

Book Notes

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Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations
by Otto Friedrich
Random House, 441 pages, \$24.95

This is no "life and works" attempt at positioning the enigmatic Glenn Gould in cultural history. Otto Friedrich, fervent admirer as well as skilled reporter, is above all interested in his subject's public and private behavior from earliest childhood on. An avid reader quickly learns that the eccentric pianist's unconventional actions on stage and in the recording studio derived from and are reflected in boyhood experience. His restless and often prophetic view of the interaction between art and technology, in which he worked out in practice the theoretical constructions of his fellow Canadian, Marshall McLuhan, emerge as creatures of a man who, body and mind, chose solitude as his friend and guide, even as he was determined not to lose touch with the world. For such a complex man, performance, first in public,

later exclusively on disks and tapes, was above all a way to achieve new heights of control.

With access provided by the Gould estate to the barely organized rabbit warren of papers, audio tapes, videotapes, films, cancelled checks, and personal artifacts—including the famous scarves and mufflers that encapsulated him physically—the author has most of what he needs to bring us close. When carton after carton of material does not reveal what Friedrich needs, he presents taped interviews—75 of them—of those who knew Gould. If the answers are contradictory, the contradictions are provided and the reader may judge.

"There is something both exaggerated and poisonous in our fascination with performing artists," Friedrich writes in the preface of this gripping "authorized" biography. "As with our political leaders, we yearn both to idolize them and to possess them, and finally to degrade and destroy them." The Gould cult has gone still further, canonizing him as philosopher and saint, and even according him a resurrection:

one item in the bibliography asserts that Gould staged his death and is alive and well (à la Elvis), "sitting up in Orillia (the lakeside town where he spent his boyhood summers), watching all the fuss."

Few would go that far. In his later years, Gould could be reached only as disembodied light or vibrations in air: the voice telephoning late at night, the piano balancing crystalline counterpoint and exquisite lyricism after take after take and splice after splice, the audio and video collages where he served as anonymous editor. One of many haunting documents revealed for the first time is a list of at least 20 different drugs Gould was taking—a veritable pharmacopoeia—to ward off illnesses, some real, some in all likelihood imagined. After a debilitating stroke in the fall of 1982, he lapsed into a coma. On October 4, his family agreed to the withdrawal of life support systems and allowed him to die; he was barely 50. After reading this account of Gould's life, one can marvel not only that Gould lived as long as he did but that he changed so many of us so much.