
Subject: An archival showcase of Glenn Gould, TV mug
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An archival showcase of Glenn Gould, TV mug
Robert Everett-Green
From Saturday's Globe and Mail
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Glenn Gould was not a physically sociable person. His favourite way of engaging with friends was to talk with them for an hour or three on the phone, preferably in the middle of the night when the rest of the world was asleep..

But sit him in front of a TV camera or microphone, surrounded by all the specialists needed to make the best use of those things, and Gould felt right at home. The man who recoiled from playing for people sitting quietly 20 or more feet from his piano loved to talk or perform as a bulky TV camera dollied in for a closer view.

More than anyone of his generation, Gould lived Marshall McLuhan's™ axiom that electronic media are extensions of the body. Recording for him wasn't™ just a means of archiving performances, but a way of living, through the distant yet immediate emanations of vinyl records, radio programs and TV shows.

Unlike his sound recordings, which have been reissued in every way possible since his death in 1982, Gould's™ abundant TV work has mostly languished in the archives of the CBC " till now. Sony Classical's™ hefty new box set of Gould on DVD includes more than 19 hours of programming made for the CBC over a 23-year period, from 1954 to 1977.

It features blotchy black-and-white concert performances by a prodigy barely out of his teens, fanciful studio productions with projections and over-decorated sets, and full-on lectures to the camera about Bach, Beethoven and Richard Strauss. There are even some short promos with Gould in character and costume as a fusty English conductor, a New York theatre guy and a spaced-out 1960s composer.

Like Leonard Bernstein, Gould saw TV as a way of teaching the masses about classical music. But Bernstein's™ Young People's™ Concerts series, which ran throughout the 1960s on

CBS, was pitched from the ground up, with titles like What Makes Music Symphonic? Gould just went straight for whatever interested him most, and talked about it in detail. One of the mind-blowing things about watching the CBC's Gould programs is seeing what he could get away with in prime time, from a son-et-lumière discussion of the mystical art of Alexander Scriabin, to two different performances, 13 years apart, of Strauss's little-known Ophelia Songs. The CBC invested in Gould, and trusted him too, as it has no other classical musician before or since.

"He'd worked a great deal in radio, he'd produced things in radio," said John Barnes, former head of CBC TV's musical programs, in an interview with Gould biographer Otto Friedrich. "He'd grown with us, and we with him. We let him be part of the team in a way that we probably wouldn't have done with someone else."

The most striking enthusiasm Gould brought to team CBC was his passion for Arnold Schoenberg, the modernist composer still seen as the arch-fiend by many classical buffs. Gould gave prominent space to Schoenberg's music on a BBC program in the mid-sixties, and on two episodes of Musicamera in the mid-seventies, but that was small beer compared to the 10-part Schoenberg series he produced during those years for CBC Radio.

Gould wrote his own scripts for his TV shows, read them at length from a teleprompter, and developed a whole battery of tics that he hoped would simulate a spontaneous delivery. Some of his remarks are brilliant, all are deeply opinionated, and many are turgid. Even at his most lucid, Gould the talker is about 1,000-per-cent less convincing than Gould the pianist. That's the real glory of this box: the hours of revelatory performances that don't exist anywhere else.

Gould's best innings as an evangelist critic, and the most all-round satisfying programs in the box, come during the four relatively unscripted encounters he had with BBC broadcaster Humphrey Burton in the mid-sixties. Gould knows what he wants to say, and Burton was no doubt cued to help him say it, but it feels like a real exchange.

The set for those black-and-white BBC co-productions is an unadorned studio, with production equipment in full view. The CBC preferred to dress up its sets to match the subject, building a fin-de-siècle drawing room for a Musicamera episode about music from that period, and simulating a church interior for a program of Bach cantatas and concertos. One of the incidental pleasures of the box set is seeing how broadcasting norms changed, from the formal dress worn by announcers in the fifties, to the on-location shooting style of Perry Rosemond's Variations on Glenn Gould in 1969.

Some important late work Gould did for TV isn't in the box, including Glenn Gould's Toronto and the three programs he made with French broadcaster Bruno Monsiegeon. A CBC spokesman said that those aren't owned by the CBC, and the rights were out of reach.

There are no plans to rebroadcast any of the box material on CBC, but all of it will gradually be lodged on a new website: cbc.ca/gould. Or you can buy the entire 10-disc set for \$59.99, at www.cbcshop.ca.