

Solange De Santis

Glenn Gould – The Classical Elvis?

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TORONTO – About the only event missing from the Glenn Gould Gathering, recently held here in honor of the late Canadian pianist, was a séance.

For five solid days, from 7:30 A.M. into the evening, some 200 people from a dozen or so countries watched Gould's long face on old black-and-white television programs, listened to recordings of him playing Bach, Beethoven and Sibelius, attended panel discussions on topics ranging from his musical legacy to his drug habits and traveled by bus to his gravesite for a memorial service.

That was not all. They wished him happy birthday (it would have been his 67th) at a big dinner complete with sparklers on the cakes, attended one play in a church featuring a conversation between Gould and Bach and another at the Stratford Festival featuring four actors playing Glenn Gould at different times of his life.

And there was more. Canadian pianist Angela Hewitt, who is very much alive, performed Gould's signature piece, Bach's Goldberg Variations, on his old Yamaha piano on the Gathering's opening night, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma accepted the fifth triennial Glenn Gould Prize and gave a transcendent concert at the end.

The level of fan excitement – there were sweatshirts, videos and CDs on sale, too – reminded one attendee, Andrew Warren, of only one other musical figure: Elvis. "I was a little wary of coming here. I admire Glenn Gould as an artist, but there are people here who are sort of deifying him. It strikes me as a loss of self," said Mr. Warren, a 25-year-old Toronto choir director and government researcher.

The existence of a cult focused on Gould is somewhat unusual for a classical-music performer who didn't compose much and who's been gone for 17 years, but certainly no more unusual than Gould was himself. Born in Toronto in 1932, he made his debut at the age of 14 and began attracting critical praise both for his technical ability and expressiveness. He became an international figure in 1956 with the release of his first major recording, the Goldberg Variations. In Gould's hands, the relatively unfamiliar work – 32 variations on a theme – emerged with a freshness and drive that vaulted the record to the top of the classical-music charts for a year. One of the most distinctive characteristics of his playing was its utter clarity, like looking through water to the stones in the bed of a river, revealing the core of the music.

The force of Gould's playing was such that many have said it actually changed their lives. One such person was Gathering delegate Konstantinos Loukos, 48, from Athens, who studied the piano as a young man, then decided to pursue a more lucrative career in architecture. He said he heard the Goldberg Variations ten years ago. "It was like a voice calling. When he came to the tenth variation, there was a tremendous power in it. The sound I was looking for all my life was there. I decided with great difficulty almost to abandon architecture and return to the piano." He said he now plays and teaches and married one of his former students.

"It's an electrifying experience, definitely very sensual," said Catherine Zanelli, a self-described "housewife" who was attending with her husband, law professor Enrico Zanelli, from Genoa, Italy. French television producer Bruno Monsiegeon, who was appearing at the conference as a speaker and made several television programs with Gould, said, "I heard this extraordinary voice that said 'come and follow me.'" New York-based artist Brian Rutenberg, who exhibited a series of abstract paintings dedicated to Gould at the conference, was so absorbed by Gould that he visited the pianist's old apartment building and ate in his favorite neighborhood diner.

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For many “Gouldonians,” as one speaker put it, the obsession with the man only starts with the music. As a performer, he was famously eccentric, sitting on his favorite wooden folding chair barely a foot off the ground, nose to the keys, humming along and conducting himself when he happened to have a hand free. In 1964, after nine years on the concert stage, he abandoned performing at the height of his fame to devote himself to recording, writing essays and making television and radio documentaries. He never married, led a mostly nocturnal existence, wore an overcoat, cap and gloves even in the warmest summer weather and ingested a variety of prescription drugs for real and imagined ailments. He died of a stroke at the age of 50, not long after recording another version of the Goldberg Variations that now stands as his requiem.

As a personality, Gould was such a tantalizing mystery that speeches and panel discussions were devoted to whether his reclusive lifestyle was courageous or pathetic, whether his ideas about performing (he wanted to ban applause and thought concerts were barbaric spectacles) were prophetic or neurotic. He was extremely articulate on the subjects of music and media, could be a charming yet difficult friend and quite funny. In one article, he interviewed himself, beginning, “Mr. Gould, when did you first become aware of your growing doubts about Beethoven?”

But the true Gouldonians brooked no criticism of their hero. Rhona Bergman, a former nurse from Philadelphia who has self-published a book called “The Idea of Gould,” said she believes he was “more than human” and his playing “helps us realize the divineness in all of us.” Alabama lawyer Berry Flowers sternly told the conference that although Gould “was wound extremely tight,” he “simply breathed a purer and different form of air than most of us.” A bronze statue of Gould sitting on a park bench (one newspaper writer flippantly said he looked like a pervert) was unveiled as part of the Gathering and many delegates took turns posing for snapshots with Gould’s likeness.

This bothers Theresa Chen a little. A 17-year-old music student at the University of Cincinnati, Ms. Chen said she admires Gould as a musician, but adds, “some people think he was the perfect puritan. They see him as a martyr, as a saint.” While she adds that she is “not a real Gould crazy,” she said she feels he has much to say to a modern audience because he recorded some highly unorthodox interpretations of the standard piano repertory and then went far outside that repertory. “He chose to explore what most people would not. He played pieces by Bizet that nobody played. A lot of people don’t agree on his (interpretation of the) Appassionata (sonata) by Beethoven. They are still interesting,” she said.

When he gave up performing, many of those in the music world felt he was throwing his career away with both hands, but ironically, by embracing vinyl and videotape, Glenn Gould is more alive today than many performers of the past, partly due to his idiosyncracies. “When you hear him humming, breathing, knocking, it’s an otherworldly experience,” said Helene Buchen, 52, a New York City-based translator and amateur pianist.

The Gould phenomenon promises to continue. Next month (November 1999), the National Ballet of Canada will present “Inspired by Gould,” an evening of four short works by different choreographers that either use or are related to Mr. Gould’s music. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s recording arm, CBC Records, just released on compact disk a broadcast performance of the 19-year-old Mr. Gould playing Beethoven’s Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2. Peter Gelb, the president of Sony Classical, which owns all of Gould’s catalog originally recorded with Columbia, said that most of the Gould archive has been published and his sales are “at the very top” for “a pure classical artist.”

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In the end, all of this activity, from breathless fan worship to serious scholarship, leads back to the music. As Ms. Chen pointed out, a man who shunned gatherings, prizes and performing “would have hated all this.” John Miller, executive director of the Glenn Gould Foundation, which organized the conference, said he commemorates Gould by retreating to his library, his “calm room,” with a scotch in hand, to listen to the records of a man who said that the purpose of art is “the gradual, life-long construction of a state of wonder and serenity.”

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