Gould’s Visions and Contemporary Bach Performance

For the past half-century, a specter has haunted the interpretation of J.S. Bach on the piano—the specter of Glenn Gould. As Gould’s legend grew after his death in 1982, pianists were led increasingly to grapple with the influence of his voluminous recorded output. Bach’s scores already present considerable practical and philosophical problems for the pianist. Gould’s stereo and film recordings of nearly the whole corpus of Bach’s keyboard works have served to augment that challenge by introducing an entirely new category of interpretive questions centering on the relation between technology and performance. Moreover, Gould’s very pursuit of novel musical experiences mediated by then-recent advancements in recording and playback technology served to undermine conventional acts of interpretation themselves, as well as the institutions that promoted and perpetuated them. The question raised by Gould's recordings is not simply “how is Bach to be played on the piano?”, but, rather, “by what technological means and under what social conditions is Bach to be realized and disseminated in the future?” In this paper, I will identify and evaluate the diversity of approaches to Bach interpretation on the piano in the wake of Gould. I argue that the deeper problem he posed regarding Bach’s significance in an age of rapid technological advancement has largely been unheeded. My presentation will feature excerpts from recorded performances, as well as my own live demonstrations at the piano, in an effort to clarify the elusive relation between Gould’s techno-utopian visions and his idiosyncratic performances of Bach.