

**Glenn Gould.** By Mark Kingwell. Toronto: Penguin/Viking Canada, 2009. xii, 237 p. (Extraordinary Canadians) ISBN 978-0-670-06850-0. \$26.00

This book is an outstanding contribution to Penguin/Viking's series of studies of "extraordinary Canadians." In the two years since its commencement in 2008 the series has grown quickly, and now includes volumes on such figures as Nellie McClung, Big Bear, and Mordecai Richler, on politicians Pierre Trudeau, René Lévesque, and Lester B. Pearson, and on communications theorist Marshall McLuhan. In his introduction to the series, editor John Ralston Saul remarks to his readers that "each one of these people has changed you." While in some cases this "you" is principally a national, Canadian, audience, in the case of Glenn Gould it certainly has wider applicability, since Gould continues to be discovered by many outside of Canada's geographic border. Furthermore, no one who has heard Gould's playing and learned even a small amount about the man, can fail to have been at least affected and maybe changed profoundly by the experience. Extraordinary people—Canadian or not—challenge us to examine our own preconceptions, prejudices, and, sometimes, our whole world view. Therefore Gould justifiably has a place within the series.

It is always difficult to integrate studies of musicians into a multidisciplinary-collection such as this one. Should the series editor commission a practicing musician—perhaps another performer? Or will a musicologist do? The risk is that the performer may become bogged down in discussion of questions of performance technique, which may lose the attention of the general reader. The musicologist may take an exclusively positivistic approach that rarely, if ever, permits leaving the safe harbour of established fact. And, if established fact based on existing sources is all that is being offered, well, who wants to read *that* again? Thus the choice of Canadian superstar-philosopher Mark Kingwell to write this study of Gould is inspired and, as it turns out, liberating. Since a number of books about this most polarizing of pianists have already appeared, our author has also sensibly decided to write a different sort of study from any of its predecessors. This is not to say he has rejected previous scholarship in the pursuit of novelty, however, for he references several standard works in his acknowledgments, including Peter Ostwald's *Glenn Gould: the Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius*, and Geoffrey Payzant's *Glenn Gould, Music and Mind*. Furthermore, it is easy to see how these and other works that he cites have shaped his own thinking (the phrase, "shaped an agenda," would probably overstate his intention, since this book has no "hero" to be worshipped or dethroned) as he composes what he calls his "philosophical biography."

The first novel feature reveals itself even before the reader has reached the first page of narrative, for, turning instead to the "contents" page, one will find a list of twenty-one short chapter headings, each with a single word as its title. Two of these—the opening "aria" and later "quodlibet"—use musical terminology. Others call upon more abstract concepts such as "silence," "existence," or "time." One almost anticipates—hopes, perhaps—that the initial letters of each of these chapter headings will spell out, in

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acrostic, something about the man himself or reveal some half-hidden secret about the author's methodology. They do not, in fact, although twenty-one does turn out to have some symbolism, being the number of recorded takes that Gould required in order to perform to his own satisfaction the opening aria of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* on his 1955 recording for Columbia Records.

Did Gould himself care about his "Canadian-ness?" If so, this is not a feature that Kingwell chooses to emphasize. Instead he shows himself to be fascinated, on the one hand, by the concept of genius as evidenced and lived out by his subject; and on the other by Gould's frequent justifications for his withdrawal from the concert platform in 1964. Given the amount of effort that Gould himself went to in order to explain this withdrawal, it would seem that he found his reasoning somewhat unconvincing.

If I have, up to this point, dwelt more on this book's approach than on its content, this is not because it lacks coherence as a biography. However, potential readers should not expect to find a day-by-day account of what Gould did, where he did it, and perhaps whom he did it with (he was, of course, famously solitary). Kingwell chooses, rather, to pull up a few important facts that interest him, and examines them from a philosopher's viewpoint. Of Gould's birth and childhood we learn quite a lot; of his death, virtually nothing. Gould's two, contrasting, recordings of the *Goldberg Variations*, from 1955 and 1981, are frequently referenced. His glory days in the late 1950s, when his performances in Moscow required hundreds of extra chairs to be brought to concert halls in a futile attempt to accommodate all who wished to hear him, are given generous treatment in the "Quodlibet" chapter; but his physical and mental idiosyncrasies/weaknesses /shortcomings (call them what you will) are also brought in as a corrective, along with mention of his being booed at a concert in Florence in 1958. Scattered along the way are many thought-provoking observations, and if the later chapters may sometimes be criticized for being a little *too* philosophical for some people's taste, one cannot deny that the final section, "Takes," provides a satisfying conclusion to this enthralling and intriguing book.

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