



DIGGING FOR GOULD

To many, Glenn Gould was a mad eccentric who eschewed the concert platform for the recording studio. But a new BBC film by Bruno Monsaingeon, who knew Gould well, discovers a sane genius. **Jessica Duchon** uncovers the story

Twenty-four years after his death, Glenn Gould continues to exert a fascination of the kind usually reserved for ground-breaking scientists and authors. No other classical pianist has ever risen to such iconic status - but then, to classify Gould as a 'classical pianist' is rather to miss the point. He may have played the instrument, but he was equally a writer, composer, philosopher, film maker, radio producer and all-round intellectual powerhouse. His true importance, it seems, lay not in the fingers but in the mind.

Perhaps popular notions about madness and genius are partly responsible for Gould's exceptional standing. For alongside listeners who regard him as a saint are those who see him as a fruitcake: a recluse happier communicating with others only through recordings and the telephone, as well as that rare paradox, a musician who wouldn't give concerts. Attitudes to his playing are likewise divided: his Bach interpretations are sometimes reviled for their eccentricity and spiky affectation, yet few recordings have ever been idolised as much as his several accounts of the *Goldberg Variations*.

The distinguished French film-maker Bruno Monsaingeon worked with Gould on a series of 23 TV programmes, filmed Gould playing the *Goldberg Variations* in 1981, and has written four books about him. His new film, *Glenn Gould: Hereafter*, is a moving tribute to an artist whose effect on Monsaingeon's life and work was immeasurable. The film is not a straightforward biography, nor a head-

on tackling of the Gouldian myths and mysteries. Instead it traces a subtle path from the extremes of the opening — a picture of the moon, overlaid by Gould's voice eagerly explaining how he has worked out how many seconds he has been alive - to a conclusion by when even the most hardened cynics will probably have come to view him as far from mad. He emerges as a free-thinking visionary, ahead of his time and saner than most.

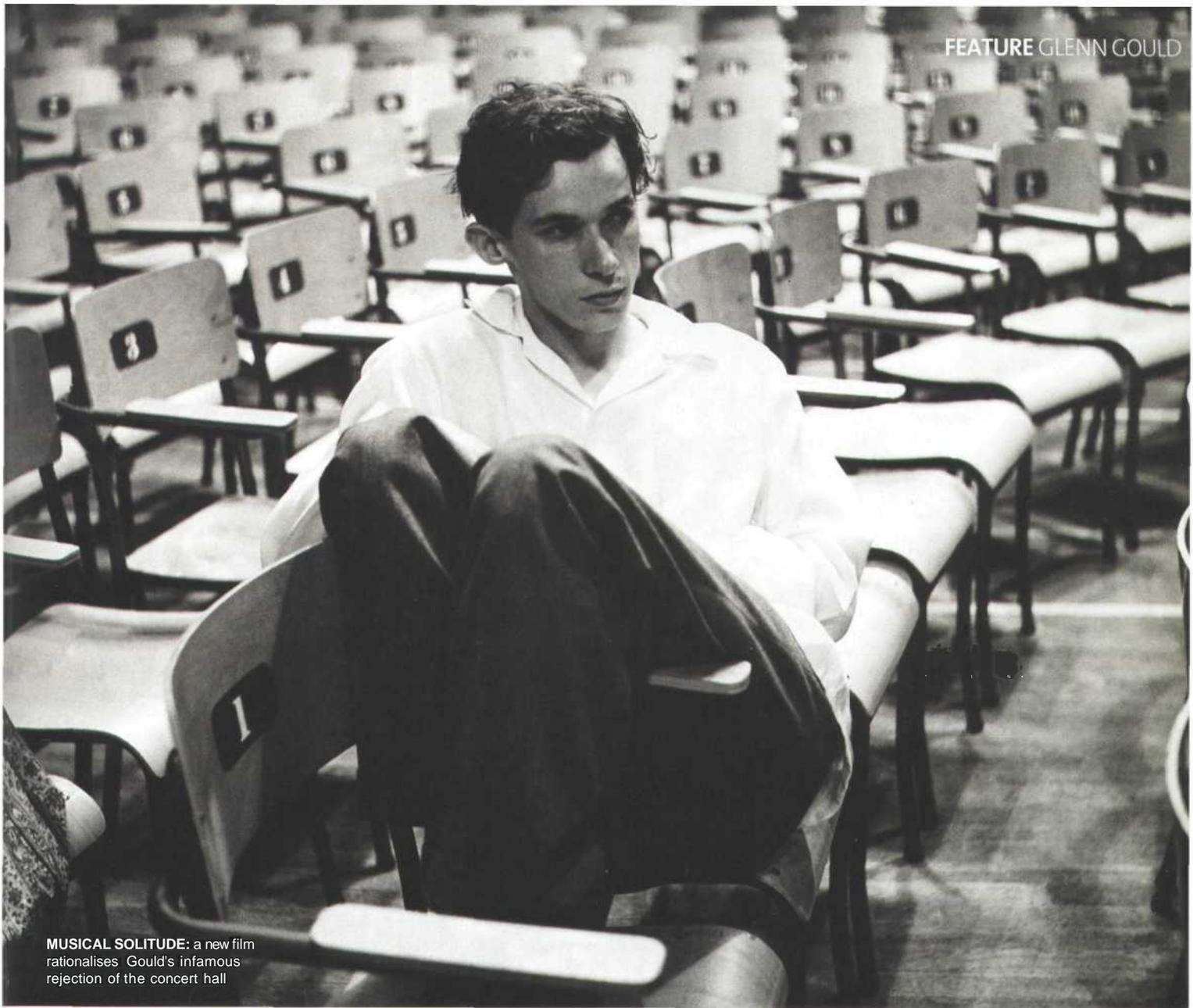
'The film is a very personal statement,' says Monsaingeon, 'and, I hope, an understanding portrait. One of my objectives was to draw a "self-portrait" of Gould, supplemented by the idea of how he is perceived today by a selection of people who have been affected by him. I've used his own words, with no witnesses, as the main ingredient. This is more interesting than interviewing people who knew him, and has more emotional impact. I hope it will reach beyond the ghetto of music, because Gould left an intellectual and philosophical legacy that goes further. Unlike most musicians, Gould's impact has increased since his death. He was a legend in his lifetime, but was forgotten for a few years after he died - then he was "born

again" and now he is just beginning to be understood as a revolutionary genius.'

STUDIO BOUND

Glenn Gould was born in Toronto in 1932 and began to compose at the age of five. His first recording of the *Goldberg Variations*, made in 1955, catapulted him to fame; but only nine years later, he gave his last recital, abandoning public performance in favour of groundbreaking work in the recording studio, on the radio, on film and as a writer. As he explains it, his attitude — that the pressures and lifestyle necessitated by performing in public inevitably interferes with the quality of musical interpretation - seems not eccentric but entirely logical.

His quirks were legion. He constantly wore gloves, he carried innumerable bottles of pills, he operated a nocturnal, solitary lifestyle, often talking by phone to friends — some of whom he never met - for hours on end. At the piano, he sat so low that his forearms reached up towards the keyboard, his large hands with fine, long fingers navigating the keys like some exotic sea creature; and while he played, he swayed in



MUSICAL SOLITUDE: a new film rationalises Gould's infamous rejection of the concert hall

ecstatic circles, often singing along, sometimes so loudly that a vocal accompaniment is clearly audible in many of his recordings.

He apparently used to say he knew he would not live beyond 50; and he died of a stroke in October 1982, a week after his 50th birthday.

Monsaingeon feels that Gould's peculiarities have been not so much exaggerated as misunderstood. 'He was simply observing the requirements necessary for him to have a productive life. People don't realise how a genius has to live. Much of it was sheer good sense on his part. In order to do what he wanted to do, he needed to be away from the crowd and not be in physical contact with people. And if he hadn't stopped performing, we wouldn't have all those films, books and recordings — you can't do that while running between hotels and aeroplanes if you're on the road giving concerts.'

Much misunderstanding comes, too, he suggests, from a sense that Gould's

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unconventional standpoints could be dangerous. 'The critical reaction to him has always been negative in Britain,' he points out. 'He wasn't taken seriously in musical establishments because of his eccentricities - that was the case in many countries. In Russia he was considered the greatest musician who ever lived, but elsewhere the establishment saw him almost as a threat to the profession. Gould always wondered why you should say something that has been said before. That can be taken as a tremendous threat to musicians.'

Many people still have strong reservations about Gould, Monsaingeon says, 'because they don't know the full compass of him. In this film, I'm trying to show material that displays him as a great musician - very moving, simple,

yet prodigious. On the musical side there's total humanity.' There's some astonishing film of Gould in Beethoven's *Eroica* Variations; many extracts of incomparable Bach playing; and a surprising insight into his approach to Mozart's A major Piano Sonata K331. Talking about its famous variations, Gould describes why he begins in an over-articulated, fragmentary manner and gradually allows the music to flow with increasing lyricism. After hearing his explanation, it's suddenly hard to imagine it played differently.

What was Gould really like, as friend and colleague? Monsaingeon's countless anecdotes are touching and often astounding. 'One of my most intense memories is of the time we finished editing the 1981 film of the *Goldberg* ▶



GOULD RUSH: (above and right) 'at the piano, Gould sat so low that his forearms reached up towards the keyboard, swaying in ecstatic circles, often singing'



Variations. He'd come to my place in Toronto mid-afternoon, take me to the studio outside the city and bring me home again around 5am after 16 hours of uninterrupted work. This went on for three weeks. When we'd finished, we came out of that underground studio like moles - we were exhausted, but I knew that I was experiencing one of the most intense periods of my life. In the parking lot early that summer morning, I looked him in the eye, about 20cm from my own, and noticed how penetrating his gaze was. He said: "Bruno, don't go back to Paris today; now we have to watch the film as spectators." I needed to go home, but he was so forceful that I stayed another night.

'After we'd watched the film several times through, we had an extraordinary discussion about Sviatoslav Richter. Glenn had the idea of making a film about Richter with him, Glenn, as producer; he wanted to bring Richter to Canada, have him play his piano, even play Rachmaninov [which Gould hated]. Richter, when I put this to him later, was extremely amusing. He said he'd do it on condition that Glenn would give a recital in his festival in France - knowing that Glenn would refuse.'

Gould, Monsaingeon relates, had an exceptionally 'polyphonic' mind, able to tackle several concentrated tasks simultaneously. Once, while they were working through the night on a script analysing a Bach fugue (Gould insisted on scripts for all his work on film), it turned out at 6am that even though they had been writing, exchanging notes and ideas all night, Gould had simultaneously written, on the side, a hilarious pastiche of Arthur Rubinstein which Monsaingeon describes as 'a literary masterpiece'.

He also loved to play games, trying to identify unfamiliar pieces of music on the

radio or challenging Monsaingeon to guess his favourite opera. 'It turned out to be Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*' recounts Monsaingeon, who hadn't guessed correctly. 'I didn't know the work, so he said: "Take the score and listen to it, I'd value your opinion." A few months later, I was trying to find his studio in a hotel, following the sound of music along a maze of corridors. He had a gramophone record playing - as he usually did - and as soon as I came in, he wanted me to guess what it was, without exchanging a word first. It was *Hansel and Gretel*, but I still didn't know it. "You haven't done your homework!" he exclaimed.'

GOULD'S LEGACY

For this film, Monsaingeon has chosen several fanatical Gould fans to represent Gould's legacy, among them a young musician who has had the first bars of the *Goldberg Variations* tattooed onto her back, and an elderly woman who devotes herself to sending out information about Gould like an evangelist. And there's a Japanese admirer whose letter to Gould had gone unanswered - until a reply that Gould had penned but never sent was found among his papers after his death. Twenty years after it was written, Monsaingeon delivers Gould's letter to her door. 'Not a day goes by when I

don't get a letter about Glenn,' he adds. 'These are just the tip of the iceberg.'

So much material was there that the film being screened by the BBC is a considerable abridgement. 'It's a huge co-production and I had to make several different versions,' Monsaingeon explains. 'The original is 106 minutes; the BBC version is 89 minutes. Still, I'm incredibly happy to be working on a co-production with the BBC for the first time.' The longer version will be available on DVD.

Monsaingeon won't be stopping there. 'We've been working on this film for seven years,' he says, 'and I want to do another right away, about the making of the 1981 *Goldberg Variations* film - thank goodness, I kept all the rushes. I'm trying to collect, edit and publish the whole of his literary output, and I'm trying to persuade Sony to release his private recordings. In terms of intellectual discoveries, there's still much to explore. We've published his diaries from two years of the time we worked together when he said he was having a problem with his shoulder; it turned out to have been a very critical problem, during which time he went into a massive self-analysis that is absolutely terrifying.'

'There was never a suggestion that Gould was a genius intermittently,' says Monsaingeon. 'He was a genius all the time. I have my own interpretation of him - and the wonderful thing about him is that he can be interpreted, just like a musical score which encompasses more than any one interpretation. He can't be considered an ordinary great performer; he brought us something different. He's like someone from another world.' I

At the time of going to press, 'Glenn Gould: Hereafter' was scheduled to be shown on BBC Four in April 2006. This is subject to change.

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