

The Idea Of Gould



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Glenn Gould once claimed he could teach anyone to play the piano 'given possession of their spirit for half an hour'. Perhaps he could. Thursday night was *Glenn Gould* night on Radio 3 – five hours of continuous programming. Although not perfect, it was great treat. Really, there should be a Glenn Gould night every year. Christopher Cook compered a panel consisting of Tim Page and Humphrey Burton, who both knew Gould, and Nicholas Spice, a magazine publisher who writes extremely well about music, chatting away in the interstices between features and performances.

The first and last truth about Gould is that, whatever his quirks and aberrations, he added greatly to the stock of beauty in the world. And he took nothing away. So what if he travestied Mozart? Mozart remains.

The right response is gratitude, then. But that got lost in the course of an evening which ended up concentrating too much on the oddities. Right at the start, we were solemnly told by one of the speakers that 'Gould would have been, in the long run, so much more durable if he had gone to university' – as if he could be posthumously be sent back to do better.

In the first feature, on the *Goldberg Variations*, people talked about his 1955 recording of the work. Irritatingly they were not named until the end, so that they could not be identified – although they included such people as Angela Hewitt and Maggie Cole. It's a major annoyance that they could be stamped out instantly by editorial fiat.

Most of the speakers paid tribute to the greatness of Gould's playing, as well they might – but even here one harpsichord player wished Gould had been other than he was. 'I just wanted to have more expanse and more humanity about it,' she said.

The next feature, by an English don called Steven Connor, was a clever heartless essay about the 'cult of genius', suggesting that Gould 'wanted to play out the role of genius'. At one point he actually said, as only an academic cultural historian could, that 'becoming

immortal is a 19th century concept'. Really?

So it went on. Gould's lovely performances were followed up by features on his obsessive use of the telephone, his insomnia, his rejection of live performance, his strange ideas about radio production ...

Finally, Gould's 1981 recording of the *Goldberg Variations* was played. It silenced all that talk. It's a performance full of pain and loneliness – but it is also, as a certain best-selling novelist puts it, 'beautiful beyond plight and time'. Impossible to be blasé about that.

