



Glenn Gould: an introduction to the life and best recordings of a piano icon

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Glenn Gould was a truly extraordinary pianist who left a brilliant recorded legacy



Glenn Gould (photography: Fred Plaut/Sony Music Entertainment)

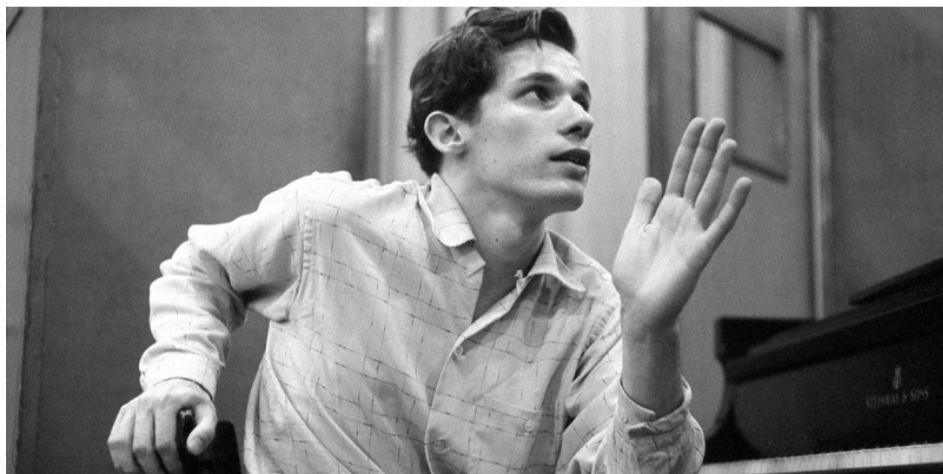
Glenn Gould's unique personality, intellect and pianism have invited veneration and controversy.

When the Canadian pianist's debut LP of [Bach's Goldberg Variations](#) arrived in 1956, its effect was groundbreaking.

The work sounded freshly minted and exciting when performed on the piano with such ecstatic fleetness, crystalline articulation and buoyant rhythms.

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Bear in mind that that early disc was anything but a customary debut vehicle: back then, only Rosalyn Tureck (recorded 1947) and Jörg Demus (1953) had issued recordings of the *Goldberg Variations* on the piano.



Glenn Gould (photography: Fred Plaut/Sony Music Entertainment)

To this day, no pianist has surpassed Gould in clarifying Bach's intricate polyphony, and his discography is anchored in a comprehensive survey of the composer's keyboard works, including part of *The Art of Fugue* played on the organ.

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A wide repertoire

The entire Gould legacy on disc ranges all the way from the early polyphonists Byrd and Gibbons, and [Handel](#) suites played on the harpsichord, to the Second Viennese School and 20th-century Canadian composers – along with an abundance of [Haydn](#), [Mozart](#) and [Beethoven](#).

Revisiting the pianist's recordings 40 years after his death, I find myself partial to some of the early discs, such as a rapturous 1957 account of Bach's Keyboard Concerto in D minor, BWV1052, conducted by [Leonard Bernstein](#).

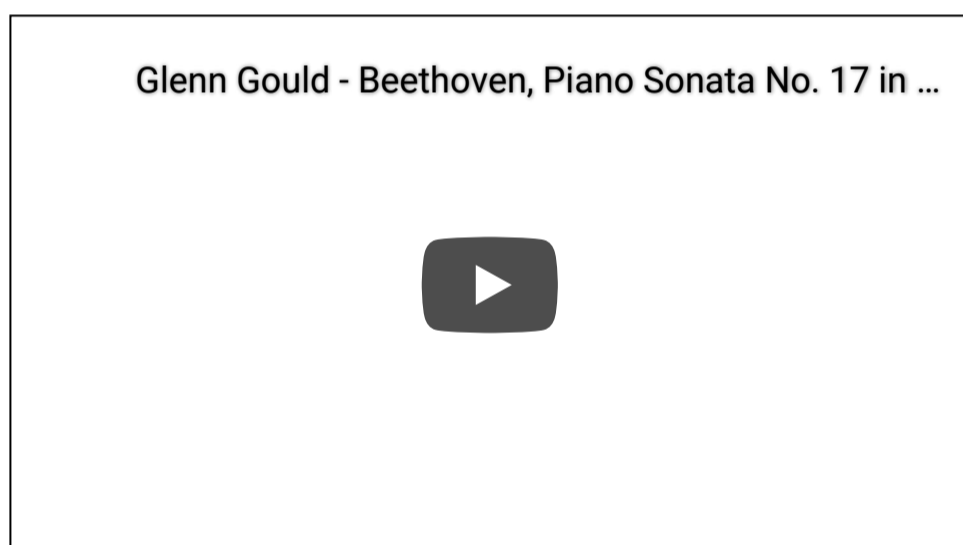
The same fervour and exemplary clarity distinguish Gould's 1958 recording of Beethoven's Concerto No 1, which features the pianist's own exhilarating cadenzas, which he himself admitted were unstylish.

A reluctant live performer

In those days, Gould was performing publicly and recording many of the pieces he performed.

But after only nine years on the touring circuit, the 31-year-old pianist decided to abandon public performance at the height of his fame, in 1964.

Watch – Glenn Gould plays Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 17, *Tempest*:



He had given fewer than 200 concerts in total, but they had helped stimulate a vigorous market for his recordings.

In hindsight, few classical musicians have made such an impact while making so few concert appearances, and Gould achieved success without compromising his artistic values.

A fascination for recording

From his youth, the pianist was more interested in the process of recording than most classical artists.

He loved the heightened control that it permitted. Always a perfectionist, he was more comfortable in front of microphones and television cameras than he was before concert audiences.

In traditional concert life, there were too many variables: mechanically faulty pianos, drafty auditoriums, noisy hotel rooms, the vagaries of plane travel, and above all the 'non-take-two-ness' of the performing act itself.

Gould preferred the isolation of the studio. There he could hone the finished product through multiple takes and splicing.



An idiosyncratic musician

He would sing while performing (clearly audible on the recordings), bringing his head down almost to the level of the keys, while seated on a tattered 14-inch-high chair that placed his eyes almost at the level of the keyboard.

In the studio, his eccentricities extended to his readings of works he didn't much care for. He committed to disc some irreverent, if dazzling, accounts of late Mozart sonatas, and a marmoreal Beethoven *Appassionata* Sonata.

Yet he had a rare ability to convince listeners who disagreed with his interpretative choices, because the force of his musical convictions was never in doubt.

Solo recordings

Notably, Gould's recorded repertoire bypasses much of the central 19th-century piano literature: no solo [Schubert](#), [Schumann](#), [Chopin](#) or [Liszt](#).

Instead, we have solo [Brahms](#), and unfamiliar piano works by Bizet, Grieg, Sibelius and Richard Strauss. Hindemith was another mainstay.

One of Gould's most successful detours is an album featuring compelling renditions of sonatas by Prokofiev (No 7) and Scriabin (No 3).

Chamber music recordings

As a chamber musician, Gould recorded with the likes of the Juilliard Quartet, violinist Jaime Laredo and cellist Leonard Rose.

There was a televised performance for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1966 in which Yehudi Menuhin partners him in Schoenberg's late *Phantasy* for violin and piano. (Their pre-performance chat includes Gould's droll query: 'Putting all your cards on the table, Yehudi, you really don't like the Schoenberg, do you?')

Pioneering documentaries

After he stopped giving concerts, the radio documentary became another medium in which Gould could do some of his most innovative and rewarding work.

At least two of the 'contrapuntal' documentaries that he produced for the CBC deserve to be heard widely: *Schoenberg: The First Hundred Years – A Documentary Fantasy* (1974) and *Strauss: The Bourgeois Hero* ('a conversation piece in two acts about the music and the life of Richard Strauss'; 1979). They are richly detailed homages to a pair of Gould's favourite composers.

Glenn Gould's legacy

Gould's Bach, compelling as it is, may not have quite the same influence today as do historically informed performances, but the passage of time has cemented his legacy as a pianist of exceptional brilliance, a passionate and uncompromising musician, and an explorer of media and technology.

The greatest recording





Bach Goldberg Variations

Glenn Gould *pf*

Sony Classical

Gould's recording debut forms part of this must-have set for any Gould follower. 'Glenn Gould Remastered: The Complete Columbia Album Collection' comprises just that – on 78 CDs, plus three CDs of interviews with Gould and a 416-page hardback book with essays, photographs and detailed discographic information.

Defining moments

1947 – Professional debuts as teenage soloist with orchestra and in recital

January: Gould (born Toronto, September 25, 1932) aged 14 plays Beethoven Piano Concerto No 4 with Toronto SO at Massey Hall, Toronto. October, aged 15: solo recital at Toronto's Eaton Auditorium – plays Beethoven, Chopin, Couperin, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Scarlatti.

1955 – US recital debut success

January 2: Phillips Gallery, Washington DC, performs uncompromising programme of Gibbons, Sweelinck, Bach, Webern, Beethoven's Op 109 Piano Sonata and Berg Sonata. Garners rave review in *Washington Post* (Paul Hume). January 11: same programme for New York recital debut at Town Hall. Next day: offered exclusive recording contract with Columbia Records; signs in May.

1956 – Recording debut

June 1955 recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* released on Columbia, generating tremendous interest and critical acclaim. Becomes best-selling solo instrumental classical album of all time and has remained in the catalogue, without interruption, to this day.

1957 – First overseas tour

May–June. Recitals: Moscow, Leningrad (now St Petersburg), Vienna. European orchestral debut with Moscow PO. Beethoven Piano Concerto No 3 with Berlin Philharmonic and Herbert von



Karajan. Esteemed Berlin critic HH Stuckenschmidt writes that Gould's playing 'represents a degree of mastery that ... has not been seen since the time of Busoni'. In 1983, Karajan writes of Gould: 'When I heard him play, I had a feeling that I was myself playing because his music-making appealed so exactly to my own musical sense'.

1962 – Carnegie Hall controversy

Prior to performance of Brahms Piano Concerto No 1 with New York Philharmonic, conductor Leonard Bernstein speaks to audience, respectfully dissociating himself from Gould's spacious interpretation. Criticism in the press ensues.

1964 – Farewell to the stage

April 10: last public concert – Los Angeles solo recital. Retires from stage aged 31 to devote himself to recording, and radio and TV broadcasting. Later wryly refers to himself as 'a Canadian writer, composer and broadcaster who happens to play the piano in his spare time'.

1982 – Closing the circle

CBS Masterworks issues Gould's second recording (made 1981) of *Goldberg Variations*. September 27 (two days after 50th birthday): suffers a series of strokes and dies in hospital on October 4, shocking the music world. After a memorial service attended by several thousand people at a Toronto church, he is buried alongside his mother in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Toronto. Father later buried there also.

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stereotyping piano, or in fact his more rare for almost two years. Not that he has forsaken the medium, but he has simply lacked a studio that meets his demanding criteria since April 1977.

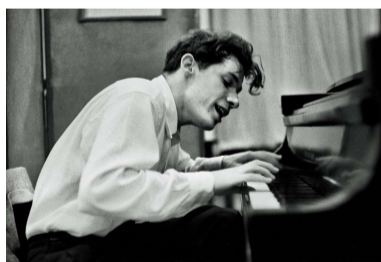
From 1955 until 1970 he had always recorded in New York. "And then", he recalls, "I persuaded CBS to come to a rather remarkable hall on top of what was a department store, one of the Eaton chains, in Toronto. It was on the seventh floor and would not accommodate a full orchestra, only a chamber orchestra. We thought it didn't have very good acoustics but one day I did a test there and put the piano below the stage, not on the stage, and I could get as precise and clean a sound as I did in New York. So I recorded there for seven years and then the store was sold. It closed on March 31st, 1977. I was there on March 30th recording right until the last moment. Current plans have it opening a year from now but being on the top floor, it's bottom priority. I have found nothing else on the local scene that suits, though if my arm was really twisted—which is not the way one should have it when one is playing the piano—I suppose I would go elsewhere."

"This single-minded insistence on doing things exactly the way he wants to go more and on less than one would expect of this extraordinary Canadian who in 1964, at the age of 31,

career and philosophy to date. Though Gould professes his privacy to an exceptional extent, his book demonstrates that there is a wealth of material on which to base such a study, not least from the pen of Gould himself. Payment should liberally flow from this central source.

In fact rather a large percentage of Gould's time is devoted to writing—music criticism, articles and essays both serious and humorous, directions for his recordings, and plays and scripts for CBC. He regularly performs in and produces musical programmes for CBC on both radio and television—on tape, that is. Most of Gould's work on radio programmes is now done at his Toronto home, where he has his own studio facilities.

One of his most recent articles was a 16,000-word memoir on Szymanowski for the *New York Times* and he is now deeply involved in devising a radio programme on Richard Strauss. He describes it as "a merger of documentary and dramatic techniques, approaching the subject through reminiscence and brief personal contacts with Strauss, using eight characters, Norman Del Mar and John Culshaw among them." It follows previous programmes on Schoenberg and a much-praised series, "The Solitude of Being," about existence in the isolation of Canada's vast northlands—which Gould has described as an autobiographical



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