

## Dissecting Glenn Gould

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"Which 50-year-old musical celebrity destroyed himself with pills?" University of Toronto philosophy professor Mark Kingwell asks, rhetorically. "Michael Jackson ..." He pauses for a moment, "... and Glenn Gould."

Both spent years at the top of their respective bestseller charts. Both have sold more records – and inspired more myth and speculation – after their deaths.

Tomorrow marks the day, 27 years ago, when Toronto pianist Gould suffered a massive stroke. He died seven days later, kick-starting a virtual Gould cult of devoted listeners, musicians and academics around the world.

But have we really figured out who this eccentric, reclusive man really was? Do we really know what it is about his 1955 recording of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* that continues to mesmerize us?

Shortly after Gould died, Toronto composer Alexina Louie wrote a piece for string orchestra called *O Magnum Mysterium* (O, Great Mystery). The words are biblical, but the mystery was – and remains – about Gould himself.

Now, Mark Kingwell has joined the ranks of the seekers of truth. Yesterday, his new opus, *Glenn Gould*, joined Penguin Books' Extraordinary Canadians catalogue.

In an elegant feat of rhetorical and analytical skill, Kingwell uses philosophical and cultural observations to turn the tables on the Gould enigma. The author shows us how to confront and dissect our fascination so that we can better appreciate our broader relationship with music, genius and our culture.

In conversation at University of Toronto's Trinity College, Kingwell reveals how, like thousands of listeners before and after, he was stopped in his tracks when he first heard Gould's recording of the *Goldberg Variations*.

His favourite of the Gould albums is a recording of pieces by William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons that predate the piano by nearly three centuries. It's part of a diverse collection of classical and pop that he plays to first-year philosophy students before and after each lecture.

"I wanted to make a virtue of necessity," he says of the Gould project – which could hold true for his teaching methods as well. "We are surrounded by music, but, most of the time, it's wallpaper. I wanted to bring music into the foreground."

It's an act that does not involve a chronological account of an artist's life. Kingwell, wanting to describe the jumble of chance and circumstance that shapes people's lives, talks dismissively of "the fiction of biography" and "the lie of the biographical narrative" to explain why each of the book's 21 chapters deals with a different topic.

Each of these subjects is as much – if not more – about broader issues as it is about Gould the man, the artist, the prophet and the oddball recluse.

Kingwell, like a tourist inside our Western world view, explores the nature of time, memory, architecture, silence, existence and the nature of progress. He addresses Canada's self-identity as the North alongside Gould's obsessive love of solitude and wintry landscapes.

Gould lurks in these pages, but more as a sort of muse than central character. In the end, it's our ideas of Gould that are at play here, reflecting the way the myths we build so often become larger than the original subject.

Despite his discomfort with how easily we toss around the word "genius" these days, Kingwell can't escape the topic here. He writes: "Gould's genius was interpretive, but it is no less creative and groundbreaking for that, especially in the aesthetic realm of music, which can live only in performance. His influence is inescapable; no performer after him can avoid the example he sets, an example derived from his original interventions and the arguments surrounding them. Now, everyone must perform through him; he can be emulated or rejected, but he cannot be ignored."

In organizing the book, Kingwell was inspired by the 21 takes Gould needed in 1955 to nail the opening "Aria," the haunting theme that sets the *Goldberg Variations* into motion. The pianist felt that, with each play-through, he was stripping a small layer of something inessential, of himself, from the music, to arrive at the pure core of Bach's intentions.

In approaching Gould and our idea of Gould from a broadly learned perspective, Kingwell hopes to approach the essence of the pianist's broader significance to our country, culture and history.

Writing about memory, and Gould's prodigious ability to remember everything he set his eyes on, Kingwell writes: "Memory is not the vast aviary imagined in Plato's *Theaetetus*, a storehouse of flitting birds we try, with limited success, to catch in hand. Memory, like mind more generally, is the embodiment of a person negotiating the world. Creating a world, indeed; and finding out, in so doing, who else is listening."

In the end, Kingwell is not sure he has found the essence of Gould. But that's fine with him, because he sought more to question than to answer.

As we follow the unfinished, inconclusive story of this extraordinary Canadian, the world is likely to keep listening – and wondering – for a long time to come.

*Mark Kingwell will speak about his Glenn Gould book at Harbourfront Centre's Studio Theatre on Thursday at 7 p.m. Tickets: \$6 (\$4 for members) at 416-973-4000*