



Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius

Peter Oswald , Lise Deschamps Oswald (Foreword by)

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The Canadian pianist Glenn Gould was a child prodigy and a musical genius whose 1955 recording of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" catapulted him to world fame. He was also plagued by lifelong depression, was terrified of playing before live audiences, and consumed prescription drugs by the handful. He died at fifty of a massive stroke. In this acclaimed biography, the late psychiatrist Peter Ostwald — himself an accomplished violinist and longtime personal friend of Gould's — raises many questions about Gould and his music. Was his genius sponsored by eccentricity or vice versa? Do those with genius sacrifice themselves for a higher ideal while remaining personally unfulfilled? Ostwald lays bare the energy and contradiction behind Gould's brilliance. "Learning more of the man, absorbing Peter Ostwald's picture and analysis, has sharpened my ears and made me more acutely receptive.... [An] important and illuminating biography."—Oliver Sacks "[A] superb psychological study ... a poignant personal memoir."—*Time* "This brisk book is discerning rather than reductive, and guaranteed Freud-free. A."—*Entertainment Weekly*

Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius Details

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Mawr says

A very detailed and thoroughly-researched biography of the greatest musical genius to come out of Canada.

Lixi says

I read it a chapter a day at lunch break last summer. I treasured every word of this sincerely written biography. I love the pianist and I couldn't care less his humming during performance or paranoia about germs. His Bach is a revelation and his Brahms gives me the most romantic feelings. Dr.Oswald, I believe, truly cared for him as a dear friend. That's why I see not only a genius, but a nature-loving and light-hearted human being from this great biography. I am grateful everyday for having his music and knowing Glenn.

Cara Steger says

I swear, Aubrey, I will finish it and get it back to you. One day!

Isidore says

An entertaining and informative study of Gould's personality. For the record, the married woman (unnamed by Ostwald) with whom Gould had a lengthy affair was the wife of conductor/composer Lukas Foss.

Mike Cuthbert says

To me, an instrumentalist but not a pianist, the life of Glenn Gould, Canadian pianist, was always somewhat of a mystery. I read stories of his behavior, his withdrawal from the concert scene into almost mystical recording sessions, and his many sicknesses—or were they? Gould was a classic hypochondriac and cancelled concert events and recording events with increasing frequency as his career progressed. One of the reasons he loved the recording studio so much was because it allowed him sanctuary from the pressures of performing in public. Ostwald even conjectures at one point that Gould felt at war with his audiences who came to hear him make mistakes. Another was the fact that he was a perfectionist. Fortunately, for much of his recording career, he was also his own chief editor. An irony of this biography is that it was written in the last year of life of its author. Ostwald was suffering from cancer the entire last year and never got to read the finished product, even in proofs. It was Gould's function as the first performer to take advantage of the new recording techniques of the 50s, 60 and 70s, dying in 1982 of a massive stroke, but in the process making his interpretations immortal. He lived long enough to record several of his more popular recordings in stereo with Dolby effects. In fact, it was his most famous second recording of the Goldberg Variations of Bach, that was an early Dolby best-seller for him and one of the last of his many projects. While famous primarily for

his albums of Bach, Gould was a scholar of the moderns as well, Webern, Schoenberg and Alban Berg among them. It's easy to concentrate on the idiosyncrasies of Glenn Gould because there were so many. His piano chair was made by his father and used so often the cushions wore out and Gould ended up hunched over the piano at eye level, sitting on the framework. His usual appearance was striking as he most often wore, even in summer, an overcoat, gloves, a scarf and hat and, not infrequently, galoshes. He had a concert routine that included warm soaking of his hands before playing and his diet was horrible. But his piano playing! He was technically brilliant, often taking tempi that mere mortals could not handle and, given his predilection for Bach, his skill at balancing all the voices in a fugue, for example, made the experience mystifying. To some critics, the balances were over-done, but if the word "contrapuntal" means "sounding together of melodies," there could be no greater example of the equality of those melodies than those of Gould. The biography also notes Gould's role as a conductor—limited but present—arranger, composer, actor, comic, writer and producer and, with a select few, bon vivant. He never married and his sex life is largely a mystery though he was not homosexual as many supposed, given his eccentricities. The subtitle of the biography is "The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius" and it was Oswald's opinion that many geniuses are infected with the tragic gene as well as the creative one. Certainly Gould did not live a "normal" life, even for a musician, but his contribution to music is undeniably one of genius. Even twenty years after its writing, the book stands as a monument to a rare and eccentric man whose main passion, recording, means he can be enjoyed for generations to come.

Terence says

pretty tragic

Ben Batchelder says

A friend in Tiradentes lent me Peter Oswald's Glenn Gould. I read few biographies, and none of musicians' that I recall, so I hesitated. But books in English are hard to come by here, and the same friend hosts a weekly classical music night at his home, so I dove in recently.

Oswald, a Gould friend, fellow musician, and psychiatrist (who never treated Gould directly), had written several books on musical themes prior to tackling this reminiscence/portrait, including the nexus of madness with the musical muse. Given the extremes of the world famous pianist's phobias, Oswald is both an appropriate and sympathetic raconteur.

I have long found classical musicians to be among the most cultured of artists, perhaps from a gentle sublimation of their own egos, and what this book reveals about both Gould and Oswald does nothing to counter that impression. In fact, while written in 1997 just prior to his own death from cancer, Oswald personifies a gentility, compassion, and discretion which I associate more with the manners of North America (Gould was Canadian, Oswald Californian) in the 1950's and 1960's prior to the ravages of the radical ascendancy.

Gould, funnily, viewed himself as one of the last of the Puritans, yet Oswald lived and wrote it. I came away listening to the Goldberg Variations with new ears, and the wish to hear more.

Jennyb says

Given that I don't have a particularly deep or devoted interest in classical music, it is kind of strange that I

have as much of a fascination with Glenn Gould as I do. But if you can leave aside his enormous talent (which you can't, really, because it's inescapably evident, even to a philistine such as myself, but if you could ...), I feel like he still would be/is a strange and compelling character. Ostwald's book highlights that, because about half of its length (and nearly half of Gould's life) is devoted to what Gould did AFTER he stopped being a virtuosic concert pianist.

Start with that fact: here is someone with a remarkable talent, one so pronounced it makes him famous and respected from a very young age. Even so, Gould decides about halfway through his life that he hates this thing he's so great at, and chooses to "pursue other interests." Who does that?! This perpetually seeking, intellectually curious personality type is only one aspect of Gould. There's also his paralyzing anxiety, intense hypochondria, social ineptitude, and inveterate narcissism. But even though Ostwald does not sugarcoat all these prominent negative traits, in the end, he still manages to portray Gould as a sympathetic -- if tragic -- figure rather than a repulsive one.

Given all of his contradictions, Gould would have been, perhaps, an insufferable person to know, but he is certainly a fascinating person to read about. And this may not be the perfect book about him, dragging as it does at some points, while at the same time relying upon rather dated medical knowledge. But it's enough to give the reader a good idea of what a talented and troubled artist Gould was, and last I checked, "troubled artist" is still an archetype that holds an inexhaustible appeal to us more ordinary folk.

James says

An incredible biography by one of the century's most important musicians.

Kate says

I could not put this down as I came close to understanding the true man behind the mask of genius. Glenn Gould was always quoted in my classes as being the definitive authority on J S Bach. After reading this deeply insightful and compassionate book, I would add some qualifications to that view.

Debbie says

A POV of Canadian pianist/composer Gould by a psychiatrist who met him as an accompanying violinist with Gould. Dr. Ostwald, who passed away from cancer only months and finishing this book (but never saw it published), knew Gould for 15 years.

This is the first of three major biographies of Gould that I've read. My belief is that Gould developed Social Phobias, but did not have Asperger's. (A common, poorly-developed "modern" theory. Absurd!)

Marianne Meyers says

Overall, a very informative book on Gould, especially his formative years and early concertizing. How interesting to be his friend, a violinist, and a psychiatrist, the author offers interesting insight into Gould's life. The drug use is overwhelming, barbituates, thorazine, valium, basically pills filling the pockets of that old coat he wore. He'd open the bottles and pour them in! Geniuses don't necessarily work well with others and Gould was a self-proclaimed loner. The author suggests that Gould may have had aspergers's syndrome which makes a lot of sense. As always, with Gould, I'm drawn in and held with amazement, awe, and humor, too.

Derek says

Dude was a freakshow.
