Any extended discussion of Glenn Gould’s career will inevitably turn to one or more of the eccentricities that accompanied his public reputation. Of those eccentricities, his particular obsession with finding the ideal instrument to accommodate his fastidious demands as a pianist was no small burden to those who worked with Gould during his short tenure as a concert pianist and his later career as a studio performer. Katie Hafner’s *A Romance on Three Legs: Glenn Gould’s Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Piano* documents the exhaustive search that Gould undertook to find an instrument that would fulfill his meticulous demands, both artistic and technical (84). Written in a biographical manner, Hafner deviates from the central narrative at numerous points to expand on secondary figures of importance: Verne Edquist, Gould’s longtime piano technician; the T. Eaton Company, the largest Canadian department store in the mid-twentieth century and an important piano dealer for international artists in Toronto; and especially Steinway & Sons, the celebrated piano manufacturing firm to whom Gould subjected the most grievance during his long search for the perfect piano.

*A Romance on Three Legs* is not an academic monograph; rather, Hafner’s descriptive and engaging prose reads closer to a contemporary novel, and includes enough supplementary information to facilitate a general understanding of Gould’s life, the piano manufacturing process, and music in general for a reader...
with no prior experience in those fields. The focal point of the narrative is CD 318, a concert grand piano built by Steinway & Sons during the Second World War that Gould found in the auditorium of the T. Eaton Company when he was twenty-seven years old.

Divided into eleven chapters and framed by a prologue and an epilogue, the book proceeds in chronological fashion, beginning with three chapters that provide background information for the larger narrative: 1) “Toronto” briefly describes Gould’s childhood, including his early development as a musician and the origins of some of his lifelong eccentricities; 2) “Saskatchewan” outlines Verne Edquist’s upbringing and his teenage training as a piano technician; and 3) “Astoria” is a synopsis of Henrich Engelhard Steinweg’s foundation of Steinway & Sons in the nineteenth-century and the company’s quick rise to international prestige amongst piano manufacturers. With the possible exception of Verne Edquist’s biographical sketch in “Saskatchewan” all of the information that Hafner provides has been discussed at length by previous scholars. Kevin Bazzana has authored multiple texts on Gould’s life and music—his extensive biography entitled *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (2003) is arguably the leading source in its field—and the history of Steinway & Sons has been documented by Susan Goldenberg in *Steinway, From Glory to Controversy: The Family, the Business, the Piano* (1996) and by Ronald V. Ratcliffe in *Steinway & Sons* (2002).

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters deal directly with Gould’s “obsessive quest for the perfect piano.” Hafner introduces key personalities from both Eaton’s and Steinway & Sons that worked with Gould during his frustrating search, and she briefly describes the diplomatic measures that each took to appease the pianist’s increasingly ambiguous demands. Hafner, too, is diplomatic in her narration of the period. She carefully examines available evidence to present Gould objectively in relation to his actions, taking special care to emphasize the underlying humility that was often masked by his unusual behavior. An example of this is found in Hafner’s description of a lawsuit that Gould filed against Steinway & Sons when the injuries sustained from a pat on his back by one of the piano firm’s employees went officially unrecognized by the company. In the end Gould dropped the suit, asking nothing more than to be reimbursed for his medical and legal expenses because, as Hafner notes, “[all that] mattered to Gould was that Steinway & Sons simply acknowledge that he had in fact been injured… [he yearned] for recognition and fairness, and in doing so he bent over backward to be scrupulously fair himself” (111).

1 The epilogue was added in the trade paperback edition of *A Romance on Three Legs*, also published in 2008.
Chapters seven, eight, and nine chronologically explore Gould’s career after becoming enamored with the above-mentioned Steinway CD 318. Citing from extant letters that are now part of the Glenn Gould Archive in the Music Division of the Library and Archives of Canada, chapter seven (“CD 318 in the Studio”) describes the overwhelming elation that CD 318 brought Gould for over a decade before a careless accident on the loading dock at the T. Eaton Company in 1971 caused irreparable damage to the piano. The following two chapters (“Broken Piano” and “Making Do”) deal with the aftermath of the piano’s damage; Gould’s disillusioned quest to have the “magic” restored to the instrument on which he had recorded most of his catalogue; an unsuccessful investigation by Gould himself into the culprits behind the accident; and Gould’s final acceptance that the piano would never be the same. As Hafner explains in chapter ten (“The Defection”), Gould’s remaining years were spent experimenting with pianos other than those manufactured by his longtime sponsor Steinway & Sons—his final studio effort, a new recording of the Goldberg Variations that was released shortly before his death, was in fact performed on a Yamaha.

Perhaps the most decisive and controversial resolution that Gould made during his lifetime was the decision to abandon the public concert stage in 1964. After giving a critically acclaimed concert at the Wilshire Ebell Hall in Los Angeles on April 10, 1964, Gould cancelled his remaining concert commitments for that season. Although he insisted the following year that 1965 was merely a “sabbatical year,” he never gave a public recital again.2 Many of the factors that influenced his retirement were not unusual among concert recitalists. As Hafner notes, “no performer believed that he played his best in an unfamiliar concert hall, on a bad piano, at the end of a grueling cross-country tour” (139). But the most significant reasons for Gould’s decision to quit performing stemmed from his idiosyncratic values as an artist: “[he] had come to hate the risk taking associated with live performances and grew tired of what he called the ‘non-take-two-ness’ of the concert experience”3 (139). In other words, by 1964 Gould had come to rely on the recording studio as the sole medium through which he could “construct” (in a literal sense of the word) a definite product of his own musical vision. By splicing

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3 The notion of “non-take-two-ness” was originally put forth by Gould in a recorded interview with John McClure in January 1968, nearly four years after he stopped performing publicly. The interview was first released as a bonus LP with Gould’s recording of the Beethoven-Liszt Fifth Symphony in April 1968, and a transcription of the original interview was later published in *Glenn Gould 7*, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 46-61.
and editing together individual sections that he often re-recorded multiple times, Gould boldly exploited the “take-two-ness” of the studio environment to produce an interpretation worthy of his own approval. As Gould himself explained to Arthur Rubinstein in a conversation that was later published in Look on March 9, 1971, “I believe in editing…I see no particular reason why one couldn’t do something in one hundred and sixty-two different segments and never, in fact, do it straight through.”

Herein lies a significant reason for his decision to dedicate his career to recording, one that Hafner does not discuss in A Romance on Three Legs: Gould as composer.

An early profile of the young pianist published in Maclean’s Magazine on 28 April 1956 reveals that Gould viewed performing mainly as “a convenient way to make enough money so [he] could afford to compose,” and that he wished to eventually “be known primarily as a composer, not a pianist.”

Gould’s String Quartet Op. 1 (1956), of which he purportedly spent three years composing, was premiered by the Montreal String Quartet on CBC radio in February 1956. But as Geoffrey Payzant observed in Glenn Gould: Music & Mind, Gould gradually drifted away from practicing traditional Western composition because he had been “insufficiently acquainted at the time with the technical capabilities of stringed instruments.”

More important to the content of A Romance on Three Legs, however, was Gould’s attitude toward musical interpretation. As he explained to Arthur Rubinstein, by editing multiple recorded performances together he was able to become “like the composer…because it [gave] him editorial afterthought.”

Gould’s idea of “interpreter-as-composer” continues to stimulate strong debate over the merits of his recorded oeuvre, and Hafner disappointedly passes on an opportunity to expand that debate to include Gould’s obsession with finding the “perfect piano.” As an alternative she puts forth two superficial and, in my opinion, irrelevant anecdotes about Joseph Hofmann and Ignacy Jan Paderewski as possible influences on Gould’s decision to abandon public concertizing: Hofmann performed a concert in 1946, after which many people demanded their money back, and in 1939 Paderewski embarked on a tour to alleviate his “financial desperation” (141). Although the audience’s disparaging reaction to Hoffman’s concert could be likened to the similar reaction that Gould received for his

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controversial performance of Brahms’ D Minor Concerto, Op. 15 with Leonard
Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic on 6 April 1962, at the time he
discontinued concertizing he had been one of the most sought after pianists in the
world.\textsuperscript{8} Finances were certainly not an issue; as Kevin Bazzana observed in
\textit{Wondrous Strange}, when Gould stopped performing in 1964, “[h]is concert fees
ranked near the top for pianists of his day,” and “away from the concert hall,
Gould earned a decent wage by the standards of the average gainfully employed
person, but little by the standards of star performers.”\textsuperscript{9}

Although a complete analysis of the complexities that factored in to Gould’s
decision to stop performing publicly would be worthy of its own monograph, the
magnitude of his decision cannot be understated, and even within the specialized
topic of \textit{A Romance on Three Legs}, Hafner neglects an opportunity to introduce
Gould’s obsession with CD 318—and indeed his meticulous demands of pianos in
general—into the greater context of his controversial decision. Hafner briefly
touches on the subject when she writes, “From the moment when Glenn Gould
first began touring in earnest, in the mid-1950s, he began to have thoughts that he
would have to give up performing because there were no pianos he could bear to
play.” (125) But with the discovery of CD 318 in the early 1960’s, Gould effectively
found a piano that satisfied most of his meticulous technical demands, and with
the international support he had accumulated over the previous decade of
performing, by 1964 Gould finally had both motivation and means to permanently
confine himself to the studio.

Nevertheless, the primary function of \textit{A Romance on Three Legs} is a
discussion of the topic stated in the book’s subtitle—\textit{Glenn Gould’s Obsessive Quest
for the Perfect Piano}. To the best of my knowledge, this is most extensive literary
documentation of Gould’s lifelong search for his ideal instrument, and Hafner is
careful to acknowledge that such “quests” among musicians were (and are) far
from unusual. In chapter four (“The Trouble With Pianos”) she lists Gary
Graffman, Josef Hofmann, and Vladimir Horowitz among others to whom
Steinway “catered [their] frequently unusual demands” (185). The second function
served by Hafner’s book relates to the promotion of Gould’s biography in a format
that is accessible to all audiences. Just as Gould’s debut recording of enigmatic
\textit{Goldberg Variations} became a “commercial phenomenon”—attracting the interest of
numerous listeners previously unacquainted with Bach’s landmark composition—

\textsuperscript{8} For a detailed explanation of Gould’s controversial performance of Brahms’ D Minor
D13.

\textsuperscript{9} Bazzana, \textit{Wondrous Strange}, 239-240.
Hafner’s book is a compelling story about an artist struggling with the means of his creation, and one needs not have any prior knowledge of Gould or his music to engage in the story being told. In the process, Hafner has imparted a deeper insight into the humble, individual nature of Glenn Gould that was often overshadowed by the surface eccentricities that marked his public persona throughout his life.

For further reading:


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