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Peter F. Ostwald’s Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius is a unique look into the life of the famous Canadian pianist Glenn Gould from multiple perspectives. Ostwald was both a psychiatrist and a close personal friend of Gould’s for a time. Indeed, he was so accomplished as a violinist that he had the good fortune to play with Gould occasionally. The book begins with Ostwald and Gould’s first meeting after a concert that the pianist gave in San Francisco on 28 February 1957. The writer quickly points out the odd nature of Gould’s reaction and mannerisms in front of the audience, as well as the apparent hypochondria Gould displayed during a conversation with Ostwald afterwards.1 Ostwald later dives into the early life of Glenn Gould as told by the people closest to the pianist to understand what shaped this prodigy, as well as the elements that led to his eventual abandonment of the concert stage for the recording studio. The main question that Ostwald tries to explore, implied by the title, is: Was eccentric lifestyle what led to Gould’s genius or vice versa? Does a genius sacrifice his or her personal life for a greater good?

According to the author himself, Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius is the first book written that explores Glenn Gould from a psychological and psychiatric perspective. Although this book deals with both musical and medical aspects of the pianist’s life, the style of writing is generally not alienating to the average reader who

may not be a professional or expert in these subjects (with only one exception towards the end). At 335 pages, this book is organized into 26 relatively short chapters, preceded by a short introduction and a foreword by the author’s wife, the author having passed away a year before the book was published. The short chapters make for easy reading, holding the reader’s attention for the duration of the subject covered by each section.

Although the first eight chapters seem to deal with biographical matters relating to the childhood and upbringing of Glenn Gould, Ostwald is able to raise important points concerning how events during this period contributed to mental and physical health issues later in the pianist’s life. In chapter 3, “Infancy,” Ostwald brings to light some interesting information regarding Gould’s abnormal behaviour as a child. Ostwald describes Gould’s early behaviour, writing that: “The absence of crying is distinctly abnormal, and flapping movements of the hands associated with peculiarities in speech development are suggestive of a developmental disorder called infantile autism.”

Ostwald is quick to dismiss this diagnosis, however, and claims that Gould might in fact have had a variant of autism known as Asperger Syndrome. He goes on to say that this condition has been associated with gifted individuals who have displayed an unusual knack for expression in areas such as music, art, mathematics, athletics, and drama. Ostwald references a book on autism written by Christopher Gillberg, who himself lays a foundation for this evidence and claims that the composer Béla Bartók and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein may have had this disease as well. The chapters that serve as the centrepiece of the book include subjects such as “Self-Isolation,” as well as “First Contact with Psychiatry.” These chapters, along with others, make up the middle third of the book, and it is here where the author discusses the psychological and psychiatric aspects of Glenn Gould’s life in great detail. Ostwald attempts to explain how these affected his art, as well as how these conditions were a result of it.

One problem with the organization of this book in general is an occasional lack of continuity when dealing with various periods in Gould’s life. Towards the end of the chapter “New Faces, New Challenges,” Ostwald finishes by talking about Gould’s falling out with the CBC in 1981. In the following chapter, “Approaching Middle Age,”

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2 Ostwald, Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius, 41-42.

3 Ibid, 42.

4 Ibid.

Ostwald begins with a look into the pianist’s life around 1971. This has the effect of being a little disorientating to the reader, and breaks away from the chronological continuity that is established earlier in the book.

Other chapters in the book, including “The Solitude Trilogy” and “Changing Views of Composers,” tend to deviate from the original premise of the book by simply discussing various projects that Gould was working on without relating them in any way to psychological issues. These sections are interesting and important in terms of understanding Gould’s life and career, but the author fails at times to tie these chapters into the overall picture for the reader.

Two of Peter F. Ostwald’s previous endeavours include biographies of Robert Schumann, and Vaslav Nijinsky. Both of these books are biographies that are approached from a psychiatric point of view very much in the same way as Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius. Further reading on the psychiatric analysis of musicians can be seen in a document very much aimed at the medical community published by Ostwald in the American Journal of Psychotherapy. What sets the Gould biography apart from the previous two is Ostwald’s close personal friendship with his subject (as close as anyone could be to Glenn Gould). Another “friend” of Glenn Gould, Robert Silverman, considered the pianist close but was never sure if Gould ever reciprocated. Silverman goes on to say that this circle of friends included Peter F. Ostwald, as well as others who got together to argue anytime one of them released a publication on Gould’s life. Although an exact definition of their relationship may be unclear, Ostwald’s firsthand account of the pianist’s life allowed him to base many of his findings on direct observations.

It seems that Gould himself may have hinted at or encouraged Ostwald to write this biography. When the author spoke to Gould about the then unwritten biography of Schumann, Gould said: “What you should do, Peter, is write a book about a really important musician.” Was Gould in fact referring to himself? What is missing from Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius is perhaps any sort of concluding chapter that sums up or answers the main questions that Ostwald is trying to explore. In both

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7 Ostwald, Schumann: the Inner Voices of a Musical Genius (Boston: Northeastern University, 2010); Vaslav Nijinsky, A Leap Into Madness (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991).


his previous books, Ostwald seems to sum up his understanding of how great a role mental health played in both the lives of Schumann and Nijinsky. The Ecstasy and Tragedy, however, does not contain any clear conclusion regarding the psychiatric aspects of Glenn Gould’s life; it simply ends with Gould’s final days in the hospital following a stroke. It is also within this final section that the author takes his understanding of medical terms for granted. The chapter “A Fatal Stroke” is perhaps the only section that uses terminology which is a little difficult to understand without further explanation. This seems to be a less than ideal point in the book to alienate the reader, especially when the author went to great lengths to make the writing easier to understand throughout the rest of the book. This flaw may have been related to Ostwald’s final illness and death so close to the book’s publication, and suggests one possible reason for the book’s seeming discontinuity at its very end.

Ostwald wrote The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius in direct response to an earlier biography of Glenn Gould written by Otto Friedrich. Ostwald was not entirely satisfied with the way that Friedrich addressed the medical aspects of Gould’s life, and wrote a review that eventually led to his own book.11 Friedrich’s Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations, published in 1989, is a very insightful look at Gould’s life and work, but the author does not have the medical expertise to tackle or understand issues about Gould relating to his mental health as well as issues relating to the various medications that the pianist took on a daily basis. Although Friedrich touches on some of Glenn Gould’s eccentricities, he does not go any farther into the subject and it is easy to understand why Ostwald felt the need to write a book on Gould from his own perspective.12

Some early reviews were quite favourable of The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius, including a review by James F. Penrose who called it “the most compelling refutation to date of the pianist’s lament.”13 Not all critics were equally pleased. In Christopher Lehmann-Haupt’s article that appeared in the New York Times the same year, he criticized Ostwald for revealing too little of Gould’s life relating to his brilliance in various aspects of his life. He also criticized Ostwald for centring his text around the eccentricities of Gould’s character and in doing so, repeating himself often.14 It should be pointed out, however, that both of these reviews are relatively short and appeared in small articles in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. They do not take the time to really dig into the book on a larger scale. Despite Lehmann-Haupt’s negative

comments that Ostwald dwells on Gould’s eccentricities, this is still the first book to focus mainly on these issues and therefore an important addition to the information available on Glenn Gould.

Although this book may have some issues regarding continuity and overall form, it is a wonderful insight into the life and work of perhaps one of the greatest artists that Canada can call its own. Ostwald sheds light on information that was previously missed or ignored by other authors, and his close personal relationship with Gould adds to the authenticity of his account and comes off as very genuine. It is a fitting final book written by the author who passed away just a year before it was published, bringing somewhat of a trilogy to a close on a series of books that explore the psychology of high-performing artists. In general the text is very engaging and accessible to the general reader and I highly recommend it to anyone looking into the life of Glenn Gould for the first time, or the Glenn Gould fan looking for different insights into the life of the famous pianist.

For Further Reading


