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# GLENN GOULD IN SIX SCENES: PERFORMANCE AS SELF-CARE

## GLENN GOULD EN SEIS ESCENAS: LA INTERPRETACIÓN COMO AUTOCUIDADO

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### ABSTRACT

Glenn Gould's legacy revolves around his retirement from the concert hall in 1964. Studies of his artistry often reflect on that by following a particular impulse: to seek out the rational underpinnings of this decision and to explain them in terms of a larger technological or aesthetic vision. Drawing in particular on the work of Virginia Held and Sara Ahmed, this article conceptualises Gould's abandonment of the concert hall as an act of self-care, a mechanism for coping with the increasingly intrusive and exploitative celebrity musical culture into which he was catapulted as a young musician. Thus, this article frames Gould's self-care in terms of six overlapping scenes, as he performed in the concert hall and recording studio, in interviews and essays, and in front of the camera as photographic subject and television actor, culminating with a case study based on an excerpt from Bruno Monsaingeon's documentary *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist*. The study concludes by suggesting that Gould's artistic choices (and achievements) had much more to do with cultivating caring relations that allowed him to thrive than they did with an individual pursuit of a grand musical philosophy.

**Keywords:** Glenn Gould; self-care; ethics of care; performance studies; musical recordings.

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## RESUMEN

El legado de Glenn Gould gira en torno a su retirada de la actividad concertística en 1964. Los estudios sobre su manera de hacer música a menudo reflexionan sobre este hecho con un propósito determinado: encontrar los motivos racionales que le llevaron a tomar tal decisión y explicarlos en base a una visión tecnológica o estética más amplia. Tomando como partida los trabajos de Virginia Held y Sara Ahmed, este artículo plantea el abandono de la sala de conciertos por parte de Glenn Gould como un acto de autocuidado, un mecanismo que le ayudó a lidiar con la cultura de la celebridad musical, cada vez más intrusiva y explotadora, en la cual se vio inmerso desde su juventud. Así, este artículo explora el autocuidado de Gould en términos de seis escenas que se solapan, según se presenta en la sala de conciertos y en el estudio de grabación, en entrevistas y en ensayos escritos, y delante de la cámara como objeto fotográfico y como actor de televisión, culminando con un estudio de caso basado en un fragmento del documental *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist* de Bruno Monsaingeon. En última instancia, este estudio sugiere que las elecciones (y los logros) artísticos de Gould tuvieron mucho que ver con el cultivo de relaciones que le permitieron cuidarse y desarrollarse más que buscar individualmente una gran filosofía musical.

**Palabras clave:** Glenn Gould; autocuidado; ética del cuidado; estudios de la interpretación; grabaciones musicales.

## I.

It is wintertime in Toronto, early 1974<sup>1</sup>. There is snow on the ground outside the studio in which Glenn Gould and Bruno Monsaingeon are filming *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist*, Monsaingeon's expensive television project for the French broadcasting company *Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française* (ORTF)<sup>2</sup>. Set against a blank white canvas, Gould and Monsaingeon are almost identical in dress and comportment. Though besuited for the occasion, they simulate two friends lost in free-flowing conversation more so than a formal television interview. The way they sit deeply, with legs crossed and hands in lap, makes their director's chairs look comfortable. Gould rocks slightly and looks to the ceiling. "I made some sort of mad prediction when I was twenty-five", he says, "that I was going to retire at thirty, and I didn't make it. I was thirty-two when I retired"<sup>3</sup>. He grins provocatively<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Karishmeh Fefeli-Crawford and Garreth P. Broesche for sharing some of their Gouldian wisdom with me as I wrote this essay, and to Nina Suter, who read and commented on the final manuscript with all the care it needed.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2004), 417-420.

<sup>3</sup> gesangvoll, "Glenn Gould: The retreat (2/4)", YouTube video, 2:02, published September 10, 2011, <https://youtu.be/yLpdBmTzamM?t=122>. Bazzana dates Gould's last concert to April 10, 1964, at which point Gould would still have been thirty-one years of age. Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 229.

“Well, there must be quite a few strong reasons for that, apart from the personal discomfort?”, Monsaingeon asks, eagerly.

“I don’t think there is any stronger reason than a personal discomfort, Bruno, because if you are personally discomforted, that’s the greatest motivation imaginable, you know”. He interlaces his fingers and scrutinises them. “Everything else thereafter is secondary and a rationale for the discomfort, it seems to me. Now, I think that the rationale is terribly important and can be made to sound very impressive, and I have on occasion written rather lengthy theses as to why, in its impressiveness, it should be obeyed not only by myself but by everyone else. I have a kind of missionary zeal about it. I think that the concert is an antiquarian format, totally outdated, utterly without relevance to mid-twentieth century, or mid-to-late twentieth century life. I certainly feel that very strongly”.

The topic of conversation is the well-known story of Gould’s retirement from live concert performance in 1964, one rehearsed many times in interviews and print in the latter part of Gould’s life. Often when he told this story, he variously mixed an admission of sheer “personal discomfort”, as Monsaingeon puts it, with some kind of dispassionate rationalisation of his decision. This particular snippet captures one of his more emotionally honest moments: Monsaingeon is keen to probe this unprecedented career move for its exciting intellectual basis, its eccentricity and its musical innovativeness. But Gould stresses how all of that is second to the concert hall’s debilitating and exhausting effects on his basic wellbeing. He abandoned concert life because of how it made him feel.

What is so typical about this vignette is not so much Gould’s response as Monsaingeon’s agenda. Studies of and reflections on Gould have tended to follow a particular impulse: to seek out the rational underpinnings of his musical path and to explain them in terms of a larger aesthetic vision. “Rather than bemoaning the passing of the concert hall”, writes Tim Page, “he envisioned a brave new world in which technology would free both performer and listener to experience music in hitherto unimagined intimacy. Gould had unshakable faith in the benefits of technology. It matters not that his attitude came out of a distaste for live performances”<sup>4</sup>. Often, it is described in quite neutral language. Jonathan Alexander calls Gould a “specialist in the keyboard works of J. S. Bach” who “left a lucrative and highly successful performing career in his 30s to focus his energies on studio recording...”<sup>5</sup>. Tim Hecker calls it fitting

to view his subsequent move away from performance as the recalibration into a new locus of virtuosity, from a specifically manual virtuosity to one of aesthetic-technological competence based on a combination of manual and technical skills. The studio, in contrast to purely live performance, was the proper venue for this new locus.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Tim Page, “Introduction”, in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), xv.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Alexander, “Glenn Gould and the rhetorics of sound”, *Computers and Composition* 37 (2015): 79.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Hecker, “Glenn Gould, the vanishing performer and the ambivalence of the studio”, *Leonardo Music Journal* 18 (2008): 79.

Edward Said, too, speaks of Gould's virtuosity when he writes that

Gould's work in its entirety [...] furnishes an example of the virtuoso purposefully going beyond the narrow confines of performance and display in to a discursive realm where performance and demonstration constitute an argument about intellectual liberation and critique that is quite impressive, and radically at odds with the aesthetics of performance as understood and accepted by the modern concert audience.<sup>7</sup>

And Barry Mauer emphasises how Gould foresaw radical alternatives for that concert audience, that he “saw the crowded concert hall as not only an impediment to communion with the music, but as disempowering for the listener”<sup>8</sup>.

On the back of some or other of these portraits, Gould is not uncommonly referred to as a genius<sup>9</sup>. As Paul Sanden has pointed out, this is also a habit of the popular media, and he takes his cue from Suzanne Cusick in seeing this trend as part of a longer tradition of favouring mind over body in musical discourse<sup>10</sup>. This is true, though only insofar as it favours a particular kind of “mind”. Gould's intellectual virtuosity has been pronounced and celebrated, but his mental struggles and vulnerabilities—those supposed smirches perhaps inconvenient to his rapid canonisation—are often quietly eschewed. And yet, as Kevin Bazzana has recognised, Gould's arguments against concertising “represented an intellectual scaffolding to rationalize what was in essence a profound personal discomfort with concerts. Frail and anxious, he found working before a live audience intensely uncomfortable. It is not a trivial argument: stage fright and adrenaline often wreaked havoc with his carefully prepared musical interpretations”<sup>11</sup>. This applied as much to the choked “free” time between concerts on tour as it did to the concentrated periods in front of an audience: he “hated sleeping in a different bed every night, in hotel rooms with the wrong food and heating that was never right, meeting new people at every stop, having to conform to a conventional daily schedule”<sup>12</sup>. He mainly “travelled alone, with no entourage, and was lonely

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, “Glenn Gould, the virtuoso as intellectual”, *Raritan* 20, no. 1 (2000): 6.

<sup>8</sup> Barry Mauer, “Glenn Gould and the new listener”, *Performance Research* 15, no. 3 (2010): 105.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Peter F. Ostwald, *Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius* (New York: Norton, 1997); Georges Leroux, *Partita for Glenn Gould: An Inquiry into the Nature of Genius* (McGill: Queen's University Press, 2010); or the documentary Michèle Hozer and Peter Raymont, dirs., *Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould* (Lorber Films, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 45-47.

<sup>11</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 180. Perhaps Bazzana drew the phrase “personal discomfort” straight from the Monsaingeon interview.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

most of the time”, something he would assuage “by making long-distance phone calls home at ruinous cost”<sup>13</sup>.

And so Edward Jones-Imhotep has asked:

Why did Gould *really* embrace recording technologies? Did he genuinely see them as the new hinge on which the musical world turned? Or were his sweeping statements about them, elaborated most systematically in ‘The Prospects of Recording,’ just a ruse, an elaborate philosophical superstructure hiding much baser motives: his hatred of traveling, his love of isolation, his hypochondria, his reclusiveness?<sup>14</sup>

Jones-Imhotep offers two answers. The first is that Gould held aesthetic objections to the concert hall—that it obscured musical structure and limited the listener’s capacity to engage with the music—and the second is that he rejected live performance on moral grounds, namely due to “the way it separated composer, performer, and listener into a rigid hierarchy that discouraged and even prevented individual judgement”<sup>15</sup>. As he puts it, concert performance “corrupted the performer” and brought out the worst in the listener<sup>16</sup>. It “was the last blood sport for Gould, who believed audiences were drawn to it by the (possibly unconscious) desire to see a musician fail under unnaturally demanding conditions”<sup>17</sup>. For Jones-Imhotep, it is this moral dimension to Gould’s refuge in the recording studio, rather than anything specifically musical, that is its most defining feature, and is what informs Gould’s most notorious proclamation that concert-going, as a social practice, would be extinct by the twenty-first century<sup>18</sup>.

Gould’s reasons for swapping the concert hall for the recording studio, whether aesthetic or ethical, have often been assessed as part of a bigger philosophical project that he adopted and preached—the missionary zeal he spoke of with Monsaingeon. What I want to do in this article is slightly different. Instead of seeing Gould’s professional manoeuvres and pronouncements on concert life as part of a grand futuristic proposal for music, I aim to think about them from a more personal perspective. In short, I would like to place more emphasis on “Gould the vulnerable” than “Gould the visionary”. For I see in Gould’s abandonment of the concert hall an act of self-care, a mechanism for coping with the musical culture into which he was catapulted as a young

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Jones-Imhotep, “Malleability and machines: Glenn Gould and the technological self”, *Technology and Culture* 57, no. 2 (2016): 288.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Glenn Gould, “The prospects of recording”, in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 332.

musician, one increasingly characterised by an exploitative, intrusive celebrity gaze and ballooning pianistic expectations.<sup>19</sup> It is not hard to think of reasons as to why this is a less-trodden path for conceptualising Gould's artistic life. Self-care, as Sara Ahmed has written, is often dismissed as self-indulgence, and self-indulgence "tends to mean being soft on one's self" or "yielding to one's inclinations"<sup>20</sup>. For that reason, it can be misconstrued as feebleness, or at the very least as an insufficient framework for acclaiming genius.

The notion of self-care has become a common commercialised theme within popular non-fiction books and personalised diaries, particularly as it dovetails with mindfulness and "self-help"<sup>21</sup>. What Ahmed has in mind is a more incisively political form of self-care, one which is not about self-indulgence, but *self-preservation*—a formulation she draws from Audre Lorde's devastating essay, "A burst of light"<sup>22</sup>. As Ahmed writes, "This kind of caring for oneself is not about caring for one's own happiness. It is about finding ways to exist in a world that makes it difficult to exist"<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, to speak of *self-care*, as I conceive of it here, is not to describe an autonomous action. Virginia Held has argued that, "as we clarify care, we need to see it in terms of *caring relations*"<sup>24</sup>. In orienting care more towards a relational practice than a virtue that individuals possess, Held has written that a "caring person will appropriately value caring relations and will seek to modify existing relations to make them more caring"<sup>25</sup>. And further, a "caring relationship requires *mutuality* and the cultivation of ways of achieving this in the various contexts of interdependence in human life"<sup>26</sup>.

Gould's self-care, as I see it, was an attempt to redeem his damaging relationship with a consuming, consumerist public, to cultivate alternative musical mutualities that allowed him to flourish in an altogether different way. This concerns more than pianism: I will try to show that self-care was at play across the spectrum of his artistic life, as he performed in the concert hall

<sup>19</sup> In centring care in this article, I am taking my lead from the work of William Cheng. See William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); and William Cheng, *Loving Music Till It Hurts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 238-239.

<sup>21</sup> Examples include Elizabeth Gilbert, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015); and former *Love Island* contestant Alex George, *Live Well Every Day: Your Plan for a Happy Body and Mind* (London: Aster, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Audre Lorde, "A burst of light: Living with cancer", in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988), 49-134.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*..., 239. I should note that Ahmed's use of self-care is directed especially towards those who survive in societies in which racism and sexism are deeply endemic. I should make clear that I do not mean to equate Gould's experience with the struggles caused by those structural inequalities.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36. Original emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* Original emphasis.

and recording studio, in interviews and essays, and in front of the camera as photographic subject and television actor. These six overlapping scenes can be grouped loosely, if crudely, into music (concert hall/recording studio), discourse (interviews/essays) and body (photography/television). In the sections that follow, I consider each of these in turn, but to emphasise their entanglement I finish with a case study that combines them, based on an excerpt from Monsaingeon's *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist*.

## II.

One reason that Gould's struggles with concert life are easily overlooked is because he himself often elided them in his published articles, as in his most well-known and frequently cited essay, "The prospects of recording"—often considered his "magnum opus"<sup>27</sup>. Published in *High Fidelity* magazine in 1966, it is Gould's most elaborate proselytism in favour of recording technology. In it, he lists and explores the many benefits of what he predicts, by the end of the twentieth century, will become the dominant medium of musical practice. These include, in the first place, aesthetic prospects: Gould argues that close-miking techniques and intimate playback settings are especially appropriate for contrapuntal preclassical music, and points out that recording technologies are already changing contemporary expectations of musical performance<sup>28</sup>. He beckons the transformative control that splicing and editorial techniques afford performers, welcomes the opportunities for composers to immortalise interpretations of their own music, and highlights the influence of recent electronic music on contemporary compositional practices more generally<sup>29</sup>. But this essay is also where he expands upon the moral prospects of recording, especially for the emergence of "a new kind of listener" whose future control over recorded materials with home studio technologies will break down the hierarchy between composer, performer and listener<sup>30</sup>. In this new world, everybody is an artist and art, as traditionally understood, becomes unnecessary<sup>31</sup>.

Said has called the modern concert hall "a sort of precipice, a place of danger and excitement at the edge"<sup>32</sup>. It is "an extreme occasion, something neither ordinary nor repeatable, a perilous experience full of constant risk and potential disaster albeit in a confined space"<sup>33</sup>. Gould might have agreed, though in decidedly negative terms. In February 1962, before he turned his back on concertising, he called the concert hall "a comfortably upholstered extension of the Roman Colosseum" and an

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 257, and Page, "Introduction", xiv. Jones-Imhotep refers to it as Gould's "definitive statement on recording technology": Jones-Imhotep, "Malleability and machines...", 310.

<sup>28</sup> Gould, "The prospects of recording", 335-337.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 337-347.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 347-352.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>32</sup> Said, "Glenn Gould, the virtuoso...", 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

audience's participation in the concert experience "a more gracious but thinly disguised sublimation" of "their primal instinct for gladiatorial combat"<sup>34</sup>. A few months after that article was published (titled "Let's ban applause!"), Gould felt the menace of his spectators in his last recital at the 1962 Stratford Festival, Ontario when they goaded his appearance and expressed their displeasure with "impatient rhythmic applause"<sup>35</sup>. Instead of playing the piano, Gould had "launched into a long lecture on music in the twenties" that was barely audible to those beyond the first few rows of seats<sup>36</sup>. Before the first half was over, people left in their droves. His attempt to thwart the subjugating dynamics of the concert hall from the inside had failed.

At the heart of his Colosseum analogy was the idea of competition, which Gould once decried as "the root of all evil"<sup>37</sup>. He particularly detested formal institutionalised music competitions, that "disconcertingly continental tradition of *musique sportive et combative*"<sup>38</sup>. He likened it to a viral disease—"competitionitis"—which was "not only debilitating to performers and audience but detrimental and antipathetic to the spirit of music"<sup>39</sup>. In 1981, he commented that

in the past, I have sometimes made rather sweeping generalizations to the effect that anybody who attends a concert is a voyeur at the very best, and maybe a sadist to boot! I'm sure that this is not altogether true... But I do think that the whole business about asking people to test themselves in situations which have no need of their particular exertions is wrong—as well as pointless and cruel.<sup>40</sup>

And that is where the ethical dimension comes in: the recording studio "has the capacity of replacing those awful and degrading and humanly damaging uncertainties which the concert brings with it"<sup>41</sup>.

Gladiatorial bloodlust, voyeuristic spectatorship and sadism: these may be generalisable vices of concert culture that Gould could rail against in philosophical tirades, but they are rooted firstly in his personal experience of playing in front of an audience. The "humanly damaging uncertainties" he speaks of are not the chalked-up results of detached analysis, but stem from the privately felt harm

<sup>34</sup> Glenn Gould, "Let's ban applause!", in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 246-247.

<sup>35</sup> Glenn Gould, as quoted in Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 214-215.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>37</sup> Gould, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Glenn Gould, "We who are about to be disqualified salute you!", in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 252.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>40</sup> Glenn Gould, "Glenn Gould in conversation with Tim Page", in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 452.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



that concertising inflicted upon him. Concert life, with its intercity tours and “the constancy of its anxiety”, left him mentally and physically debilitated.<sup>42</sup> As Bazzana has pointed out, “the pressure and drudgery of touring continued to wear him down” in the 1960s, and “seemed to make him pricklier and more depressed with each passing year”<sup>43</sup>. Each oncoming season filled him with dread, and increasingly he resorted to cancelling concerts.<sup>44</sup> Not including the Stratford Festival, he made only eighteen stops on his 1961-1962 tour, nine stops in 1962-1963, and three stops in 1963-1964.<sup>45</sup> As a touring musician—indeed, more fundamentally, as a pianist—he was profoundly unhappy.

We can get a sense of the respite Gould found in the studio in the outtakes from his recording of Johannes Brahms’s *Ballades*, Op. 10, made in 1981<sup>46</sup>. Back in New York City to record after a long stint with Andrew Kazdin in the 1970s at Eaton Auditorium, Toronto, Gould worked with producer Samuel Carter to make these recordings, and the outtakes partially capture his working method. As Garreth P. Broesche has pointed out, the studio “talk-back” between the producer’s control room and the performer on the studio floor reveals only so much: “many—if not most—important decisions were made either in the control room, when the recording device was not running, or after the recording session had wrapped”, which is to say that, for lengthier discussions during sessions, Gould would join Carter behind the mixing desk and off the record, so to speak<sup>47</sup>. But the preserved chatter in the outtakes reveals Gould’s intertwined comfort and creativity in the studio enclave, and the twenty-minute span within which he records the reprise (bars 119-150) of the Ballade in D Major, Op. 10 No. 2 is a particularly good example of his process in motion<sup>48</sup>. It provides a glimpse into his lived studio experience, demonstrating how the reassurance of social collaboration and the freedom to retry passages provided him with the conditions in which to thrive<sup>49</sup>.

After a few moments of chatter, Carter leans into the microphone to set a verbal marker for the start of this session: “This will be Insert 7, Andante Reprise: Take 1”. Gould plays his first of two

<sup>42</sup> Glenn Gould, “Yehudi Menuhin”, in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 299.

<sup>43</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 204.

<sup>44</sup> “My season begins next week and so I’m getting depressed as usual”, as he wrote to a friend. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>46</sup> Music is my life, “Glenn Gould—complete Brahms Ballades recording session (New York, 1982) \*RARE\*”, YouTube video, 2:11:32, published July 13, 2013, <https://youtu.be/NOTsc-Z2BIE?t=7892>. It seems likely that these outtakes were sourced through *The Glenn Gould Archive*, which has made them publicly available. See <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/glenn Gould/028010-3000-e.html>, accessed June 24, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Garreth P. Broesche, “Glenn Gould, spliced: Investigating the filmmaking analogy”, *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 4 (2016): par. 2.4.

<sup>48</sup> Here, I consulted Johannes Brahms, *Sämtliche Werke, Band 14*, ed. Eusebius Mandyczewski (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1926-1927), 13-32. It is available through IMSLP at: [https://imslp.org/wiki/4\\_Ballades,\\_Op.10\\_\(Brahms,\\_Johannes\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/4_Ballades,_Op.10_(Brahms,_Johannes)), accessed June 23, 2021. The Andante Reprise begins on the second last line of page 8 of the PDF.

<sup>49</sup> See Broesche, “Glenn Gould, spliced” for an insightful account of the recording process for Op. 10 no. 1.

full takes of the reprise. When he finishes, he immediately complains about some noisy interference, but Carter calmly replies that he couldn't hear anything.

"I don't know what that sound was, that was not me and nor was it the chair as far as I could tell. It sounded like some little gremlin in the studio went..."

"I didn't hear that one", Carter replies.

"Oh, good", answers Gould. He then asks for Carter's thoughts on the take. "How was that?"

"Very lovely".

Gould is not so happy. "Uh, there is a g natural, second one below middle c, and also the f sharp just below that, both of which are hiccupping a little bit, and they did a couple of times, but we've... I mean it was a *very* beautiful take, and I would be inclined to say, 'To hell with it!'. I'll try it one more time".

"Yes, fine. I barely noticed the hiccups".

"They're very slight", Gould continues, as if eager to explain away any imperfections, "and in playing of this kind—that is *so* wide—it is just almost impossible not to have it happen once or twice".

"Of course. We'll do one more then".

This kind of exchange is typical of most of their conversations: Gould does most of the talking, swears that he hears flaws and disruptions that Carter does not, and generally directs what they will do next.<sup>50</sup> In turn, Carter offers very short responses. With such rare interventions, his role seems to be to placate Gould, to reassure him but also to give him space and allow him to reflect on the session in whatever way keeps him at ease.

"Alright, this would be Insert 7: Take 2", intones Carter, and Gould offers his second full take of the reprise. He is much happier this time. "Would you buy that one?!", he asks Carter, triumphantly.

"That's beautiful—that's the best yet", Carter answers.

"Yep, it is. I can't do any better than that".

"Lovely".

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<sup>50</sup> Gould's use of the term "hiccup" refers to quite a specific issue with his piano. His Steinway CD 318 was mechanically adjusted to provide a much lighter touch and action, and it resulted in an occasional peculiar anomaly in his playing: in the middle register, at moderate and slow tempos, a hammer would sometimes glancingly strike a string a second time before returning to rest. See Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 247-248. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this.

“As Richard Strauss said when he finished *Capriccio*, “That’s it!”” Gould seems especially confident that they are done with this section—*Capriccio* being Strauss’s final opera.

“Okay!”, laughs Carter.

“Ah. I think I’d like to take a little rest and maybe a soak and, uh, I don’t think I even need to listen to that. It’s just *so* good”.

Carter agrees. “I don’t think so either, no”.

“There was one or two tiny little hiccups in there, I just... to hell with it”.

“Nothing”, Carter reassures him.

“That’s it, you know, I just can’t get any better than that”.

The first thing to say is that Gould is in his element. Not only is the studio a place in which to play without fear, it is a site for the kind of creative flow and genuine musical contentment he could not find in the concert hall. The second thing is the creeping invasion of Gould’s perfectionism, but this is something best grasped in what Gould and Carter do next in the session. There is a break at this point, and we can only speculate about what happens while the microphones are off. Presumably, Carter and the rest of the team listen back to some of the material while Gould soaks his arms in warm water, one of his many legendary habits<sup>51</sup>. Despite their initial shared confidence that they do not need to listen back to the two takes they’ve set down, it appears that Gould reconvened with Carter and was unhappy with aspects of the reprise. The next thing we hear Carter say is, “Okay, uh, I’ll re-slate that. This will be Insert 8, uh... in relation to ‘Take 14: Take 1’”. Carter’s tone suggests that it is Gould who has called for a series of inserts, and the passage he wants to fix is bars 132-135, especially the resolution to C major at bar 133 and to D major at bar 135<sup>52</sup>. Carter plays the “feed” (a few bars of previously recorded material) from bar 130 for Gould to pick up from.

His first attempt is not quite good enough. “Damn. Almost got it. One more time”.

“Feed into Insert 8: Take 2”, says Carter.

Gould finishes his second attempt and clears his throat. “Okay it got the notes, but I changed the pedal in order to get it. And I want to try and not do that, so let me try it again.”

“Insert 8: Take 3”, Carter intones.

Gould tries again. “Once more”, he says, after finishing.

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<sup>51</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 72.

<sup>52</sup> See the second line of page 9 of the PDF of Brahms’s score, referenced in note 48 above.

“Insert 8: Take 4”.

Gould seems more sure after this fourth take. “Went astray there, but I got what we want, I think”.

Carter backs this up. “Yeah I think so, too”. But Gould is not happy to leave it there.

“Okay, let’s try one more for safety”, says Gould.

“Okay...”, Carter replies, perhaps betraying just a hint of weariness. “Insert 8: Take 5”.

Gould finishes this take and lets out a guttural cry. “That was *so* good!”. It seems that he is finally happy.

“Lovely little squeal or something in there”, Carter agrees. It is hard to know exactly what Carter means by this, but something is not to their liking, so they persist. “Insert 8: Take 6”, calls Carter.

At this point, Gould’s refrain of ‘one more time’ seems to be the one thing guaranteed after each take. He finishes his sixth attempt and says, “Let’s try once more, that’s not bad, but it’s a little scared”.

“Insert 8: Take 7”. It is easy to imagine Carter’s chin resting firmly in his palm at the mixing desk at this point. Gould is essentially talking to himself at this stage. After the seventh take, he mumbles something that I can’t quite make out and eventually says to Carter, “One more time”.

“Insert 8: Take 8”.

This time, Gould plays on a bit longer as if he is checking to hear something else with the piano. “Um, yeah”, he says, “three times in a row, g has had the characteristic of g sharp, and therefore it’s not me... But I think that one got it, um... Let me try one more, but I think we’re alright”.

“Insert 8: Take 9”.

“Um, yeah, that’s as good as we’re gonna get. There is a g sharp sounding through on this damn g here”. Gould starts tapping the notes he mentions. “It’s probably the c sharp, I suspect, or the e... I dunno... But, um, okay, I think—I’ll listen to those later, and we may have to do another one tomorrow or something, but let’s not waste time with it”.

“Okay”, says Carter, and they move on to a different section of the reprise.

The obvious but by no means inconsequential takeaway from this is that the studio offers Gould a means to cope with his perfectionism. Though initially delighted with the two longer takes

of the Andante reprise, on listening back to the recordings Gould became obsessive about achieving a particular sound in bars 133-135. These three bars take nine attempts, eat up about ten minutes of studio time, and in the end are not deemed good enough, but what matters is that it all took place in an atmosphere free from judgement. Crucial in that respect is the dynamic between Gould and Carter. Though an ocean of calm, Carter seems at many points perfectly happy to move on. The “problems” with the passage are conspicuously Gouldian: the inaudible “hiccups” in the longer takes, and the mysterious g with the “characteristic of g sharp”, are things that Carter either does not comment on or confesses not to hear. But Carter’s conduct is quite telling: he offers neither criticism nor advice, but passive, careful facilitation. When Gould seems to indicate that he is happy, Carter is quick to agree in the hope that Gould will move on; and when Gould wants to redo something, Carter is dutiful in letting him see it through, even if he may privately think it unnecessary.

All of this puts Gould at ease. It places him in a shared musical environment which is supportive of both his achievements and his self-criticisms, and which very much allows him to take the lead when he so wishes. It is not so much that Gould is fully in control of everything, but that he *feels* that he is in control of what is happening and the direction the session is taking, that he is as much his own producer as Carter is. This sense of control is what gives him the peace of mind to make mistakes, to rationalise imperfections, and to persevere. As Hecker has put it, Gould’s efforts to involve himself in all aspects of recording, i.e. performing, producing and engineering, “was in essence a singular push toward control—control of both the artistic and the technical aspects of the recorded artifact as well as the social relations of that creative production”<sup>53</sup>. This is quite far from standard practice in the studio: in his many years as a producer, Simon Zagorski-Thomas remembers that “it was certainly not uncommon for session musicians to say to me as they were leaving the studio: ‘make me sound good’”<sup>54</sup>.

But Hecker also makes the point that “while Gould had an innate understanding for many technical aspects of recording, he was profoundly reliant upon his assistants”<sup>55</sup>. That information comes from Kazdin who, as I mentioned, was another music producer who worked on multiple projects with Gould, and it helps to sharpen the distinction between the notion of total control and Gould’s sense of control: the latter is relational, afforded by the cooperation of Carter and the sound engineers present in the control room. What mattered was not that he be vested full authority to become a kind of auteur, but to be given the space to feel empowered and, in turn, to thrive musically. As Carter seems to know, this is what will make his job run most smoothly, too. To use Held’s term, it is a caring mutuality that benefits both parties.

<sup>53</sup> Hecker, “Vanishing performer...”, 81.

<sup>54</sup> Simon Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 195.

<sup>55</sup> Hecker, “Vanishing performer...”, 81.

### III.

As Gould left the concert hall behind him, he became increasingly invested in radio—and not only from a musical standpoint. According to Bazzana, in the 1960s the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) effectively gave him “*carte blanche* to make whatever programs interested him”<sup>56</sup>. These included documentaries, which were often built around interviews with various cultural and artistic figures; and as an interviewer, Gould performed in ways that complement his studio practices. Whereas he revelled in editing and producing programmes, the raw materials required real, face-to-face human conversations, and these could elicit anxiety in Gould just like musical performance did.

One example dates from a Sunday evening in June 1957. Gould is on a railway station platform in Frankfurt, Germany, and he is waiting for the call to board the sleeper train on the Amsterdam–Vienna express<sup>57</sup>. While turning to check on his luggage, he notices the conductor Leopold Stokowski pacing around the platform in a triangular shape only several feet away from him. His social anxiety is immediately triggered: he fixates on the conductor’s pacing pattern, estimates the distance between them, and rapidly formulates faux-casual introductory remarks should Stokowski recognise him:

The [boarding] call came, and so did he. And so did the other passengers. And so did the porters and luggage racks, and not one of my snappy lines fit the occasion. “Good evening, Maestro, quite a crowded Pullman, isn’t it?” “How do you do, sir. These Germans certainly do make the trains run on time, don’t they?” I had no more time to think. He was only three steps away—two—one. I did the only thing possible: I dropped my ticket. Right beneath his nose. Accidentally, of course. Casually, almost. He had to stop while I bent to pick it up. “Damn it”, I said, in a just barely audible tone which was intended to lend the ploy some credibility. I took my time retrieving the ticket, and as I looked around, ostensibly to apologize to whichever good burgher might have been momentarily inconvenienced by my mishap, I did manage (or at least I like to think I did) a look of genuine incredulity. “Why, it’s—it’s—it’s Maestro Stokowski, isn’t it?”<sup>58</sup>

Given the flair with which Gould writes, it is likely that there is a certain amount of retrospective reimagining going on in how he tells this story. But it illustrates his distress in unpredictable social situations in which potentially important relationships could be made or broken in the most discrete of human interactions. Bazzana has written about how serious Gould’s social anxiety could be:

If someone was to visit his apartment or studio, he would often carefully prepare the visit, cueing up recordings and videotapes, preparing his comments—in effect, planning a program. He sometimes prepared for face-to-face conversations or telephone calls with written notes, followed

<sup>56</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 286.

<sup>57</sup> Glenn Gould, “Stokowski in six scenes”, in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 259. This Gould essay, my favourite by him, inspired the title for my article.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

by a tranquilizer. Yet once a meeting was underway he could be open to spontaneity, depending on how things went. He needed the rituals of preparation to calm him and give him confidence, but the anxiety, while real, was not necessarily overwhelming.<sup>59</sup>

That rings true for Gould's chance encounter with Stokowski, because they got on just fine when the conductor called by Gould's carriage on the journey. It would play out less successfully several years later, in November 1965, when Gould and Leonard Marcus (of *High Fidelity* magazine) met him in a professional capacity for the first time to interview him. Convening with him in Stokowski's apartment on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, Gould was nervous:

I fidgeted with a question outline I'd stowed in my jacket pocket ... I thought that the use of notes might seem premeditated, even unprofessional, but I was sure I'd forget some of the great lead-ins I'd jotted down before leaving my hotel. In the end, I opted for the impromptu approach, consigned the notes to my pocket, and joined Leonard at the window.<sup>60</sup>

That decision turned out to be the wrong one. Gould blanked several times when he should have been asking follow-up questions, and the interview ended "after about thirty minutes of ill-conceived questions, truncated answers, and disconcerting cutoffs"<sup>61</sup>.

Beyond his (then) inexperience as an interviewer, Gould's diagnosis of the problem was that conversations involve a perilous, unquantifiable degree of chance: "in conversation, courtesy demands that the addressee react and, in so doing, relate his own experience to the analytical, emotional, or tactile propositions under discussion. And it is, in my view, a dangerous exercise"<sup>62</sup>. When it came to Gould's final interview with Stokowski in December 1969, this time on film and with much more experience under his belt, everything Gould did was much more premeditated. "I even felt that as a pro", Gould writes, "I could afford to appear unprofessional; I took several pages of notes from my jacket pocket and set them on the desk in front of me"<sup>63</sup>. Gould even ran his questions by Stokowski, but when the cameras started rolling, he caught the conductor off guard by launching into an opening gambit about the possibility of extra-terrestrial life and interplanetary contact, eventually asking him whether he would want lifeforms beyond Earth to know about the phenomenon human beings call art. After a moment of perplexity, Stokowski responded with a monologue that lasted over eight minutes. It was exactly what Gould wanted<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 331.

<sup>60</sup> Gould, "Stokowski...", 265.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-282.

Just like in the recording studio, Gould was most comfortable in conversational situations when he felt in control<sup>65</sup>. This was even more important in interviews where he was on the other end, many of which were entirely scripted<sup>66</sup>. He turned down offers to appear on television in the 1960s and 70s if the conversations were to be conducted impromptu, and many of his later projects left no room for spontaneous manoeuvre, such as his interview with Page about his second recording of J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988<sup>67</sup>. His work with Monsaingeon in the 1980s was pre-planned “down to the last comma, and instead of memorizing his lines he relied, very obviously, on cue cards”<sup>68</sup>. In other cases, conversations that took place unscripted were at the very least based around talking points that were selected in advance after many hours of discussion and planning, as with his programmes with Humphrey Burton in the 1960s<sup>69</sup>. To borrow from Burton, any ‘spontaneity’ it included was rehearsed.

The natural endpoint of this logic goes much further: why leave anything up to chance at all? He said it himself when he wrote that, “Though never reluctant to leap into print with a declaration of enthusiasm [...] I have rarely been eager to meet the artists I admire”<sup>70</sup>. No doubt that was in part what attracted him to writing magazine essays and journal articles, where the performance of his intellectual persona could be curated and safeguarded much more tightly. And actually, the scholarly currency attached to “The prospects of recording” is a good example of how well that curation has worked.

The most extreme actualisations of this thinking are Gould's self-interviews. Many of his essays stylistically invoke some form of internal dialogue—he challenges and questions himself in many of his essays, such as in “Let's Ban Applause!” and “Music and Technology”, to name just two I have already cited—but in some cases he wrote in the form of transcribed conversations between “glenn gould” (g.g.), the sceptical interviewer, and “Glenn Gould” (G.G.), the provocative raconteur<sup>71</sup>. In the most elaborate of these, G.G. deftly responds to his interviewer's challenges, performs witty rhetorical flourishes and interventions, and professes to want to discuss anything other than music<sup>72</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> The irony, of course, is that Gould only got what he wanted from Stokowski by weaponising spontaneity for his own ends.

<sup>66</sup> Here, I do not mean to equate scripts/scores universally with “control”, nor to imply that improvisation concurrently entails a lack of control. I simply mean that scripts helped Gould to *feel* in control.

<sup>67</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 453. In a YouTube comment, Page called this interview a ‘playlet’ that Gould wrote for them to record after several long conversations over the phone. “And so effectively it was Tim Page playing a character named Tim Page saying mostly things that Tim Page had in fact said [...] But acting it was, and nobody has ever pretended otherwise”. (See the comments section at Clarsach, “Glenn Gould discusses his performances of the Goldberg Variations with Tim Page”, YouTube video, published May 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaLoegXPpyk>).

<sup>68</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 403.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>70</sup> Gould, “Stokowski...”, 258.

<sup>71</sup> Gould, “Let's ban applause!...”, 247; and Gould, “Music and technology...”, 354-355.

<sup>72</sup> Glenn Gould, “Glenn Gould interviews Glenn Gould about Glenn Gould”, in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 313-330. Note, for instance, his instantaneous interruptions of his



In doing so, he puts all of the necessary parts in place for his desired brand of intellectual virtuosity: he is unflappable, funny, outrageous and so much more than a musician, if only he could be given the platform to show it. Everything is eloquent and articulate, and unfolds within a kind of larger structural coherence (G.G. likens the conversation near the end to a set of variations on the theme of concert-versus-record)<sup>73</sup>. There are no stammers or stumbles in print, and there is certainly no risk of drawing a blank. That is the safety of the page. The impression on reading it, of course, is that this is the imprint of Gould in real time, and that, as blatantly artificial as the interview is, he would be similarly imperturbable in an actual conversation, capable of robustly batting away challenges to his musical or moral philosophies.

It is interesting in that respect that Gould was also “terribly insecure as a writer” and could be “tempted by pseudo-academic prose because he sought legitimacy as an intellectual”<sup>74</sup>. This ties in quite neatly with Gould’s conversational reluctance with valued peers (like Stokowski) or in public formats: here, what mattered most to Gould was successfully performing his musical intellect, an aspect of his reputation he increasingly cultivated as he justified his move away from the concert hall. And just like in the concert hall, this kind of performance was a cause for anxiety: in minimising spontaneity and risk-taking, Gould’s performance of self-care extended to his conversational habits and written works. Essays and scripted interviews were to real conversations what the recording studio was to the concert hall: on the page, Gould sought that same sense of control.

#### IV.

Given Gould’s concerns with how others perceived him, it might seem strange to frame his self-scripting as a performance of self-care rather than one, say, of ego. To make sense of this, we need to contextualise Gould’s writings and recordings within the aftermath of his early rise to fame. Propelled by the success of his first recording of the *Goldberg Variations*, Gould “had risen from relative obscurity as a promising young concert pianist in Canada to become an international star”, as Graham Carr puts it<sup>75</sup>. Gould, a relatively introverted musician, very suddenly had to manage his rise to global celebrityhood “at a critical juncture in the history of the North American music industry”: in the 1950s, commercial demand for records soared, and “musicians were increasingly seen in the public eye through the media of television and film, as well as the mass circulation of newspapers and popular magazines”<sup>76</sup>.

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interviewer to humorously twist his words (318) and his alternative suggestions for topics to discuss: “what about the political situation in Labrador?”; “perhaps aboriginal rights in western Alaska[?]” (316).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>74</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 271 and 274.

<sup>75</sup> Graham Carr, “Visualizing ‘The sound of Genius’: Glenn Gould and the culture of celebrity in the 1950s”, *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2006): 7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

In his article on the early photographic construction of Gould's persona, Carr argues that "the sudden outpouring of Gould photos and screen appearances in the late 1950s was crucial to the genesis of his fame and celebrity"<sup>77</sup>. He identifies the release of Gould's *Goldberg Variations* LP in January 1956 as a decisive break from standard record packaging practice in the classical music world. Until the late 1950s, classical album covers typically featured sketches of the composer, or paintings that depicted the thematic content of the music; instead, Gould's *Goldberg* LP featured thirty photographs of the pianist in full flight on its sleeve, "focussing all eyes on Gould and reifying the technology of recorded sound"<sup>78</sup>. This set in motion the long-running "fetish for visualizing Gould and technology", but Gould's lodgement in the public imagination went much further than that: "By the early 1960s, North Americans were likely to encounter Gould as they leafed through their daily newspaper, perused the bins of a local record shop, immersed themselves in a weekend magazine, tuned in their radios, or turned on their television sets"<sup>79</sup>. Though he was a classical musician, "the star treatment he received bore all the hallmarks of late 1950s popular culture"<sup>80</sup>. At least initially, Gould complied with the publicity campaigns that Columbia Records pushed, no doubt well aware of how powerfully they could influence his career<sup>81</sup>. The countless pictures of Gould soaking his arms in warm water or slumped on his rickety piano chair were ready-made for popular consumption<sup>82</sup>.

Celebrity is a double-edged sword, and these were the same habits that the media seized upon to ridicule him. Sanden writes that "Gould's unusual stage demeanor during his performing years seems to have drawn the most negative press [...] Regardless of whether they enjoyed the program, reviewers typically began by drawing attention to his idiosyncratic performance mannerisms"<sup>83</sup>. S. Timothy Maloney has highlighted some of the harsher pronouncements by critics on his appearance, typified by the caricature that appeared in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* on February 13, 1970 (long after he ceased concertising, it might be added)<sup>84</sup>. Gould is seated with legs crossed in a chair so low that he has to stretch above his head to reach the piano keys; he can't see the keyboard, but this does not even matter because his eyes are closed; and his baggy, oversized clothes, weighed down with bottles of pills in his pockets, rumple along the stage. At first "he took innocent pleasure from the controversy surrounding his eccentricities, and realized the publicity value of it, but as time passed he

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19 and 23.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>83</sup> Sanden, *Liveness...*, 48.

<sup>84</sup> S. Timothy Maloney, "Glenn Gould: Autistic savant", in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (London: Routledge, 2006), 124. The image is available to view online here: <https://www.cpimages.com/CS.aspx?VP3=DamView&VBID=2RLQ2JCFCAJM&PN=1&WS=SearchResults>, accessed June 23, 2021.

became less amused and more self-conscious”<sup>85</sup>. No wonder he later decried the “morally disruptive, and aesthetically destructive, influence” of the music critic, whose cutthroat practice of “adversary journalism” he saw as in need of complete overhaul<sup>86</sup>.

Gould’s response was to render the physicality of performance as ancillary as possible, to the point where he even apologised “for speaking about his playing in such blatantly physical terms” whenever he needed to<sup>87</sup>. Sanden recognises a clear hierarchy:

to Gould, a musician’s physical actions are only important insofar as they serve his or her mental conception of how a particular work should sound. Gould’s views are by no means unique or radical, as they simply reflect the mind-centred concept prevalent for centuries within Western musical epistemology. Gould is notable, however, for how explicitly he explains this hierarchy.<sup>88</sup>

Bazzana detects “a flash of anger in his eyes as he is asked to don scarf and gloves at the piano for photographs during a recording session” in a 1959 National Film Board of Canada documentary: “I’ve had *quite* enough of that sort of picture’, he says, firmly”<sup>89</sup>. Naturally, that clip could be just as staged as what the photographer was requesting. But the Columbia Records producer Paul Myers recalls Gould’s admission that “one of the reasons for his decision to quit the concert stage was that he was tired of being regarded as a ‘freak show’. He felt that too many members of the public came to see him rather than hear him”<sup>90</sup>.

All of this adds another dimension to the self-care of Gould’s withdrawal from concertising. His performance anxiety was supercharged by the public consumption and quirkiness of his physical body as it was circulated in popular media in his early career. His body was under constant surveillance by what Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has called the “performance police”—the powerful cultural commentators in musical life that reinforce “artificial performance norms”<sup>91</sup>. In other words, his performances in front of the camera—Gould-as-model—inflected public expectations to an uncontrollable extent, to the point where his physicality was rendered a grotesque object of fascination or condemnation. It is in that sense that Hecker’s view of Gould’s studio practices as “a technology of self-erasure” seems especially appropriate: in vanishing from the concert hall and

<sup>85</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 178.

<sup>86</sup> Glenn Gould, “Critics”, in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) 257-258.

<sup>87</sup> Sanden, *Liveness...*, 49.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>89</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 178.

<sup>90</sup> Maloney, “Autistic Savant...”, 122.

<sup>91</sup> Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “Classical music as enforced utopia”, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, nos. 3-4 (2016): 330.

changing his mind on the photographic construction of his public image, Gould was in one respect seeking respite from the cruel gaze of celebrity culture<sup>92</sup>.

It is not quite as simple as this because Gould continued to appear on television throughout the 1970s and right up to his death. No amount of studio refuge could undo the policing and mocking of his body: instead, he confronted it, and television became the arena within which Gould sought to reassert control over his body more explicitly than anywhere else. This is not to say that he became any less of a convention-bending provocateur—his short 1968 programme entitled *How Mozart Became a Bad Composer* attests to that—but it meant that he was able to do so on his own terms. Nicholas Mathew points out that Gould’s television projects positioned “the viewing public as unacknowledged and fortunate eavesdroppers on Gould’s private world”; they adopted “a style that became in many respects naturalized within televisual esthetics: the mediation of microphones and cameras is occluded even as they produce a new level of intimacy, accessed from the privacy of the home”<sup>93</sup>. As Carr puts it, viewers of his films “may not have realized that the ‘candid portrait’ promised [in Gould’s television work]... was, in fact, an artfully sutured simulation of reality”<sup>94</sup>.

This went as far as the artificial recreation of recording sessions. Carr recounts one from *On The Record* (1959), in which Columbia photographer Don Hunstein enters the studio to take photos of Gould while recording<sup>95</sup>. Initially, Gould plays Debussy’s *Claire de Lune* in mock protest and has a laugh with the production cohort, but then begins playing Bach more seriously, which Hunstein takes as his cue to begin photographing. But as co-director Wolf Koenig later acknowledged, parts of the film were done after Gould had finished recording: Gould simply repeated whatever material the production team wanted to film and pretended to be in the middle of a session. The sound engineers in the control room played along and gave plenty of faked back-chat to Gould at the piano. This is what Mathew calls “the style of *Gould himself*”: his self-presentation looked quotidian and realistic, but was in fact carefully curated and, most importantly, open to rehearsal and revision<sup>96</sup>. And Gould was certainly concerned with how he looked. When being photographed in rehearsal with Stokowski, the conductor’s preferred angle could not be used because of the set-up of the piano. Gould was happy that they compromised, not only because moving everything around “would have involved an unwarranted waste of studio time”, but because, even “worse”, it would have “placed the camera to *my* right, a notoriously disadvantageous angle”<sup>97</sup>. Those rehearsals took place in March 1966, but Gould wrote that in 1977-1978.

<sup>92</sup> Hecker, “The vanishing performer...”, 78.

<sup>93</sup> Nicholas Mathew, “Gould and Liberace, or the fate of nineteenth-century performance culture”, *The Journal of Musicological Research* 39, nos. 2-3 (2020): 240-241.

<sup>94</sup> Carr, “Visualizing ‘The sound...’”, 31.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Mathew, “Gould and Liberace”, 241. Original emphasis.

<sup>97</sup> Gould, “Stokowski...”, 274. Original emphasis.

Discussing a television project on Bach for a German company, Gould told Page that there “is nothing aleatoric about my television work [...] In the film, there is a discussion between myself and the director which will appear to be spontaneous. In reality, it will be the product of months of hard work, concise scripting, and rehearsal”<sup>98</sup>. I would like to think about this *appearance* of spontaneity in Gould’s television work as an assertion of his own physical autonomy in ways that countered his enfreakment in popular media and criticism. In bringing body, discourse and music together, Gould’s films function as a kind of totalising effort at self-care. To think about all of this properly, I need an extended example.

## V.

*Glenn Gould: The Alchemist*, Monsaingeon’s four-part ORTF television project, marked the first time he and Gould worked together. An enraptured Monsaingeon wrote to Gould in October 1971 after discovering one of his recordings in a record shop in Moscow, offering to make films with him<sup>99</sup>. Six months later, Gould replied and invited Monsaingeon to Toronto. After a few days of conversing and playing for him, Gould dropped him back to the airport and told him that he would “feel very comfortable making films” with him<sup>100</sup>. After the project, Gould told him that those weeks working with him ranked among the happiest in his professional life<sup>101</sup>. To use Held’s term once again, a caring mutuality was born.

As Bazzana has pointed out, Gould “is refreshingly unscripted” in these films, but expectedly “the wide-ranging subject matter of the interview segments was plotted out in advance” even if the “actual conversations were conducted impromptu and edited together from multiple takes”<sup>102</sup>. Just like in previous examples, though, there are instances of complete fabrication, the lengthiest and most interesting of which is the second part of the film, which I focus on here. Gould acts out a mock studio session in which he pretends to record Bach’s English Suite No. 1 in A major, BWV 806. Gould’s producer Kazdin is portrayed by the CBC producer James Kent, who had some acting experience<sup>103</sup>. (He is assisted in the control room by Gould’s long-time collaborator Lorne Tulk, a sound engineer who, unlike Kazdin, plays himself). The recording Gould supposedly works on was actually completed several months earlier, and the sequence in the film served to portray Gould’s creative processes in the studio in an endearing and positive light. As a careful synthesis of Gould’s

<sup>98</sup> Gould, “Gould in conversation with Page...”, 458.

<sup>99</sup> Bruno Monsaingeon, “Glenn Gould”, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.brunomonsaingeon.com/EN/PERFORMERS/GOULD.html>.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange...*, 418.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 419. According to Bazzana, Kazdin was offended at not having been asked to portray himself in the film.

music, intellect and body, it is a richly constructed example of the “appearance of spontaneity” that he favoured.

The scene opens in the dimly lit Eaton Auditorium<sup>104</sup>. We hear the first minute of the ‘Sarabande’ in the background while the camera focuses on the rows of unfilled audience seats. It pans across them to reveal Gould at the piano, perched on his chair, clad in a blue suit and surrounded by microphones (figures 1 and 2). The hall is empty of spectators, and the viewer is slowly transferred from the perspective of regular concert hall-goer to a more close-up connection with the performer. The impression is that Gould has reimagined this site of musical showmanship for his private, aesthetic purposes, and is bringing the listener along on the journey in an altogether more intimate format than the concert hall would allow. Though, given the thousands of homes into which this programme was broadcast in France and beyond, Gould hasn’t so much removed the showmanship of the concert hall as he has technologically mediated it.



Figure 1. An empty Eaton Auditorium

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<sup>104</sup> gesangvoll, “Glenn Gould: The alchemist (1/4)”, YouTube video, 0:58, published September 11, 2011, <https://youtu.be/wmiagqoXaQY?t=58>.



Figure 2. Gould at the piano in the Eaton Auditorium

The camera cuts to introduce Kent (playing Kazdin) in the control room, equipped with a score and conducting along in musical bliss to Gould's performance with his pencil. It then cuts back to Gould for a few moments before he suddenly interrupts his own performance to ask Kent for feedback.

"Your comments, sir?"

"Oh that was beautiful, eh, beautiful Glenn, it's too bad you didn't carry on with that".

"Well, did you manage to get the thing sharpened up a little bit. Is the centre mic, for instance, attenuated now?"

"The centre mic is a little bit above the other two to enhance the middle frequencies".

"Yeah. Uh, do you think it's worth coming and hearing, or do you want me to do another one?"

"Oh it certainly is yes, by all means".

“Okay”.

Unsurprisingly, the dialogue sounds stilted compared to his actual studio outtakes, but the real giveaway, if one were needed, is that Gould cuts his take short mid-phrase to ask for the producer’s opinion without leaving a gap of silence. The contrived question about microphone placement is Gould’s attempt to place himself on technological turf: as we heard in his sessions with Carter, Gould was much more concerned with the immediate sound of the piano rather than with how the microphones were picking it up, at least while he was on the studio floor.

Gould gets up from the piano and joins Kent in the control room. As they listen back to the recording, Gould asserts his directorship in conversation with Kent and Tulk. The camera angle is predominantly on Kent rather than Gould, but the pianist’s arms can be seen conducting along grandly to his own playing as he asks,

“But, the problem is going to be, if we use this as a basic, how do we get in to our finish, because I was arpeggiating and sort of improvising like mad at the end”.

Kent suggests something with an accent somewhere, but Gould is not sure.

“Maybe”, he responds, after a pause, his arms still conducting and his focus seemingly only indirectly on whatever Kent has to say. The scene largely continues like this. The impression is that Gould is fully in charge of both the musical and technical sides of things, and that Kent and Tulk need to be told how to proceed.

They move on to the first “Bourée” of the suite, and the camera angle changes. Instead of shooting Gould diagonally, where his meditatively swaying torso could be best captured, the camera centres on his facial expressions (figure 3). In the opening bars, Gould conducts himself with his left hand while visibly singing along. When his left hand joins his right at the keyboard moments later, his whole head seems caught in a musical enchantment of some kind: his cheeks and long hair bounce as his head twitches, his eyebrows furrow and then leap into his forehead with each right hand mordent, and he closes his eyes. Elsewhere, Nicholas Cook has pointed out that moments like these are rendered so expressive by the “sheer density of gestural figures” that Gould executes<sup>105</sup>. That is true of this passage too, but more specifically, the exclusive focus on Gould’s head here prioritises contemplation over embodiment.

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<sup>105</sup> Nicholas Cook, “Seeing Sound, hearing the body: Glenn Gould plays Webern’s *Piano Variations*”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Western Art*, ed. Yael Kaduri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 130.





Figure 3. Gould performing the “Bourée”

What happens next is a kind of imitation of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Gould cadences on E major and, without a moment's thought, proclaims, “That is too boring, let's try it again”. For the second take, Gould takes off at a much faster pace, this time watching his hands intently. But he breaks off after several bars, not because the tempo was beyond his abilities but because it was, in his words, “too crazy”.

“Again”, he calls.

After a false start, Gould takes off and plays solidly for over a minute, stopping after he reaches the end of the first main section of the piece.

“Yeah I messed up one thing near the end”, he says, “which I think we can do with a fix”. He is referring to a single wrong note that, as Monsaingeon remembers, was also entirely planned so as to make the session seem realistic<sup>106</sup>.

There is a lot going on here but it all fits into Gould's mind/body hierarchy that Sanden pointed out: the moments of focus on Gould's head and facial features foreground the mental process

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<sup>106</sup> Monsaingeon, “Glenn Gould”, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.brunomonsaingeon.com/EN/PERFORMERS/GOULD.html>.

involved in Gould's playing. This, coupled with his virtuosic flexibility in interpreting the "Bourée", gives the impression that his mind can command his body to do anything that he wants. But it is the final scene of this instalment of the series in which Gould takes this to its most extreme: he has just played Alexander Scriabin's "Désir" from his *2 Pièces*, Op. 57, and is now in the control room listening back to his recording. Tulk is sitting at the mixing desk and Gould is standing over him, telling him which faders to manipulate to change the volume balance of the recording<sup>107</sup>.

"That's very nice... gradually start to slide [Fader Number] 2, but don't take up 1... a bit more 2. Hold 1! Keep 2. Don't take out 1. No, no, that's plenty! Don't take out 1. Bring in 3, very gradually, very slowly... Now, at the top of this phrase, 3 should be just climaxing. A little bit more, a little bit more, this *should* be the top of 3, right on this chord. Lovely!"



Figure 4. Gould conducting Tulk at the mixing desk

Tulk is dutifully sliding faders as Gould instructs, but more importantly, Gould is conducting while all of this is happening (figure 4). His head is buried in his score, his pencil in hand and his arms quite dramatically beating time to his own recording. It is as if he is on the podium and Tulk is his orchestra, his 'instrument' the mixing board. Gould's relentless feedback positions him as a maestro rehearsing his players, working hard to shape the sound he can hear in his head. The message is that he is not *just* a pianist: he is a conductor, a sound engineer, effectively his own producer—in a word, an

<sup>107</sup> gesangvoll, "Glenn Gould: The alchemist (4/4)", YouTube video, 7:34, published September 11, 2021, <https://youtu.be/4R9ZKwVP250?t=454>.

auteur. He attenuates his pianistic body and, in showcasing multitasking mastery, attempts instead to embody his ideals of musical intelligence and sophistication. While Gould may have fancied himself as an auteur of sorts, Hecker has pointed out how this distorts the extent to which “he relied upon people within his inner circle, such as Kazdin, to conduct the mixes, set up microphones, attend to the minutiae of fragments of tape splicing, solve problems and exorcise the ‘gremlins’ from within the studio itself”<sup>108</sup>. And Kazdin, in his own book on working with Gould, has written that “In the press, Gould became known as a ‘tape wizard’; he wasn’t. He merely understood the full potential of the tape-splicing process”<sup>109</sup>.

It would be easy to dismiss this whole episode as an exercise in self-aggrandisement, but I see more to it than that. As Carr puts it, “Gould, by the late 1950s, had become one of classical music’s apostles to the masses”, propelled to stardom by “a slew of images that put the accent on his vitality, rebelliousness, spontaneity, and youth”<sup>110</sup>. With this intense publicity came forms of cultural reception and criticism that often configured his body in harmful ways. Between Columbia’s photo ops, cartoonists’ caricatures and critics’ reviews, his body was portrayed as freakish, fascinating, sexual, or sensational in some other sense<sup>111</sup>. As his celebrity status grew, he lost control over how such portrayals circulated, multiplied, and crystallised in the popular imagination. Withdrawing from the concert hall may have been one way to deter that kind of physical scrutiny, but his television projects were more proactive. By reconfiguring his body as a vessel for musical intellect and auteurship, Gould sought to resist the usually hurtful ways in which his physique was branded. The heavily choreographed recording session in *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist* was for a public audience, but I think we can also see it as a personal venture, a reclamation of bodily ownership and musical identity.

## VI.

“Glenn Gould,” writes Page, “was a supreme perfectionist”<sup>112</sup>. Perhaps that is a more concise way of thinking about his unusual musical trajectory than what I have argued for. But the thing about perfectionism is that it is often underpinned by anxiety, and the way that Gould forged his path, as an artist caught in the swirling typhoon of celebrity, can be understood as a means of managing that perfectionism, of reserving it for environments that were safe and populated by people he trusted. He exchanged the voyeurism and gladiatorial combat of the concert hall—Said’s “extreme occasion”—for the reclusion of the recording studio, eliminating the performance anxiety brought about by the single chance to ‘get it right’ in front of hundreds of anonymous eavesdroppers. His social anxiety, too—his fear of spontaneously meeting and intellectually interacting with people he didn’t yet know well—was

<sup>108</sup> Hecker, “The vanishing performer...”, 81-82.

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Kazdin, *Glenn Gould at Work: Creative Lying* (New York: Dutton, 1989), 20.

<sup>110</sup> Carr, “Visualizing ‘The sound...’”, 33.

<sup>111</sup> Carr discusses the sexualisation of Gould’s body in *Ibid.*, 26-28.

<sup>112</sup> Page, “Introduction”, xi.

mitigated by planning conversations and interviews, reaching its most radical, if logical, conclusion in essays where he interviewed himself. And he countered the often cruel media consumption of his body in popular culture by using film to present himself as not the peculiar sum of his pianistic habits, but as philosophical mind-in-body, striving for a higher musical purpose. His dropout and contrarian lifestyle is like a form of protest, and as Ahmed reminds us, “Protest can be a form of self-care as well as care for others”<sup>113</sup>.

As I have already said, one of the reasons it has been easy to rationalise the ways in which Gould performed self-care is because that is what he often did. His acted-out auteurship in *Glenn Gould: The Alchemist* is an obvious example of that, as is “The prospects of recording”. No doubt he is guilty of believing the illusions of his own grandeur to a certain degree. To see his artistic path more directly in terms of self-care is not to say that he should avoid criticism entirely, nor is it to belittle his musical contributions or technological foresight. What I have argued for is to understand those contributions as indelibly rooted in self-care. When those surface-level achievements—whether in his studio discography, on film, in interview or print—are cut off and coldly rationalised, they obscure the coping mechanisms that prompted and nurtured them<sup>114</sup>. From there, it is easy to canonise him within an outmoded lineage of individual male musical genius, the kind whose myths of creativity have been comprehensively discredited in much recent research<sup>115</sup>. Cook speaks of composers in garrets as the prototypical model for this kind of thinking, and it is not hard to see how easily that model extends to Gould in his recording studio, especially in his lofty, auteur-like self-portrait<sup>116</sup>.

But if care is relational, and if we understand Gould’s various modes of performance as acts of self-care, we must see them as fundamentally tied to social relationships. Gould flourished in situations where he was facilitated by those working with him—Page in interviews, Monsaingeon on the film set, Carter, Kazdin and Tulk in the studio—and struggled when he did not have that caring certainty to rely upon, like when he dropped his train ticket in front of Stokowski. He made the point himself more sharply about concertising when he ridiculed the “twenty-eight-hundred-to-one” relationship between audience and performer that was the “concert-hall ideal”, for him a totally superficial (and terrifying) form of human contact<sup>117</sup>. Seen that way, the artistic choices he made had quite a lot more to do with caring social relations than with the individual pursuit of a grand musical

<sup>113</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life...*, 240.

<sup>114</sup> We might add his radio and compositional work to this list, though I did not have the chance to explore these in detail in this article.

<sup>115</sup> Pamela Burnard, *Musical Creativities in Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); David J. Hargreaves, Dorothy E. Miell, and Raymond A. R. MacDonald, eds., *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Juniper Hill, *Becoming Creative: Insights from Musicians in a Diverse World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>116</sup> Nicholas Cook, *Music as Creative Practice. Studies in Musical Performance as Creative Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>117</sup> Gould, “Gould interviews Gould...”, 318.

philosophy. That does not mean discarding Gould's aesthetics as he developed them: it is simply not to position them as intellectually self-sufficient. As Held reminds us, the "artificial abstraction of the model of the liberal individual is at best suitable for a restricted and limited part of human life", and "we should not lose sight of the deeper reality of human interdependency and of the need for caring relations to undergird" the notion of liberal individuality in the first place.<sup>118</sup>

Let's return to Toronto, 1974, and the conversation between Gould and Monsaingeon with which I began. After Gould expands on the obsolescence of concert culture, Monsaingeon tries to push him further on the rational agenda behind his thinking.

"As I understand", says Monsaingeon, "we are very far from personal reasons. You really found this [recording-based] conception of your activity on objective or musical terms"<sup>119</sup>. But Gould doesn't quite give him what he wants. "Yeah," Gould laughs, "happily I eventually found an aesthetic logic that substantiated what I wanted to feel on the inside!"

On those last four words, Gould presses his hand comfortingly against his chest with a big smile on his face (figure 5). Given all his focus elsewhere on his musical mind and intellect, this moment is something I find quite poignant, in its own way—the briefest gestural recognition of one's vulnerability as a musical priority.



Figure 5. Gould laughing with Monsaingeon

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<sup>118</sup> Held, *Ethics of Care...*, 43.

<sup>119</sup> gesangvoll, "Glenn Gould: The retreat (2/4)", YouTube video, 5:04, published September 10, 2021, <https://youtu.be/yLpdBmTzamMPt=304>.

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