndrome" (p. 105). He cites scientific and popular Asperger celebrity lists that include everyone from Steven Spielberg to Woody Allen, from Mozart to Mahler, and asks, "What self-respecting creative person could resist having at least one or two symptoms to get them onto that list?" (p. 107). Such massive lists are invalidated by their all-inclusiveness. More important, Kingwell asks, "Even supposing Gould did have Asperger syndrome, what difference can it make?" (p. 106). What remains is wonder.

Canadian contralto Maureen Forrester stated that Gould could be extremely "corny," and no serious biographical consideration of Gould has applauded his humor. To my knowledge, however, Kingwell is the first critic to expose at length the horrible humor for the criminal act it usually was. Hermetic Gould was also a ham, one who often found his audience on the other side of a telephone line or via the airwaves. Gould was forever on the CBC putting on silly costumes and unfunny German and Oxbridge accents. If he were not

Gould, and if he were not in Canada at the right time, it is inconceivable that such antics would have been allowed. His "belaboured humour ... is best left at the dinner table, if anywhere. Unfortunately, Gould lacked such a mundane outlet even as he had access to more public ones," like the CBC and industry magazines, such as *High Fidelity* (p. 182).

Glenn Gould is really an addendum to the fine biographies already out there, and its short, friendly chapters invite revisiting. Very often one feels that the book is more about Kingwell than about Gould, which makes it perfectly appropriate, perfectly Gouldian; Gould's personality and interpretations also tended to overshadow Bach and Beethoven's written notes. The web of philosophical ideas Kingwell spins from Gould's thought sometimes seems farfetched—such as when he cites writers Gould did not and could not have known—but he makes Gould relevant to today. He turns Gould into a text that is a point of departure for other, greater intellectual discoveries.

Notes

[1]. Tamas Dobozy, "The Inert Landscapes of György Ferenc," in *Last Notes and Other Stories* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006), 122.

[2]. Bruno Monsaingeon, "Introduction to *The Last Puritain*," <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/glenn Gould/028010-502.15-e.html>. Monsaingeon, who translated Gould's writings into French, considered Gould a fabulous writer—unlike every other biographer or Gould scholar.

[3]. I thank Damjana Bratuž for her help with the "Italian Gould," including her thoughts on literal and cultural mistranslations that may account for past biographical confusion. For one of the rare instances of Anglophone Gould scholarship that considers reception in a language other than English, see http://www.damjanabratuz.ca/essays/gould/gould_presence.htm.

[4]. Otto Friedrich, *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1990), 13.

[5]. Kevin Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30.

[6]. Quoted in Edward Said, "The Music Itself: Glenn Gould's Contrapuntal Vision," in *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 6. Said has written convincingly about Gould's favorable views of composers who were not in tune with their times. Said's many essays on Gould are the only major omission in this book (Kingwell does cite Said, but not in connection with Gould).

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