

# The Goldberg Variations

by Jason Lee Norman

The last time I saw Glenn Gould he was in a field somewhere in southern Ontario, singing to the elephants. It was one of those farms where they take animals from the zoo that have arthritis or circus animals with depression and let them just walk around some land of their own. Glenn was waving his walking stick like a conductor and singing to them:

*Bom bom bom bobobobummmm*

I think it was Ravel's *Bolero*. There he was, singing Ravel to those elephants and wearing his long heavy coat and wool cap and his gloves. Always gloves, to protect his hands. He usually covered the insides of his gloves with talc, and sometimes petroleum jelly. There was a rumour that every night before bed he would soak his hands in warm olive oil. So there he was, the last time I saw Glenn Gould and he was in his gloves and coat and hat, waving his walking stick like a conductor's baton. He looked at me and said, 'these are the happiest days of my life'.

The last time I saw Glenn Gould before that it was in Vladivostok. He was giving a concert for the people of Russia. Glenn insisted that his chair was to be exactly 14 inches off the ground. He wanted to be at eye level with the keys. The piano was the only thing Glenn really loved. He caressed the keys and he would whisper to the piano during his performances. People in the front rows could even hear him humming throughout. His performance of the Bach's Goldberg Variations brought all of Russia to tears. They would have given him a key to the city except at that time the Russians did not use keys. They basically just put their fingers into the hole where the key would normally go and then just push it open. Instead of a key to the city ceremony, the mayor and the citizens of Vladivostok all pointed their index fingers in the air for Glenn Gould. He found this to be a moving and suitable tribute.

The last time I saw Glenn Gould before that he had just jumped over his last fireball spewing pit of lava. He grabbed a golden axe

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with his two gloved hands and burst into the castle's main chamber to find me standing there. Sorry Glenn Gould, I said, but our princess is in another castle. After that, Glenn and I went to an all night diner and ate scrambled eggs. After our meal he looked at me and asked if there was a way that we could both become brothers. Like if one of us could adopt the other. If we could just visit the courthouse and fill out some forms-could we make it official that way? I told him that I didn't think it worked like that but I thought it was a very sweet idea. I also told him that my two younger brothers should probably have a say in things as well. Glenn agreed with this and reached out and touched my arm with his gloved hand.

The last time I saw Glenn Gould before that was when we were standing together at the entrance to Toronto General Hospital where his mother was being treated. His hypochondria kept him paralyzed in the courtyard, unable to enter, even to sit with his dying mother. He preferred to go back to his apartment and call her on the phone. Glenn saw the hospital as filled with germs that were out to destroy him. Much like an audience whose main function was to strip him down to nothing but his exposed nerves and devour him slowly. Glenn Gould despised germs and despised audiences. After a week I was finally able to convince him, not that the hospital was not filled with germs, but that they were not out to get him specifically. Germs were fickle, I told him. He was then finally able to sit with his dying mother and she was able to hold his soft gloved hand in hers as he hummed to her some Bach, or possibly, Ravel's *Bolero*.

