

# Ideas of North: Glenn Gould and the Aesthetic of the Sublime

ANYSSA NEUMANN

*University of Oxford*

In 1965, one year after his startling retirement from the international concert stage at age thirty-one, the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould took a train deep into the northern regions of his native country, to the western shore of Hudson Bay. There, in subarctic solitude, he began to work on his first radio documentary, *The Idea of North*, a quiet, contrapuntal meditation on the mentality and metaphor of North<sup>1</sup> in Canadian consciousness. Wielding a portable tape-recorder, Gould interviewed five people who had “a remarkable experience of the north”<sup>2</sup> and wove together their impressions of both physical and psychological contact with its elemental force, reflections on “isolation, on absence, stillness, remoteness, and the absence of alternatives.”<sup>3</sup> Upon return to the recording studios in Toronto, Gould cut, edited, spliced, and layered these interviews into a complex vocal fugue, creating an hour-long “docudrama” broadcast on CBC radio in 1967. *The Idea of North* became the first installment of what Gould later called *The Solitude Trilogy*, which included two more docudramas, one observing a remote settlement in Newfoundland, the other offering a glimpse into Mennonite enclaves in Manitoba. No longer occupied by the demands of a concert career, Gould was free to devote himself to the recording studio both as pianist and as creator of radio documentaries, which were, he admitted, less “factual documentary” than “metaphoric comment.”<sup>4</sup> In the womb-like security of the recording studio, released from the musical and social demands of a live audience, he began to cultivate a new aesthetic of limitless technological creation. Central to Gould’s ideal of creative possibility, I contend, was his lifelong captivation with the idea of North, a metaphor for the sheer physical profundity of the northern land, “an escape from the limitations of civilization,”<sup>5</sup> a state of mind. In this paper I argue that by using this metaphor of North, Gould developed a conception of the sublime that linked metaphysical philosophy with artistic invention.

Gould’s fascination with the north did not develop from his freed-up, post-concert-career schedule but rather began in his early childhood. A lifelong resident of Toronto, he first

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will differentiate between “north” as a geographical location and “North” as the mythical, mystical, or metaphysical associations evoked by the geographical north.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Gould, “‘The Idea of North’: An Introduction,” in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1987), 392.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Gould, “Glenn Gould Interviews Glenn Gould About Glenn Gould,” in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, 325.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 21.

encountered the imagery of the Canadian wilderness through Group of Seven paintings, reproductions of which hung in many Canadian schoolrooms, and later through regional maps, aerial photographs, and geological surveys.<sup>6</sup> His sense of the north as something “other,” separate, away from society, stemmed from the weekend trips his family took to their summer house on Lake Simcoe, an hour north of Toronto. Gould was fond of disappearing into the woods with his dog, visiting cows in the fields, and motor-boating on the lake; his preference for seclusion emerged early in life. At Simcoe, he could practice the piano in peace, listen to the radio, and fiddle with recording equipment on his own schedule, developing a lifelong love affair with the microphone.<sup>7</sup> In Toronto, he often retreated to the refuge of the organ at the Presbyterian church his family attended, playing Bach, alone, in a spiritual dimension of solitude: “Those moments of evening sanctuary became very special to me. They meant one could find a certain tranquility, even in the city, but only if one opted not to be part of it....”<sup>8</sup> Gould also opted out of mainstream romantic piano repertoire, favoring Bach foremost, followed by the Second Viennese School. At age fifteen, he wrote that “the aim of these men...is to recapture the pure subjectivity of the Renaissance, Baroque, and early classical era...this return to bygone days has been...a spiritual refreshner [sic] and aesthetic directive....”<sup>9</sup> Also spiritually refreshing were Rosalyn Tureck’s recordings of Bach. In her playing, Gould found an aesthetic direction that mirrored his own attempts: “It was playing of such uprightness, to put it in the moral sphere. There was such a sense of repose that had nothing to do with languor, but rather with moral rectitude in the liturgical sense.”<sup>10</sup> His emphasis on the link between spiritual, moral, and aesthetic concerns in music is reflected in his perception of the Canadian north as a place of spiritual purification and distance, a place where a “neo-Thoreauvian way of life”<sup>11</sup> is possible.

Geographically, Gould’s early experiences of the north actually lay in the southernmost parts of Canada; both Toronto and Lake Simcoe lie in the St. Lawrence Lowlands beneath the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, farther south than the entire state of North Dakota. The country cottage culture at Lake Simcoe, however, tapped into a larger network of lakeside cottages, particularly in the Muskoka District, where Toronto’s 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-class first had access to a rugged landscape and

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<sup>6</sup> Gould, “‘The Idea of North’: An Introduction,” 391. The early twentieth century Canadian landscape painters known as the Group of Seven, active from 1913 until the 1930s, sought to express the spirituality, purity, and magnitude of the untouched northern wilderness of Canada. Influenced by Post-Impressionism and Scandinavian art, the Group of Seven broke away from conservative, traditional portrayals of landscape to pursue discovery of an expression based on Canada itself, its rugged geography and its mystical spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Peter F. Ostwald, Glenn Gould: *The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 90.

<sup>8</sup> Gould, quoted in Ostwald, *Ecstasy and Tragedy*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> Gould, quoted *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Gould, quoted *ibid.*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Gould, from a letter dated August 3, 1971, *Glenn Gould: Selected Letters*, ed. John Roberts and Ghyslaine Guertin (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 150.

austere solitude of the “real Canada.”<sup>12</sup> Looming to the north was this so-called real Canada, the majestic Canadian Shield, a Precambrian slab of rock constituting nearly half of Canada’s landmass and emblematic of Canada itself—its stoic impenetrability, its indigenous populations, its colossal physicality—as solid and ancient as the origins of the earth.<sup>2</sup> For many, Canadian identity, caught up with images of this Canadian expanse, combines the hard reality of geomorphology with what Canadian writer Margaret Atwood calls “shifting boundaries,” for, “until you get to the North Pole, ‘North,’ being a direction, is relative.”<sup>13</sup>

The complex Canadian wilderness of Gould’s childhood imagination holds a unique place in the world’s conception of the north, a collection of austere geographies and mystic tales promulgated by historic explorations, aboriginal mythology, and literary and visual arts. Although fraught with a complicated history of indigenous persecutions, controversy over Aboriginal rights, exploitation of natural resources, and global warming, Canada’s northern soil remains relatively unblemished by international warfare. Unlike Russia, whose far reaches of Siberia tend to evoke exile, despair, and death, Canada is largely undisturbed by the type of political and military upheaval that has marked other northern countries, and the north more easily occupies a space in the mind of Canadian writers as the fulcrum of poetic loneliness and vast, empty places, even though much of the land is, in fact, peopled.<sup>14</sup> Like Russia, with its history of Orthodox monks and mysticism, northern Canada is also home to a certain asceticism associated with the Jesuits, who, having arrived in eastern Canada—then a French colony called New France—in 1611, have become as much a part of Canadian northern mythology as the original inhabitants of the land, the Inuit and First Nations.<sup>15</sup> Mennonites, Hutterites, and the Russian-Doukhobour immigrants survive in enclaves that add mystique to English-speaking Canada’s strong Presbyterian and Methodist traditions, rooted in European Protestantism and its underlying moral virtue.

The inherent spirituality associated with the north traces back to the Greeks, whose paradise-like *Ultima Thule* existed at the back of the north wind; the simultaneous beauty and terror of the north inspired centuries of thought regarding both its transcendent otherness and demonic

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Radforth, “Canadian Shield,” *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, ed. Gerald Hallowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Oxford Reference Online. Accessed 9 December 2010. [www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?](http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?)

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>14</sup> See the fictional and poetic writings of Margaret Atwood, Wilfred Campbell, Robertson Davies, John Buchan, Robert Service, and also the conservationist literature of “Grey Owl” and Ernest Thompson Seton. This romanticized notion of Canada, prevalent until recent decades, fueled artists like Gould, whose physical detachment from human violation of the land and its indigenous inhabitants allowed them to probe deeply into an imagined north without facing the harsh realities of historical fact.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 187.

power, the “destructive force of nature,”<sup>16</sup> the bleak, inhospitable terrain of ice, rock, and volcanoes. Many cultures considered the far north to be the land of the dead, a territory between physical and metaphysical realms where souls transition from this world to the next. The idea of a limitless, almost incomprehensible metaphysical space spurred the world’s imagination to the idea of north as moving “always out of reach,” leading “always to a further north, to an elsewhere.”<sup>17</sup> This elsewhere “...has a metaphoric force beyond that definition. ‘True north’ goes beyond the idea of the prodigious (or malign) north and suggests that, for each individual, there exists somewhere the place that is the absolute of the north, the north in essence, northness in concentration and purity.”<sup>18</sup> As Peter Davidson writes, and as Gould intuitively felt, a “persistent myth of the north in our own time is that the exploration of the Arctic is morally pure, connected with concepts such as askesis and self-knowledge,”<sup>19</sup> like a compass pointing ever northward. Whereas physical survival in the north requires “sufficient internal resources in a hostile environment,”<sup>20</sup> so too does the metaphysical journey demand constant struggle against the relentless reality of external elements, a pursuit of self-reliance and spiritual edification.

What first appears as provoking a sense of wonder in the imagination can become distilled, through centuries of thinkers grasping with the incomprehensibility of the infinite, into a philosophy. I posit that the rhetoric of the north as “a threshold in the mind,”<sup>21</sup> and its preoccupation with the vast unknown, mirrors the philosophical discourse of the sublime, a definition-defying concept first discussed by the Greek critic Longinus and subsequently debated by all schools of thought from Augustinian theology to current postmodern views. In the words of Kant, “The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*...”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, common to all philosophical thought about the sublime is “the sense of the divine, the contrast between the limitations of human perception and the overwhelming majesty of nature,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7–8.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 51. A myth indeed—Orientalizing the north over the course of history turned the north into, in the words of Edward Said, “an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence,” allowing artists to cling to and promulgate the popular belief that the northern regions were untouched, pristine. Although Said was referring to the Orient (East), rather than the North, his argument holds valid for this paper too, that the Other is not “essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality...” North is both reality and imagination, each rich and dangerous.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, “Glenn Gould as a Radio Composer.” *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 1988), 562.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Beissel, quoted in Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 199.

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1911), 90. Emphasis in text.

as a signifier for that which exceeds the grasp of reason.”<sup>23</sup> That the sublime has its roots in Greek rhetorical figures highlights the opposition between language and nature, and ensuing thinkers have come up with various solutions to the problem of the source of the sublime, whether its roots are in the natural world or in ideas of the mind.<sup>24</sup> The eighteenth-century thinker Edmund Burke proposed that nature must be mediated by the mind in order to be aesthetically apprehended, that only the violent terror of nature observed from a distance can be rendered aesthetically sublime. Also prevalent in the eighteenth century was the Christian/Neoplatonic view that the sublime “in its purest form, is emblematic of the creative power of God, that point of stillness beyond the veil of the contingent.”<sup>25</sup> Kant postulated that the sublime “cannot be contained in any sensible form,” and distinguished between the mathematical sublime, spatial or temporal magnitude, and the dynamical sublime, the experience in emotional terms,<sup>26</sup> which parallels Burke’s view that one must be at a safe distance to contemplate the terrors of nature.

Though Gould never addressed the philosophical concept of the sublime in explicit terms, my contention is that the discourse of the sublime, particularly that found in Burke, Kant, and Christian Neoplatonism, closely parallels his sense of the North. The language used historically to articulate impressions of the north—any north—demonstrates the “cognitive failure”<sup>27</sup> usually reserved for descriptions of the sublime: vast, limitless, infinite, overwhelming, what lies beyond. The barren, desolate north is the physical representation of Hegel’s sublime, “an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing.”<sup>28</sup> And like the sublime, the north also describes a “state of mind,”<sup>29</sup> one which became, for Gould, the idea of North, the basis of his creative aesthetic—that is, in the words of Gould’s biographer Kevin Bazzana, “music is primarily mental...an abstract entity...essence rather than appearance...the physical aspect of music [becoming] subservient to the conceptual.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the physical north stands as a threshold to the conceptual north. Writer Annie Dillard describes her experience in the Arctic Circle as the absence of recognizable three-dimensional space and the absence of time,<sup>31</sup> a literally physical blank slate. In this vast whiteness of the Arctic landscape, a tabula rasa removed from the constraints of imposed civilization—which cannot survive in the face of such sheer elemental

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<sup>23</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 80-81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, quoted *ibid.*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Kevin Bazzana, *Glenn Gould: The Performer in the Work: A Study in Performance Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 11–13.

<sup>31</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 55.

force—the artist, through isolation, confronts the absolute idealism of pure form, divorced from banal considerations. The sublime, as a state of mind, offers the possibilities of metaphysical creation rather than natural destruction, freedom instead of oblivion.<sup>32</sup>

Holding that solitude is directly proportionate to an artist's productive capacity, Gould sought to live a monastic existence, both personally and professionally, calling himself “the Last Puritan.”<sup>33</sup> Although he lived in Toronto, had daily encounters with recording engineers, and was, by all accounts, a witty and verbose showman in need of attention and praise, he kept his distance from friend and foe alike by technologically mediating his social exchanges with the telephone. A notorious hypochondriac, his standard attire of overcoat, hat, gloves, and scarf, even in the summer, protected him from physical contact with others, and the assortment of loose prescription pills in his pockets was meant to keep him safe from germs and ailments.<sup>34</sup> Gould tended to sleep during the day and work at night, recording copious amounts of piano music and editing his radio programs in the seclusion of the CBC studios, reigning over his dominion with complete artistic control. His excursions to Newfoundland and Manitoba<sup>35</sup> to conduct interviews allowed him to experience truly isolated life while still maintaining an urban existence. Although the north existed as a physical reality for his documentary subjects, it was fundamentally a concept for Gould, a North, a romanticized realm he could freely explore at a safe, intellectual distance, devoid of historical trauma, political entanglements, and physical destruction.<sup>36</sup> His personal knowledge of solitude was related, in fact, not primarily to geography but to self-imposed solitude, the prerequisite for a condition Gould called the “ecstatic experience.”<sup>37</sup>

“Ecstasy” is a crucial term he used frequently but loosely, never explaining exactly what he meant by it. Gould's first biographer, Geoffrey Payzant, attempts to define ecstasy as a state of mind, writing that “ecstasy is...a solitary condition, an individual person's standing-outside-himself. It is not euphoria.... It is not a condition attainable collectively by a crowd, as, for

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<sup>32</sup> In the words of Friederich Nietzsche, “Only as the genius in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos can he truly know something of the eternal essence of art.” From *The Birth of Tragedy* in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 42.

<sup>33</sup> Gould, from a letter dated January 27, 1960, *Selected Letters*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> For further discussion of Gould's well-known quirks, and Gould's own involvement with the critical reception of these quirks, see Geoffrey Payzant, *Glenn Gould: Music and Mind* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1992) and Ostwald, *Glenn Gould*.

<sup>35</sup> Gould's first-hand experience of Canada's north ended in Churchill, Manitoba, which “although above the tree line but hundreds of miles south of the Arctic Circle...was the farthest north one could travel by train.” Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 296.

<sup>36</sup> In *The Idea of North*, Gould wrote, “But like but a very few Canadians, I guess, I've had no direct confrontation with the northern third of our country. I've remained of necessity an outsider, and the north has remained for me a convenient place to dream about, spin tall tales about sometimes, and, in the end, avoid.” Quoted in Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Gould, from a telecast quoted in Payzant, *Glenn Gould*, 60.

example, an audience at a concert.”<sup>38</sup> In Payzant’s interpretation, Gould felt that “there is no genuine musical experience without ecstasy,”<sup>39</sup> that this awareness of innerness comes at the moment when the “merging of self with music occurs.”<sup>40</sup> And for Gould, who from a young age felt uncomfortable on stage in front of thousands of critical eyes and spoke of retiring before his international career even took off, the concert hall represented the Roman Colosseum,<sup>41</sup> the performance an external spectacle for audiences to watch rather than listen to—the diametric opposite of the aloneness necessary for artistic creation. The crowd, waiting for the kill, stifles the fragile experience of ecstasy, that tenuous balance between self and the negation of self, of transcendence beyond the physical restraints of a pianist’s technical skill and the heavy, wood-and-steel instrument. Morally and aesthetically against the institution of public concerts, Gould believed that: “the justification of art is the internal combustion it ignites in the hearts of men and not its shallow, externalized, public manifestations. The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline but is, rather, the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity.”<sup>42</sup>

To construct a life of quiet ecstasy, Gould abandoned the concert stage in 1964 and withdrew to the solitude of the recording studio, proclaiming that radio and records were the future of music.<sup>43</sup> He turned to the limitless possibilities of “take-two-ness”<sup>44</sup> and viewed recording technology not as a mechanism for reproduction but as, in fact, a new kind of creation, a process free from the linear limitations of live performance and open to the vast possibilities of editing and splicing multiple interpretations into something entirely new, a montage. The music of Bach worked especially well for Gould’s theoretical idea of infinite interpretations “because of its curious combination of structural precision and improvisatory options” which “encourages one to invest it with one’s own personality.”<sup>45</sup> Gould’s idiosyncratic personality is apparent throughout his recordings; his clipped articulation, extreme tempos, pristine counterpoint, transparent structural clarity, and refusal to indulge in the more sensual attributes of the piano make his

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<sup>38</sup> Payzant, *Music and Mind*, 63.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> See “Let’s Ban Applause” by Glenn Gould, *The Glenn Gould Reader*, 245–250.

<sup>42</sup> Gould, “Let’s Ban Applause,” *The Glenn Gould Reader*, 246.

<sup>43</sup> Gould wrote, “I have always preferred working in a studio, making records or doing radio or television, and for me, the microphone is a friend, not an enemy and the lack of audience—the total anonymity of the studio—provides the greatest incentive to satisfy my own demands upon myself without consideration for, or qualification by, the intellectual appetite, or lack of it, on the part of the audience.” From a letter dated February 15, 1961, *Selected Letters*, 43.

<sup>44</sup> Gould, quoted in Payzant, *Music and Mind*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Gould, quoted in Roberts, “Preface 1,” *Selected Letters*, xi.

playing instantly recognizable, a kind of rigorous, ascetic, “Northern minimalism,”<sup>46</sup> diametrically opposite the heavily-pedaled, rubato-laden, romanticized Bach playing so in vogue at the time. Indeed, the listener feels as if he’s listening not to Bach, but to Glenn Gould, whose aim was never “merely to reproduce the expressed intentions of the composer, be it Bach, Schoenberg, or Strauss.”<sup>47</sup>

Nor did Gould hide his sense of entitlement to such interpretive, creative license. He favored composers whose substance was structure, particularly Bach and Schoenberg, their compositional technique not relying on the virtuosic or impressionistic qualities of the piano but instead exploiting the instrument’s contrapuntal abilities. Their “extreme [compositional] economy”<sup>48</sup> generated endless possibilities from the musical material and allowed the performer the freedom of artistic choice. One well-known story, promulgated by Gould himself in *High Fidelity*, recounts the creation of his recording of the A minor Fugue from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. By splicing alternating measures of Takes 6 and 8, Gould wrote, “[we achieved] a performance of this particular fugue far superior to anything that we could at the time have done in the studio....By taking advantage of the post-taping afterthought, one can very often transcend the limitation that performance imposes upon the imagination.”<sup>49</sup> Gould considered his recorded interpretations to be far closer to his internal conception of the music than any live performance could be. Removing social, acoustic, and technical obstacles, Gould became, in essence, a composer, constructing his recordings by retaining the artistic control to experiment with a wide range of tempo, articulation, and voicing, to splice together everything he found interesting, and to change whatever did not work musically or technically. He “lower[ed] the barrier between the music he heard in his imagination, and the one sounded in reality,” producing montage interpretations that may have been a “creative lie,” charged by “imagination and invention,”<sup>50</sup> but that were, paradoxically, a more heightened kind of truth, truer to the creative spirit than any mere reproduction could claim.

In this spirit, Gould similarly constructed his radio programs, *The Solitude Trilogy* as well as other docudramas about musicians, including Leopold Stokowski and Pablo Casals, conceiving these documentaries as musical compositions. Juxtaposing layered lines of text with music, he created a complex, fugal form out of a finite, linear construct. Invented in seclusion and more abstract than his piano recordings, the radio productions were divorced from the tactile, physical reality of piano playing; they were merely spliced-together sound waves traveling through the

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<sup>46</sup> Medvedev, “The Blank Space: Glenn Gould, Finland, Russia and the North,” *International Politics*, Vol. 38 (March 2001), 94.

<sup>47</sup> Siepmann, “Glenn Gould and the Interpreter’s Prerogative,” *The Musical Times*, Vol. 131, No. 1763 (January 1990), 25.

<sup>48</sup> Bazzana, *Glenn Gould: The Performer in the Work*, 26.

<sup>49</sup> Gould, quoted in Clark, “Glenn Gould: Prophet,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Winter 1983–1984), 703.

<sup>50</sup> Medvedev, “The Blank Space: Glenn Gould, Finland, Russia and the North,” 94.



northern Canadian air to isolated radio consoles and their solitary listeners, the sounds of disembodied voices fading in and out, of trains cars clicking over steel tracks, heading north. The radio, as a private experience, becomes “a metaphor for solitude,”<sup>51</sup> technologically mediating between the listener and the outside world as well as between the listener and a vast range of aesthetic experiences. Combining speech and music, ideas and emotions, interpretation and imagination, and weaving them together in a variegated, cyclical, autonomous media reliant on electronic sound waves for transmission, Gould conceived of “a form which expresses the limitations of form, which takes as its point of departure the terror of formlessness.”<sup>52</sup> The blank tape on which Gould recorded his sound world was, like the idea of North, “an emptiness waiting for recreation.”<sup>53</sup> The artist confronts the silence and fills it, giving it shape.

The rhetoric of musical ecstasy parallels Gould’s own description of the experience of social isolation, “a sense of exaltation...the only word that really applies to that particular kind of aloneness...an experience that most people don’t permit themselves to know.”<sup>54</sup> Solitude is the prerequisite for an ecstasy that frees one from self and transcends the physical and temporal limitations that prevent him from approaching the sublime, an ideal realm. In Gould’s final installment of *The Solitude Trilogy*, a portrait of Mennonite life called *Quiet in the Land*, a character says that “we need to learn...to get on in this world of ours without becoming tainted by it.”<sup>55</sup> Gould frequently equated separation from the world with latitude, but, I propose, being unable to abandon the material and physical reality of his art, he internalized this geographical distance by transforming his inner life into an idea of North, an unlimited expanse of creative possibilities.<sup>56</sup>

Just as the Group of Seven painters had seemingly discovered “a new aesthetic based on Canada itself” in the early twentieth century, expressing “the spirituality and essential Canadian-ness of untouched northern landscapes,”<sup>57</sup> so did Glenn Gould discover a musical aesthetic of purity, order, contemplation, and endless wonder based on the idea of the Canadian North as “a place of spiritual cleansing and healing, a powerful antidote to the greed and decadence of

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Cott, *Conversations with Glenn Gould* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 102.

<sup>52</sup> Gould, quoted in Ian Rae, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet’s Novel in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 261.

<sup>53</sup> B. W. Powe, *The Solitary Outlaw* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1987), 164.

<sup>54</sup> Gould, quoted in Cott, *Conversations*, 106.

<sup>55</sup> Gould, quoted in Elizabeth Angilette, *Glenn Gould: Philosopher at the Keyboard* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), 145.

<sup>56</sup> In the words of Kant, “To be sufficient for oneself, and consequently to have no need of society, without at the same time being unsociable...is something bordering on the sublime.” Quoted in Payzant, *Music and Mind*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 194.

modernity.”<sup>58</sup> And though the Group of Seven had painted a *terra nullius* that Gould and other artists, writers, and thinkers accepted without question—expediently presenting a land devoid of human life and history—Gould’s own idealized projection of what this space should be, or could be, resulted in such a virtuosic melding of ancient ideas, past music, and contemporary technologies that his artistic vision and influence has indeed been “made inescapable,” as philosopher Mark Kingwell writes: “He cannot be ignored.”<sup>59</sup> This staggering legacy was not merely captured by recording equipment but was in fact realized as the recordings themselves, auditory reifications of his lifelong search for wonder and serenity. Inherent in Glenn Gould’s art—his playing, recording, writing, and radio work—was a moral reckoning of beauty and virtue, a belief in the transformation of the soul, a desire for transcendence and meaning, and a trust in the afterlife over its alternative: oblivion. In the introduction to *The Idea of North*, Gould wrote: “Something really does happen to most people who go into the north—they become at least aware of the creative opportunity which the physical fact of the country represents and—quite often, I think—come to measure their own work and life against that rather staggering creative possibility: they become, in effect, philosophers.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Kingwell, *Glenn Gould* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009), 59.

<sup>60</sup> Gould, “‘The Idea of North’: An Introduction,” 392.

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The many incarnations of Glenn Gould often appear disconnected, treated as notches to tick off along the road of biography: young virtuoso, concert pianist, revolutionary Bach interpreter, recording artist, writer ...Â Underlying the seemingly disparate factions of his life, however, was an unflinching aesthetic that permeated Gould's work from beginning to end, an aesthetic of solitude, purity, and spiritual transcendence rooted in the geographical and metaphorical north of his native Canada. This article traces Gould's conception of North from his childhood to his contentious anti-concert views, his experimental studio recordings, and his neglected radio documentaries, and seeks to show how Gould's aesthetic not only belongs to the philosophy of the sublime but indeed Her article "Ideas of North: Glenn Gould and the Aesthetic of the Sublime" was published in the December 2011 issue of voiceXchange, a journal from the University of Chicago. She also teaches music history at Oxford University, writes liner notes for Naxos International Records, and has held two Winter Creative Music Residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. This disc was featured on David Dubal's radio program, The Piano Matters, on WWFM New York and WFMT Chicago. Glenn Gould's The Idea of North (1967 original) 59:00 As his biographer Kevin Bazzana points out, Gould's admirers have long identified a certain "northerliness" in Gould's performances of Bach. According to one observer, "Gould's Bach is sparse, abstract, yet mysterious. It is never pretty, certainly not sensuous." "Of Inward Journeys and Interior Landscapes: Glenn Gould, Lawren Harris, and 'The Idea of North'". Essays on Canadian Writing 59 (Fall 1996): 65-86. "Radio as Music: Glenn Gould in Conversation with John Jessop".