IN SEARCH OF GLENN

GOULD

Colm Feore: a virtuoso performance

By Marc Glassman

We see him at first as no more than a black shape at the top of the screen. The frame is filled with the ice and snow of the Canadian north. Slowly, the figure trudges toward us as we become aware of piano music by Bach in the air. At last he arrives at the point where he wants to be: an enigmatic presence, with peaked hat and overcoat, silhouetted against a frigid, barren landscape.

This is the audience's first sight of Glenn Gould in a film that won much critical and audience acclaim at this year's Toronto Festival of Festivals, *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*. An arresting figure who has grown in the public imagination since his death a decade ago, Gould seems to be the ideal subject for an essay, but perhaps not for a biographical feature film. On the surface, his life seems less dramatic than enigmatic. His decisions often appeared to be philosophical rather than practical, ruled by ethics in an age that has come to worship the competitive edge. The director, François Girard, his creative team (co-scenarist Don McKellar, actor Colm Feore, cinematographer Alain Dostie), and the producers at Rhombus Media have been able to fashion a stylist portrait of this man of many parts that is as much a tribute to them as it is a reflection of the unusual voice of Glenn Gould.

Glenn Gould arrived, apparently out of nowhere (the nowhere that was 1950s Toronto), in Manhattan in 1955. His debut concert at New York's Town Hall inspired such critical huzzahs that Gould was immediately signed to a contract with Columbia Records, which lasted until he died. Response to his first recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations was so enormous that the young Canadian pianist was immediately elevated into the first rank of classical music stars. By then, he had already begun to create and cultivate the bizarre image that would remain with him throughout his life.

From a June 25, 1955, Columbia press release: "It was a balmy June day, but Glenn arrived in a coat, beret, muffler and gloves. 'Equipment' consisted of the customary music portfolio, also a batch of towels, two large bottles of spring water, five small bottles of pills (all different colours and prescriptions), and his own special piano chair. Towels, it developed, were needed in plenty because Glenn would soak his hands and arms to the elbows in hot water for 20 minutes before sitting down at the keyboard. But the collapsible chair was the Goldberg (Rube) variation of them all. It was a bridge chair, basically, with each leg adjusted individually for the height so that Glenn could lean forward, backward or to either side."

For the next nine years, Gould toured

ALL PHOTOS: CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN

Gould's career: not the stuff of conventional drama

the world, creating controversy amidst the critical plaudits wherever he played. For every success, such as his triumphal performances in Russia in 1957 ("Moscow Hails Gould," *The Toronto Star*), there were attacks, such as the condemnation in *Le Soir* of his appearance at the Brussels World's Fair. It complained of his "orang-outang" style.

In 1964, he quit touring at the age of 31 and returned to Toronto. There he continued to make popular classical records to the astonishment of the music establishment, who assumed that it was only through constant personal appearances that an artist could maintain his reputation and commercial viability. He also developed a second artistic career as a brilliant radio documentarian for the CBC. His show, *The Idea of North*, presented "contrapuntal radio," a description of Gould's own devising, in which he scored voices as a composer would score instruments, creating an atmospheric distillation of Gould's discoveries of the citizen-philosophers of Canada's distant frontiers.

While pursuing his musical and radio careers, Gould also found time to become noted as an essayist, writing with brilliant asides on mainly musical topics. There, his line of attack fell within the general philosophical interests of Canadian thinkers such as Harold Innis, George Grant and Marshall McLuhan. Like them, he was fascinated by the ways in which technology has influenced contemporary society. His own eccentric version of a Renaissance man, Gould was a progressive figure who embodied many of the exemplary qualities of Canadian culture in the Trudeau era—a mistrust of being observed; a fascination with technology; a healthy scepticism; and an ethical disdain for competitiveness.

In creating a film portrait of Glenn Gould, Girard and his collaborators confronted an enormous task. Gould's career, admirable as it was, is not the stuff of conventional drama. His personal life was marked more by what he refused to do than by what he did accomplish. Gould's behaviour—withdrawing from the concert halls at the apex of his career—was perceived by many to be eccentric and contrary. He had no known lovers, conducted most of his public interviews by telephone, and led a deliberately reclusive life while still maintaining a local and international reputation.

The problem became apparent to Girard quite early in the project. "It was clear that there was no way to make only one film and say what it was to think and know about Glenn Gould. The character and his work were too complex to be included in one portrait. I had to find a way to evoke the range of ideas, the range of this complex character." His solution was ingenious. Evoking the Goldberg Variations, which are in 32 parts, it was decided to create 32 vignettes that would not so much summarize as indicate the various characteristics of this contradictory artist.

A key section, indicative of Girard's artistic strategy, occurs in part five, "Gould Meets Gould." In a virtuoso performance, Colm Feore plays the mature Gould interviewing himself. Most of the dialogue in this section is taken from an extraordinary piece written by Gould, "Glenn Gould Interviews Glenn Gould About Glenn Gould." Gould, the interviewee, is bantering with the more conventional Gould, the interviewer, who wants to ask his famous subject about music. "Do you think it's essential? I mean, my personal philosophy of interviewing—and I've done quite a bit of it on the air, as you perhaps know—is that the most illuminating disclosures derive from areas only indirectly related to the interviewee's line of work."

Girard takes his cue from this scene. He provides the viewer with a series of oblique glances at Gould. Over the course of *Thirty-Two Short Films*, we see Gould as a clever stock investor ("The Tip"), as a substance abuser ("Pills"), and as a solitary man ("Personal Ad"). We never see him at the piano or in intimate discussions with friends or colleagues. Girard allows the audience to make its own connections with the artist through the vignettes. "Gould Meets Gould" lets us know early on that the makers of this film are willing to engage in the kind of stylistic and philosophical games that Gould himself enjoyed.

Over the course of the 32 mini-films, one can see everything from talking heads (documentary interviews with Yehudi Menuhin, broadcaster Margaret Pacsu, documentarian Bruno Monsaingeon), to animation (*Spheres* by Norman McLaren with accompaniment by Bach, performed by Gould), to experimental film (part seven, "Variation in C Minor" and part 25, "Diary of One Day"), to performing arts documentation (part 13, "Opus 1"), to fictionalized dramatic scenes. "I wanted this film to be

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eclectic," says Girard. "Since we were working on 32 fragments, I allowed myself to play the game to its limits. The challenge was to extend the largest range possible. We have documentary, pure fiction, abstract and musical films. It's more than documentary, it's a melange of different forms."

One of the most intriguing examples of the fictionalized method employed in *Thirty-Two Short Films*, is part six, "Hamburg." As the scene opens, Gould is talking on the telephone in a German hotel room, dictating a telegram to his manager. He is explaining that he is too ill to continue his concert tour. The bell rings. As Gould answers the door and signs for a package from New York, there is a bit of linguistic by-play of the type that Gould enjoyed. The overseas operator misinterprets "cancel the performance" for "can't sell the performance," which, of course, was never Gould's problem. The chambermaid attempts to leave the room, but she is stopped by the phlegmatic pianist, who insists that she must sit down. The door is shut, the package opened, its contents—a record—put on the turntable. Gould sits near the chambermaid, who at first looks suspiciously at the dynamic man who has kept her there. Gould retreats to a seat further back, and both she and he are transported by the music. Rising from the couch with a look of rapture on her face, the chambermaid takes the album cover and realizes that the man in the room has created the music that she is hearing. This beautifully judged performance by Kate Hennig ends with a simple "danke."

Here's Gould's description of the incident: "the maid is standing, entranced in the doorway with a mop in her hands, transfixed by the cadenza to movement no. 1, which is on the phonograph—it's just ended, and she's just bowed and gone on to the next room." What Feore, Hennig, McKellar and Girard have accomplished in "Hamburg" is more that a simple recapitulation of an episode in Gould's life, charming as it was. They have evoked the excitement, consternation and difficulties of Gould on the road; demonstrated his preference for recording; played a neat linguistic joke; and indicated that his passion is in the music, not in personal relationships.

As "Hamburg" recalls Gould in crisis as a performer, and "Gould Meets Gould" presents the dilemma of the philosopher, "Truck Stop" (part 15), delineates the artist as radio documentarian. Arriving at a diner just north of Toronto, Gould hears first on his car radio and then on the juke box, Petula Clark's hit single *Downtown*. (Gould was a fan of the British pop star.) He orders "the usual" from the waitress and listens, the lone hipster in shades, as a trucker describes an encounter with a lovely young hitchhiker, another man speaks to the waitress in French, while two men discuss the sad state of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Through all of this, Gould gently "conducts" the diners' performances with his index finger. This sequence beautifully dramatizes *The Idea of North*. "Truck Stop" is followed by two related short films entitled "The Idea of North" and "Solitude," which explicitly refer to Gould's radio career and the theme of solitude.

Book-ending these three linked pieces are two short films ("Crossed Paths" and "Questions With No Answers") which call into question the whole notion of creating a biography. How much can any one know about someone else, even a person who is a friend or memorable colleague? Conversely, what topics might a friend not raise that an interested public would—quite impertinently—want to broach? In "Crossed Paths," Girard presents a series of small reminiscences by people whose lives were touched by Glenn Gould. His piano tuner talks about their relationship to Gould's famous instrument, CD318; his maid recalls his love for ketchup and arrowroot biscuits; an old friend admits to falling asleep while listening to Glenn during a long, late-night telephone call. The scene poignantly expresses the idea that no one can understand another human being. The best we can see are the bits that relate directly to us.

"Questions With No Answers" brings up the issues that Gould repressed throughout his life. Here Girard, in an inspired piece of casting, has such figures as playwright David Young, journalist Gale Garnett, and actor Gerry Quigley interrogate Gould. Their questions range from asking Gould about his sexual preferences, to querying him about whether his withdrawal from the stage is a "cop-out," to demanding to know why he hasn't composed the music that he purportedly was going to write after his retirement from the stage. "These are questions with no answers because we didn't have the answers, or Gould did not provide the answers. I know, myself, more than I show in this film, but the thing is I wanted to be as protective of Glenn Gould as he was in his personal life," says Girard.

What is most striking about *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* is that the creators of this film have played so fairly with their subject. They are acutely aware of the limitations of the biographical process. The 32 short films, often created in a virtuoso style by François Girard (an experienced director of art videos), engage the audience in revealing moments from his interpretation of Gould's life.

Will we ever know Glenn Gould? Should we even try? This film subtly suggests that each piece of information, each perspective, helps us understand the artist, but that it may be futile to attempt a definitive portrait of anyone. Certainly in the case of Gould, that emblematic and enigmatic figure, Girard's strategy is appropriate and perhaps inevitable •