

CHAPTER 1

The Music Itself: Glenn Gould's Contrapuntal Vision

GLENN GOULD is an exception to almost all the other musical performers in this century. He was a brilliantly proficient pianist (in a world of brilliantly proficient pianists) whose unique sound, brash style, rhythmic inventiveness, and, above all, quality of attention seemed to reach out well beyond the act of performing itself. In the eighty records he made, Gould's piano tone is immediately recognizable. At any point in his career you could say, this is Gould playing, and not Alexis Weissenberg, Vladimir Horowitz, or Alicia de Larrocha. His Bach stands in a class by itself. Like Gieseking's Debussy and Ravel, Rubinstein's Chopin, Schnabel's Beethoven, Katchen's Brahms, Michelangeli's Schumann, it defines the music, makes that artist's interpretation the one you have to have if you are to get at the composer definitively. But unlike all those pianists and their individual specialties, Gould playing Bach—no less sensuous, immediate, pleasurable, and impressive as music making than any of the others I've mentioned—seems like a species of formal knowledge of an enigmatic subject matter: it allows one to think that by playing the piano Gould is proposing some complex, deeply interesting ideas. That he did all this as the central focus of his career made that career more of an aesthetic and cultural project than the short-lived act of playing Bach or Schoenberg.

Most people have treated Gould's various eccentricities as something to be put up with, given that his performances were often so extraordinarily worthwhile. Exceptional critics, Samuel Lipman and Edward Rothstein principally, have gone further than that, saying that while Gould's uniqueness manifested itself in different, but usually erratic ways—humming, strange habits of dress, playing that is unprecedented in its intelligence

and grace—it was all part of the same phenomenon: a pianist whose work was an effort to produce not only performances but also statements and criticisms of the pieces he played. And indeed Gould's numerous writings, his departure from concert life in 1964, his single-minded attention to the details of record production, his garrulous, rococo way of being a hermit and ascetic, reinforce the notion that his performances could be connected to ideas, experiences, and situations not normally associated with the career of a virtuoso pianist.

That Gould's career truly began in 1955 with his recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is, I think, apparent, and the move, in some sense, foreshadowed nearly everything he did thereafter, including his rerecording of the piece not long before his death. Until he put out the record, few major pianists except Rosalyn Tureck had played the *Goldberg* in public. Thus Gould's opening (and lasting) achievement was, in alliance with a major record company (a liaison Tureck never seemed to have), to place this highly patterned music before a very large public for the first time, and in doing so to create a terrain entirely his own—anomalous, eccentric, unmistakable.

You have the impression first that here is a pianist possessed of a demonic technique in which speed, accuracy, and power are subordinate to a discipline and calculation that derive not from a clever performer but from the music itself. Moreover, as you listen to the music you feel as if you are watching a tightly packed, dense work being unfolded, resolved almost, into a set of intertwined lines held together not by two hands but by ten fingers, each responsive to all the others, as well as to the two hands and the one mind really back of everything.

At one end of the work a simple theme is announced, a theme permitting itself to be metamorphosed thirty times, redistributed in modes whose theoretical complexity is enhanced by the pleasure taken in their practical execution. At the other end of the *Goldberg*, the theme is replayed after the variations have ceased, only this time the literal repetition is (as Borges says about Pierre Menard's version of the *Quixote*) "verbally identical, but infinitely richer." This process of proceeding brilliantly from microcosm to macrocosm and then back again is Gould's special accomplishment in his first *Goldberg*: by doing it pianistically he also lets you experience the sort of understanding normally the result of reading and thinking, not simply of playing a musical instrument.

I don't at all mean to denigrate the latter. It is simply that from the beginning Gould tried to articulate music in a different mode than was the case when, say, Van Cliburn—his near contemporary, a fine pianist—played Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff concertos. Gould's choice of back at the outset, and his subsequent recording of most of Bach's keyboard works,

is central to what he was trying to do. Since Bach's music is preeminently contrapuntal or polyphonic, this fact imparts a really astonishingly powerful identity to Gould's career.

For the essence of counterpoint is simultaneity of voices, preternatural control of resources, apparently endless inventiveness. In counterpoint a melody is always in the process of being repeated by one or another voice: the result is horizontal, rather than vertical, music. Any series of notes is thus capable of an infinite set of transformations, as the series (or melody or subject) is taken up first by one voice then by another, the voices always continuing to sound against, as well as with, all the others. Instead of the melody at the top being supported by a thicker harmonic mass beneath (as in largely vertical nineteenth-century music), Bach's contrapuntal music is regularly composed of several equal lines, sinuously interwoven, working themselves out according to stringent rules.

Quite apart from its considerable beauty, a fully developed contrapuntal style like Bach's has a particular prestige within the musical universe. For one, its sheer complexity and frequent gravity suggest a formidable refinement and finality of statement; when Beethoven, or Bach, or Mozart writes fugally the listener is compelled to assume that an unusual importance is given the music, for at such moments everything—every voice, every instant, every interval—is, so to speak, written out, worked through, fully measured. One cannot say more in music (the tremendous fugue at the end of Verdi's *Falstaff* comes to mind) than in a strict fugue. And consequently the contrapuntal mode in music is, it seems, connected to eschatology, not only because Bach's music is essentially religious or because Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* is highly fugal. For the rules of counterpoint are so demanding, so exact in their detail as to seem divinely ordained; transgressions of the rule—forbidden progressions, proscribed harmonies—are specified in such terms as *diabolus in musica*.

To master counterpoint is therefore in a way almost to play God, as Adrian Leverkühn, the hero of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, understands. Counterpoint is the total ordering of sound, the complete management of time, the minute subdivision of musical space, and absolute absorption for the intellect. Running through the history of Western music, from Palestrina and Bach to the dodecaphonic rigors of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, is a contrapuntal mania for inclusiveness, and it is a powerful allusion to this that informs Mann's Hitlerian version of a pact with the devil in *Faustus*, a novel about a polyphonic German artist whose aesthetic fate encapsulates his nation's overreaching folly. Gould's contrapuntal performances come as close as I can imagine to delivering an inkling of what *might* be at stake in the composition and performance of counterpoint, minus perhaps any

grossly political import. Not the least of this achievement, however, is that he never recoils from the comic possibility that high counterpoint may only be a parody, pure form aspiring to the role of world-historical wisdom.

In fine, Gould's playing enables the listener to experience Bach's contrapuntal excesses—for they are that, beautifully and exorbitantly—as no other pianist has. We are convinced that no one could *do* counterpoint, reproduce and understand Bach's fiendish skill, more than Gould. Hence he seems to perform at the limit where music, rationality, and the physical incarnation of both in the performer's fingers come together. Yet even though Gould's playing of Bach is so concentrated on its task, he manages also to suggest different kinds of power and intelligence that would appear in later recordings. In the course of recording Bach's keyboard works integrally, Gould produced a disc of Liszt's transcription of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and, still later, his own versions of orchestral and vocal music by Wagner, late romantic music that was contrapuntal in its own overripe way, made even more artificial by being set in a chromatic polyphony that Gould forced out of the orchestral score and onto the piano keyboard.

The records, like all of Gould's playing, accentuate the overwhelming unnaturalness of his performances, from his very low chair to his slump, to his semi-staccato, aggressively clear sound. But they also illustrate the way in which Gould's predilection for contrapuntal music gave him an unexpectedly novel dimension. Sitting at his keyboard, doing impossible things all alone, no longer the concert performer but the disembodied recording artist, didn't Gould seem to become his own self-confirming, self-delighting hearer, a man who replaced the God that Albert Schweitzer suggested that Bach was writing for?

Certainly Gould's choice of music to play bears this out. He has written of his preference not only for polyphony in general, but also for the composer, like Richard Strauss, "who makes richer his own time by not being of it; who speaks for all generations by being of none." Gould's dislike of middle-period Beethoven, Mozart, and most of the nineteenth-century romantics whose music was intensely subjective or fashionable and too instrument-specific, is balanced by his admiration for pre- and post-romantics like Orlando Gibbons and Anton Webern, as well as for polyphonists (Bach and Strauss) whose all-or-nothing attitude to the instruments they wrote for made for a total discipline lacking in other composers. Strauss, for example, is Gould's choice as the major twentieth-century musical figure. Not only was Strauss eccentric, he was also concerned "with utilizing the fullest riches of late-romantic tonality *within* the firmest possible formal disciplines"; thus, Gould continues, Strauss's "interest was primarily the preservation of the *total* function of tonality—not simply in a work's funda-

mental outline, but even in its most specific minutiae of design.” Like Bach then, Strauss was “painstakingly explicit at every level of . . . architectural concept.” You write music in which every note counts and if like Strauss you have an explicit function in mind for each: whereas if like Bach you write simply for a keyboard instrument, or in the *The Art of the Fugue* for four unspecified voices, each voice is carefully disciplined. There are no strummed *oompahs* (although, alas they exist in Strauss), no mindlessly regular chordal accompaniments. The formal concept is articulated assertively and consciously, from the large structure to the merest ornament.

There is a good deal of exaggeration in these descriptions, but at any rate Gould’s playing aims to be as explicit and detailed as he thinks the music he plays is. In a sense his performances extend, amplify, make more explicit the scores he interprets, scores that do not as a matter of principle include program music. Music is fundamentally dumb: despite its fertile syntactic and expressive possibilities, music does not encode reference, or ideas, or hypotheses discursively, the way language does. So the performer can either be (or play) dumb, or, as in Gould’s case, the performer can set himself a great deal to do. If this might mean controlling the performance space to the extent of articulating, taking over his environment (by dressing and appearing to be against the grain), conducting the orchestra despite a conductor’s presence, humming over and above the piano’s sound, talking and writing as if to extend the piano’s reach into verbal language via a whole slew of essays, interviews, record jacket notes, then Gould did so enthusiastically, like a mischievous, unstopably talkative little prodigy.

The most impressive of the numerous Gould events I attended was his appearance in Boston in October 1961 with Paul Paray and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. In the first half Gould did the Fifth *Brandenburg* with the Detroit’s leading violinist and flutist. He was partially hidden from view, but his arms and head were visible, bobbing and swaying to the music, although his playing was suitably small-scaled, admirably light, and rhythmically propulsive, perfectly conscious of the other performers. Music with eyes, ears, and a nose, I remember thinking. (All of Gould’s recorded concerto performances—especially the Bach concertos—are the same in one respect: so athletically tensile and rhetorically inflected is his playing that an electric tension is kept up between what seems often to be a heavy, rather plodding orchestra and a darting, skipping piano line that dives in and out of the orchestral mass with marvelous aplomb.) After the intermission Gould reemerged to play the Richard Strauss *Burleske*, a horrendously busy one-movement work that is not exactly a repertoire staple; Gould incidentally never recorded the piece. Technically his performance with the Detroit was stunning; one wouldn’t have believed it possible that

an essentially Bach-ensemble pianist would all of a sudden have become a whirlwind post- and hyper-Rachmaninoff-style virtuoso.

But the real wonder was more bizarre still, and as one reflects on Gould's later career, what he did in the Strauss besides playing the piano seems like a prefiguring of subsequent developments. As if to enlarge his part as a soloist, Gould conducted the orchestra extravagantly, if not intelligibly. Paray was there too, and he of course was the actual conductor. Gould, however, conducted to himself (plainly disconcerting though the sight of him was), doubtless confusing the orchestra and, unless Paray's occasionally murderous glances at Gould were part of some prerehearsed routine, annoying Paray. Conducting for Gould seemed to be an ecstatic, imperialistic widening of his reading of the *Burleske*, at first through his fingers, then by means of his arms and head, then finally by pushing out from his personal pianistic space into the orchestra's territory. Watching Gould do all this was a skewed lesson in the discipline of detail, the artist being led where the fanatically detailed, expansively inclined composer led him.

There is more to a Gould performance than that. Most critics who have written about him mention the clean dissections he seems to give the pieces he plays. In this he strips the piano literature of most of its inherited traditions, whether these have come down in the form of liberties taken with tempi or tone, or from declamatory opportunities that issue as a sort of profession deformation from the great line of piano virtuosos, or again that are ingrained in patterns of performance certified by famous teachers (Theodor Leschetizky, Rosina Lhevinne, Alfred Cortot, etc.). There is none of this in Gould. He neither sounds like other pianists, nor, so far as I can determine, has anyone succeeded in sounding like him. It is as if Gould's playing, like his career, is entirely self-made, even self-born, with neither a preexisting dynasty nor an extra-Gouldian destiny framing it.

The reason for this is partly the result of Gould's forthright egoism, partly the result of contemporary Western culture. Like many of the composers and pieces he has played, Gould wants to appear beholden to no one as he goes his own way. Not many pianists will take on and make sense of so formidable a mass as both books of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, all his partitas, the two- and three-part inventions, the toccatas, the English and French suites, the *Art of the Fugue*, all the keyboard concertos including the Italian, plus such oddities as Bizet's *Variations chromatiques*, Sibelius's sonatas, pieces by Byrd and Gibbons, Strauss's *Enoch Arden* and his *Ophelialieder*, the Schoenberg concerto, transcriptions of Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll" and Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. What Gould sustains in all this is (to use a phrase he once applied to Sibelius) a style that is "passionate but antisensual." It allows the listener to observe Gould's "gradual, lifelong construction of a state of

wonder and serenity” not only as an independent aesthetic phenomenon, but also as a theatrical experience whose source is Gould himself.

In 1964 Gould left the concert world and was reborn as a creature of the technology he exploited to permit more or less infinite reproduction, infinite repetition (“take-twoness,” he called it), infinite creation and re-creation. No wonder he referred to the recording studio as “womblike,” a place where “time turns in upon itself,” where a new “art form with its own laws and its own liberties. . .and its quite extraordinary possibilities” is born with the recording artist. A highly readable book by Geoffrey Payzant, *Glenn Gould: Music and Mind*, copiously describes this rebirth, as well as Gould’s skill in managing to keep the spotlight on himself. Gould’s post-concertizing afterlife was passionate, antinatural antisensuality carried very far indeed, and it certainly flowed from his cheery penchant for being lonely, original, unprecedented, and somehow immensely gregarious, someone who curiously never tired of himself.

In less metaphysical terms, what occurred in his career after 1964 was a displacement in emphasis. In the concert hall the emphasis had been on the reception by the audience of a live performer, a commodity directly purchased, consumed, and exhausted during two hours of concert time. Such a transaction had its roots in eighteenth-century patronage and the class structure of the *ancien régime*, although during the nineteenth century, music performance became a more easily acquired mass commodity. In the late twentieth century, however, Gould acknowledged that the new commodity was a limitlessly reproducible object, the plastic disc or tape; as performer, Gould has transferred himself back from the stage to the studio, to a site where creation has become production, a place where he could manage to be creator and interpreter simultaneously without also directly submitting to the whims of a ticket-purchasing public. There is no small irony in the fact that Gould’s new bonds were with technicians and corporate executives, and that he spoke of his relationship with them (and they of him) in emotionally intimate terms.

In the meantime, Gould was able to push his contrapuntal view of things a bit further. His aim as an artist would be, like Bach or Mozart, to organize the field completely, to subdivide time and space with utmost control, to “speculate the elements” (Mann’s phrase in *Doktor Faustus*) in such a way as to take a row of elementary notes and then force them through as many changes as possible, changes that would come from splicing bits of tape together to make new wholes, from displacing sequences (for instance, the different enunciations of the *Goldberg* theme in Gould’s 1981 version were recorded out of order), from using different pianos for different sections of the same music, recording and living without paying attention to the time

of day, making an informal studio space into the opposite of the concert hall's crippling formality. This, Gould said, was giving additional enrichment to the idea of process, to carrying on more or less forever.

It was also, perhaps poignantly, a way of trying to undermine the biological and sexual bases of the human performer's life. For the late-twentieth-century musical artist, recording would be a form of immortality suited not only to a noncomposer (nineteenth-century-style composers being now both rare and rarefied), but to what the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin called the age of mechanical reproduction. Gould was the first great musical performer of the twentieth century unequivocally to choose that fate. Before Gould, performers like Stokowski and Rubenstein had self-consciously lived in the hybrid world of wealth and romantic cliché created by spectators, impresarios, and ticket sellers. Gould saw that such a choice, however admirable it was for those two, wouldn't do for him. Yet for someone so self-aware, Gould never reflected on the unflattering complicities of an enterprise such as his, which depended ultimately on giant corporations, an anonymous mass culture, and advertising hype for its success. That he just did not look at the market system, whose creature to some degree he was, may have been cynical prudence, or it may have been that he somehow couldn't fit it into his playing. It was as if the real social setting of his work was one of the things that Gould's contrapuntal skills were not meant to absorb, however much these skills assumed the system's complaisance.

Yet he was far from being a pastoral idiot-savant despite his affinity for the silence and solitude of the North. As the critic Richard Poirier has said of Frost, Lawrence, and Mailer, Gould was a performing self whose career was the cultivated result of immense talent, careful choice, urbanity, and, up to a point, self-sufficiency, all of them managed together like a polyphonic structure in relief. The last record to be released in Gould's lifetime—the rerecorded *Goldberg Variations*—in almost every detail is a tribute to an artist uniquely able to rethink and replan a complex piece of music in a new way, and yet keep it (as much as the earlier version) sounding recognizably like a performance by Glenn Gould.

Child and partner of the age of mechanical reproduction, Gould set himself the task of being at home with what Mann calls "the opposing hosts of counterpoint." Despite its limitations, Gould's work was more interesting than nearly all other performing artists of this era. Only Rachmaninoff, I think, had that special combination of lean intelligence, magnificent dash, and perfectly economical line that Gould produced in nearly everything he played. Technique in the service of an inquiring understanding, complexity resolved without being domesticated, wit relieved of philosophical baggage: Glenn Gould plays the piano.