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“The ascetic and the madman, the hermit and provocateur, the preacher and the mischief maker.”¹ These labels are often liberally applied to Gould, as well as to others who choose to live differently. Though the reality of Glenn Gould’s genius is rarely challenged, many of those who write about him are often quick to blame his idiosyncrasies on “a hypochondria that played havoc with his daily life” or other medical conditions.² George Leroux has written about Gould through the eyes of one who grew up appreciating Gould’s genius, and through this lens delved deeper into many of the motivations behind Gould’s decisions. Throughout Partita for Glenn Gould, Leroux unpacks a different understanding of Gould’s path, to show us a man whose choice to depart from the public eye was not because he wished to abandon his public, but ultimately to give back to them through “the mystery inherent in the pairings of withdrawal and communication.”³

Leroux organizes his book through a very creative method, symbolically attaching Johann Sebastian Bach’s Partitas to the different chapters of the text. Leroux


² Ibid., 100.

³ Ibid., 10.
states that Gould loved the *Partitas* and “knew them inside out,” therefore, Leroux thought it fitting to use several pieces from several different *Partitas*, focusing primarily on pieces with minor keys, to match the tone and content of each specific chapter.4

His first chapter, the “Overture” is linked to the “Praeludium” or Prelude from *Partita No. 1, in B Flat Major*. This is one of the few *Partitas* in a major key that Leroux references. This opening chapter serves much the same purpose as introductory remarks or a preface, as the majority of the chapter is devoted to how the *Partitas* link thematically to the chapter content. In the second chapter, “Art and a Life’s Shape,” Leroux connects us to the “Tocatta” from *Partita No. 6 in E minor*, and begins to help us understand how Gould’s withdrawal from the public eye was for the purpose of bringing art back to his audience. Leroux remarks that “the same artist who declared that he detested audiences and refused to be hijacked by the public would devote his life to producing recordings and preparing radio and television broadcasts for that same public.”5 Leroux begins to make a very strong case that it was not Gould’s aversion to the audience that drove him to seclusion, but his commitment to his art. I would question Leroux’s assertion, however, as Gould often made reference to audiences in a negative light, because he believed that concert-goers transformed the artist into a “circus animal” among other things.6

Leroux continues on with “The Paradox of Genius” linked to the “Allemande” from *Partita No. 2 in C Minor*. He delves into Gould’s idiosyncrasies and their relation to his genius, believing that Gould’s eccentricities were not due to a non-diagnosed mental disorder alone. I question Leroux’s objectivity on this subject as he is clearly a passionate fan of Gould’s, stating “all those who love Gould unconditionally...are eager to tell you just when he appeared in their lives, as if that moment constituted an encounter beyond compare. I am one of their number.”7 Can one objectively assess whether the object of their affection is afflicted by a mental disorder?

When most writers discuss Gould’s potential mental sickness, the diagnosis usually arrives at Asperger’s Syndrome, a variant of autism.8 There is some evidence to corroborate Leroux’s push away from an Asperger’s diagnosis, because a tendency toward physical clumsiness is often an Asperger’s symptom. Several other writers,


5 Ibid., 31.

6 Ibid., 30.

7 Ibid., 6.

however, lean toward other symptoms. Writers such as biographer Peter Ostwald, a psychiatrist, have noted that some of Gould’s behaviours were quite symptomatic of Asperger’s Syndrome; Gould’s friend, Tim Page, also makes reference to Asperger’s sufferers being “sensitive to sound, touch and temperature...they also [may] be gifted in music and mathematics, both Gould traits.”

For Leroux to assert that Gould was not afflicted with Asperger’s may be Leroux’s hope, but one should honestly consider the evidence of the other eccentricities that we see prevalent in Gould’s life and career. Moreover, as Mark Kingwell states in his biography *Glenn Gould*, “What difference does it make? It does not explain the appeal of his playing any more than a biomechanical, or indeed a sociobiological, account would.” A diagnosis of this kind may help us to understand Gould’s struggles, but not why so many are drawn to him and his music.

Leroux follows in a similar vein with a chapter entitled “The Hands of Gould, the Body of Glenn,” “Courante” from *Partita No. 3 in A Minor*. Leroux explores some of Gould’s chronic hand, back, and posture problems, leading us to question whether they were truly medical problems or inventions of the mind. In Leroux’s style of matching *Partita* moods to chapters, he reveals that “[his] hope is that the minor key might echo this intimacy with the performer’s body, the artist’s remoteness and uneasiness in the company of others.”

Leroux provides physical evidence for Gould’s pains, citing a story about Gould’s fall into Lake Simcoe in the icy winter. But were his posture changes solely physical? As we watch Gould’s piano posture change over time, Leroux describes it “like a protective embrace, whose main feature was the coiling inward, the refusal to be dominated.” Was Gould’s change of posture both a physical ailment and a surrendering to this embrace, a means of protecting himself from the outside world? In a sudden burst of objectivity, Leroux states that “Gould multiplied his imaginary and catastrophic diagnoses,” alluding to the belief that Gould’s illnesses had a large mental

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13 Ibid., 103.

14 Ibid., 97.

15 Ibid., 103.
proponent, that all his ailments were not solely physical in origin. This is an objective view we do not always see from Leroux. Leroux mentioned earlier his deep love for Gould and defends Gould, primarily in the area of Asperger’s, so to hear an opposing viewpoint from Leroux is refreshing.

Leroux continues on with the “Air and Sarabande” from Partita No. 6 in E Minor, subtitled: “To Read, To Write, To Dream”. As the sarabande is “a kind of movement that accompanies the world’s onward flow and embraces the rhythms of every life,” Leroux wishes to use it to introduce us to the other rhythms of Gould’s life, primarily of Gould the reader—to understand Gould’s inner life through those activities that did not centre around his musical genius.16 Leroux states that “Gould read widely in his youth...there is as yet no proper study of his reading.”17 Leroux attempts to address that void by discussing three authors Gould particularly enjoyed: Henry David Thoreau, George Santayana, and Natsume Soseki. Leroux spends considerable time digging into the writings of these three, especially Soseki, but the connection to Gould is not very apparent. He makes mention of Soseki making a “moral case for isolation and withdrawal” and Santayana’s “generosity toward the community, and rejection of individualism” but I found it hard to connect the rest of the chapter to Gould’s journey and struggles.18

Leroux does discuss Gould’s interest in writing, that regardless of the solitude that Gould sought, he never “tuned out the world’s hubbub; he wanted always to maintain contact with the world using every technical resource available to him.”19 This view is also supported by Roxalana Roslak, a collaborator of Gould’s, that Gould “was incredibly well-informed and showed a remarkable knowledge and understanding of countless activities and events in which he himself would take no part.”20 Though Gould desired solitude, he still wished to remain connected to the world outside his window.

Chapter five is entitled “The Importance of Being Alone,” and is linked to “Sinfonia” from Partita No. 2 in C Minor. Leroux touches briefly on Gould’s love of Northern landscapes and his dislike of Romanticism, but also makes reference to his use of technology to connect his art to distant communities and the eventual “phasing out” of art itself. All these disparate elements make for a confusing read at times. Leroux

16 Leroux, Partita, 17.
17 Ibid., 120.
18 Ibid., 128 and 121.
19 Ibid., 119.
does weave the thread of Gould’s desire to reach people through his solitude into his dislike of Romanticism. Gould stated that “Romanticism was first of all...an emotion that puts on airs, and in these airs finds a means of distancing itself.”21 It seems that one of his reasons for disliking Romanticism was because it separated people. Though we see a glimpse into Gould’s passion for solitude here, contrasted with his desire to give back to the audience, Leroux mixes in multiple topics in this chapter, leading us to question what the desired outcome of the section was.

The following chapter, “Music and a Life’s Shape,” “Scherzo” from Partita No. 3 in A Minor reveals that Gould’s decision to pursue solitude was informed by joy, and not the product of a trauma or disorder. “Gould chose a form of life in which renunciation became, over time, a prerequisite for art.”22 Leroux’s belief is that as Gould’s career and skill grew, the inevitable outcome would be solitude. Leroux also begins to build a greater understanding of what that solitude meant to Glenn Gould, symbolically connecting the safety of solitude and the security of the studio to the maternal security of a mother’s womb.23 The solitude reminded Gould of his early days with his mother, deprived of relationships with other children “because of the number of hours he spent at his instrument.”24

Leroux continues this through to the next chapter “On the Road, At the Lakeshore, In the Forest,” “Gigue” from Partita No. 6 in E minor, concluding with a “Gigue” as all Bach’s Partitas do. Leroux expands our growing understanding of Gould’s solitude, exploring Gould’s solitary journeys to the Ontario countryside and his family’s cabin, and connecting this to Gould’s relationship to his mother. The curling of his body, the safety of his mother, their cabin: he was seeking solitude where he felt safe. “His strength came from another world, from his musical childhood and it’s idyllic setting, the cottage retreat where his mother watched over him at the keyboard and they annotated scores together...his childhood home became a kind of sanctuary.”25 His mother was a place of safety, his cottage was a place of safety, and perhaps he sought to recreate that symbolic safety when he placed himself at the piano.

Leroux strives to make the point throughout his book that Glenn’s desire for solitude emanated partially from an aversion to the crowd, to the mob, to the

21 Leroux, Partita, 145.

22 Ibid., 181.


24 Leroux, Partita, 200.

25 Ibid., 220.
expectations of the public who look upon the performer as a circus animal. This desire for solitude, however, was also born from a longing to free the audience as well as the artist. “To break the conventional pact of the concert hall, then, is first and foremost to free the artist from the public’s demands; but it is also, perhaps to turn the public back upon itself, to give it, too, its undreamed-of freedom, a space where it will not be subject to the narcissistic will of the spectacular, authoritarian, dictatorial artist.”

This view is supported in Katie Hafner’s text, *A Romance on Three Legs*, when she states that “Gould’s decision to retreat into...the recording studio was not only inevitable...but also suited him perfectly as an artist.” In this, Leroux aligns with the views of his contemporaries, that Gould desired to free himself from the expectations of the audience, but ultimately to use that freedom to give back to his audience through his meticulous recordings.

Overall, Leroux’s plan to connect the literary themes of the chapters with corresponding themes in the elements of the *Partitas* is admirable, but I believe it is ultimately ineffective. Perhaps someone better versed in the themes of the Bach *Partitas* would see the clear connection, but I do not see how they relate without spending considerable time listening to the specific *Partita* element and considering it’s relationship to the material. The concept is unique and interesting, but ultimately, I don’t believe it supported his content as he desired it to.

Those who enjoy philosophy and organic literary structures will enjoy this book, as Leroux has a philosophical writing style. I found that many subtopics developed through multiple chapters, and the additional topics that were added seemed to add additional confusion to the definition of the chapter content. Conversations about communities in the north, Gould’s possible homosexuality (or anti-sexuality), and the conversations about his hands, body, and mother, which permeate several chapters of this book, served to blend together several chapter topics, creating a more difficult read.

Though I do not fully appreciate Leroux’s attempt to symbolically connect to Bach’s *Partitas*, nor the occasionally meandering thematic trail, I deeply enjoy Leroux’s sensitivity to Gould as a person, not just as a musical figure. Many materials surrounding Glenn Gould focus on his idiosyncrasies, his erratic habits. Leroux delves deeper to help us understand his solitude, and presents Gould as both a solitary and social creature. As Leroux states, this book is for “those whose interest in Gould makes them want to go beyond the classic polar stereotypes...the ascetic and the madman.” It is a brief glimpse into the heart of Glenn Gould, to challenge the common belief that

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26 Leroux, *Partita*, 34.


Glenn’s escape to solitude was based on trauma or eccentricity; to allow the world to see Glenn Gould’s final decisions as decisions to fully surrender to his art, and to bring that art to the people of the country that he loved so dearly.

For Further Reading


