

“Goldberg Variations”—Glenn Gould (1955)

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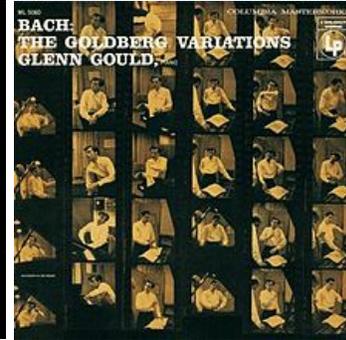
Essay by Tim Page (guest post)*



Glenn Gould



Original label



Original album

In hindsight, one can almost believe that Glenn Gould had it all planned out--the unknown 22-year old Canadian pianist would come to America, astound the critics, win what would turn out to be a life-long record contract on the basis of a single concert, choose an austere and (then) rarely-heard work for his first album, turn that into a smash success, make himself world famous, and change the course of Bach interpretation forever.

Foreseen or not, that’s pretty much what happened. Gould’s American debut--at the Phillips Gallery in Washington, DC, on January 2, 1955--elicited a rapturous response from the late Paul Hume, then the music critic for the “Washington Post”:

Few pianists play the piano so beautifully, so lovingly, so musicianly in manner and with such regard for its real nature and its enormous literature...Glenn Gould is a pianist with rare gifts for the world. It must not long delay hearing and according him the honor and audience he deserves. We know of no pianist anything like him of any age.

On the basis of a single performance, David Oppenheim, the director of Columbia Masterworks (now SONY Classical) signed Gould to an exclusive contract--and it was decided that the pianist's first recording would be the “Goldberg Variations.” It was an audacious choice for many reasons, and it is not surprising that some executives at Columbia felt a certain apprehension about launching a new artist in such esoteric repertory. In those days, music by Bach was hardly likely to sell so well as music by Chopin or Rachmaninoff.

But Gould knew what he was doing--as he so often did--and the album was an immediate popular and critical success. It has never gone out of print, not for a moment; indeed, it quickly became one of those rare classical recordings that were deemed bona fide intellectual *events* by the public at large. If you were young in the 1950s, and you attended the films of Ingmar Bergman, knew your Sartre and Camus, and followed the

daunting stylistic twists and turns from Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and other modern jazz artists, it was more than likely that you were a Gould fan as well.

It was possible to dispute Gould's way with Bach; it was even possible to dislike it. But there was no way to ignore the fact that he had tapped into a fresh, original and--for most of his audience--vastly appealing way of interpreting a composer who, at that point, was still probably more revered than he was loved. And while there had been some earlier recordings of the "Goldbergs" (by Wanda Landowska and Rosalyn Tureck, among others) it was generally considered an austere, recondite and semi-scholarly work better suited to theoretical analysis than to listening pleasure.

When the album was released--its jacket spangled with numerous images of the fiercely intense young man, ethereally beautiful rather than traditionally handsome--it marked the birth of a musical legend, one that shows no sign of losing its potency almost 60 years later.

Indeed, if this joyous, fleet, highly original recording of the "Goldberg Variations" had been all that Gould left to us, it would still stand to ensure his place among the great pianists. He heralded a new approach to Bach--one that combined the stark, separate contrapuntal voicings so easily delineated on the harpsichord with the tonal color and dynamic calibration available from the modern piano. Never before had the German master been played with such dazzling and incisive virtuosity. Yet underlying the technical flamboyance there was evidence of a remarkable cerebral intensity.

Gould went on to record dozens of other albums, including most of Bach's keyboard music, the five Beethoven piano concertos and some two-thirds of the sonatas, music by Haydn, Mozart, and Brahms as well as 20th century masters such as Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith and Ernest Krenek. He made exactly one album as an organist (Bach's "Art of Fugue"), one album as a harpsichordist (four Suites by Handel), and one album as a conductor (Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll"); moreover, several of his own compositions--including an ambitious string quartet written when Gould was barely out of his teens--have been recorded.

Still, when one thinks of Gould, one thinks immediately of the "Goldberg Variations." He returned to the piece late in life, in a recording that was released just before his death in October 1982. It is a wise and beautiful performance indeed, but far removed from the giddy, glorious and seemingly omnipotent romp Gould had with the music in 1955. William Blake titled one of his volumes "Songs of Innocence and Experience." If we were to divide Gould's performances of the "Goldberg Variations" along the same lines, this would certainly be the "song of innocence," recorded by an eager, audacious and untested young genius, bristling with ideas and intelligence that would soon shake the world.

Tim Page is Professor of Music and Journalism at the University of Southern California. He won the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism for his writings about music in the "Washington Post." He is the author or editor of more than 20 books.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.