

**Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould.** By Kevin Bazzana. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003. \$39.99. 528 pp., ill. ISBN 0-7710-1101-6

During his lifetime, Canadian pianist Glenn Gould had legions of admirers—among them many of the world’s foremost musical figures—and he was the subject of a great deal of media attention focusing as much on his eccentricities as on his genius at the keyboard. Since his death in 1982, his popularity, as measured by record sales and scholarly attention in the form of articles, books, films, recordings, and broadcast documentaries, has mushroomed, not just in Canada (or even especially in Canada), but around the world. The newest addition to the Gould bookshelf is this biography by Victoria-based scholar and writer Kevin Bazzana.

Bazzana’s credentials as a Gould scholar are impeccable. Editor of *Glenn Gould* magazine since its inception in 1995, he is the author of the critically acclaimed *Glenn Gould: The Performer in the Work*, published in 1997. With *Wondrous Strange*, Bazzana, who has devoted over twenty years’ research to his subject, widens the scope to an all-encompassing biography.

What differentiates this book from Otto Friedrich’s official biography, *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations*, written in 1989 and authorized by the Glenn Gould Estate, are its perspective and tone. Friedrich tends to promote a more romantic view of Gould as an eccentric, largely self-taught neurotic genius who prematurely fled the public concert scene in terror, only to retreat to the security of the recording studio. (Admittedly, Gould himself did nothing to discourage such speculation, except as regards his well-known attitudes to recording and live concerts.)

Bazzana presents a more balanced portrait of the artist, contradicting the common view of Gould as “an unclassifiable entity who came out of nowhere in 1955” (13), and argues convincingly that Gould’s eccentricities (and yes, neuroses) were neither as unique nor as incomprehensible as first might appear. He demonstrates that Alberto Guerrero’s influence as a teacher was greater than Gould ever admitted publicly, that Gould’s famous “retreat” from the concert stage was intended almost from the start, and that it was followed by a period of intense productivity under conditions which better satisfied the artist’s extremely exacting standards. In this view, Gould had the courage of his deeply held convictions and, at great cost to himself, single-mindedly pursued his own path.

Moreover, Bazzana situates Gould in a distinctly Canadian context, seeking to demonstrate how his tastes and attitudes arose naturally from the small-town atmosphere of the east-end Toronto neighbourhood known as the Beach, “the most British neighbourhood of the most British major city in the most British province of a former British colony” (19), where Gould grew up in the nineteen thirties and forties.

*Wondrous Strange* succeeds brilliantly and is without question the best biography on Gould to date. The extent of the research is in itself most impressive, but the organization and writing are no less inspiring, and the narrative is seamless and wonderfully engaging.

I have only two quibbles with the author, and these regard his appraisal of Gould’s writing style and sense of humour. Bazzana

says, "His writings were never without brilliant insights and provocative theses, but as a writer, at least until middle age, he was at best uneven, at worst awful" (271). He elaborates, "Gould's surviving high-school essays already reveal a fondness for pretentious verbiage, over-ripe metaphor, embarrassing alliteration, excruciating word play, and forced, heavy-handed attempts at humour.... In later life he never fully outgrew the literary sins of his youth" (272). One can readily agree on the "sins of youth," but the adult Gould's writing strikes me as clear and humorous—certainly worthy of more than the dismissive "at best uneven."

Now perhaps it would be wiser not to question Bazzana's judgment since his own prose is so admirably clear and unpretentious. Yet it seems unfair to allow a penchant for self-indulgence to discredit such an important part of Gould's output. He was a prolific writer whose masterpieces combine insight, however idiosyncratic, with an obvious delight in language (the liner notes, "Hindemith: Will His Time Come? Again?," come quickly to mind<sup>1</sup>). This delight expresses itself as humour—always present, often tongue-in-cheek, and frequently downright exuberant. When Bazzana states that "the Gould liner note was inevitably stimulating, and usually provocative, if often unappealingly baroque in style" (217), one can only reply that these are simply matters of taste (though surely there is some irony in finding Gould's writing baroque!).

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<sup>1</sup>"Hindemith: Will His Time Come? Again?," in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1984), pp. 147-50.

I must also take exception to the "pseudo-academic prose" by which Gould supposedly "sought legitimacy as an intellectual" (274). Surely the insights of an artist of Gould's stature have tremendous inherent validity requiring no academic forum to lend legitimacy. The author explains that "temperamentally he was not a scholar—he was an enthusiast"(as if these were mutually exclusive categories), but then admits, "...Gould *was* an intellectual, but he did his most important intellectual work at the piano" (275). Gould did write pseudo-academic prose for fun, but he also expressed serious musical insights. That he was indisposed to enclosing them in pompous, didactic volumes à la Heinrich Neuhaus in no way diminishes their merit.

Gould's sense of humour is apparent in countless essays and published remarks. Take, for instance: "I'm very much the anti-hero in real life, but I compensate like mad in my dreams" (333). Or, in a parody of academic musicology (a favourite target), his discussion of "the resonance of silence... *German* silence, which is of course organic, as opposed to French silence, which is ornamental" (394). Bazzana, of course, is perfectly entitled to categorize the twelve-year-old Gould's description of a proposed opera ("an aquatic *Toad und Verklärung*") as "his most gruesome pun" (280), but paronomastic ability is routinely maligned for no justifiable reason.

But these points in no way diminish my admiration for the book or my appreciation of Bazzana's talent. *Wondrous Strange* deserves great acclaim, and should be of interest to amateur and professional alike.

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