

# THE SOUND TRACKING OF THE TIMES

By Nicholas Gebhardt

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**I**n an interview in 1981, the pianist Glenn Gould commented to his interviewer that one of the things he found most moving about the final Contrapunctus in *The Art of the Fugue* was that J.S. Bach was writing this music against every possible tendency of the time.<sup>1</sup> This rigorous observation suggests something at work in the way in which we now think about music, and as a consequence, about sound, that bears directly on the question of art's relation to technical processes, to industry, to economy, and also, to thought. Raising the aesthetic and political spectre of "the times," Gould forces us to consider the degree to which our claims for, and fetishism of, the new communications media as a revolution in art, and therefore, of life, **actually function to undermine the very possibility for the invention of a radical art of sounds.**

Bach wrote *The Art of the Fugue* at the end of his life during a period when the structure of Baroque musical thought was undergoing a transformation from a polyphonic modal or horizontal plane to the mechanical or orchestral imperatives of a vertical harmonic order that saw the fugue as an increasingly redundant form. It is of no surprise then, that Bach should abandon, or withdraw from, the new musical order, proceeding instead with, what might be called an "idealised world of uncompromising invention."<sup>2</sup> For, according to Gould, there was always "...a constant proximity of fugue in Bach's technique. Every texture he exploited seems ultimately destined for a fugue."<sup>3</sup>

In writing a group of fugues that are in no way contemporaneous with their time, that in their actual duration replace every tendency of the time with an art of invention, Bach establishes a certain collective temperament (and tempering), or what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls a becoming, in the apprehension of the technical reality that constitutes the Baroque structures of expressive form. *The Art of the Fugue*, if we develop Gould's line of thinking, is an explicit reference to the *framing* of sonorous material as an art that is neither bound by the return to a timeless or eternal state of Transcendent Art (it is grounded on a movement against the times), nor is it an artistic revelation of the present (the times) as the future condition of life. Instead, it marks out the shape of a contrapuntal composition that no longer reveals the fugal technique for what it is, but re-assembles the tempered scale as a giant modulating machine that is, in Nietzsche's phrase, untimely (...always in time, inventing time).

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In thinking about the nature of “the times,” therefore, we have to ask, at what point does the figure of Johann Sebastian Bach cross over into Glenn Gould? This is not, however, a thematic consideration, nor even a question of identity, but one of modulation (and by modulation I mean both a transposition and a reconfiguration of an event) that involves Gould as a kind of fugitive whose aim is to preserve, not himself, but a secret in much the same way that a melody appears as a motive within another melody.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Gould’s description of *The Art of the Fugue* seems to me to be entirely consistent with his own concept of an art of sounds. The idea of inventing a contrapuntal form of radio documentary based on discrete voices and contiguous sonic elements, according to the textural criteria of the medium is also about a profound resistance to the organisational and bureaucratic tendencies of a present that demands a *pure state of exchange* through the deregulation of all (aesthetic) forms.<sup>5</sup>

So what would an art of sounds consist of now? and how is this perception of art related to “the times”? to the concept of music? to the rise of recording techniques? and to the field of cultural production in general? Strictly speaking, our concern with the organisation of sound, with how sound is organised along either aesthetic, political or scientific lines, necessarily involves thinking about music and implies a concept of musical thought. While the definition of music may have been expanded by composers such as Varese, Schaeffer and Cage, to include all audible phenomena, this historical transition from the musical object to the sound phenomena, from musicology to phenomenology, is still bound by the *expectation* or *anticipation* of musical resonance, by a melodic distribution of sounds across specific frequencies, across the total sound spectrum. In this sense, we are not interested in abandoning music, but asking instead where musicality might lie within a mediated or informatic world?

Gould’s great insight is to realise, in the potentiality of sound recording, a cinematic condition that brings about a renewed relation of music to thought in that the visual image is now saturated, drenched, with a dynamic musicality without depth, or more specifically, **an advanced microphony**. This is what I mean by a sound-image: that point at which the combination of visual images and sounds and bodies affects the duration of the moment, of a series of moments; that inhabits and exceeds the internal organisation of sounds through a series of *cuts, fades, dissolves, and zooms* in terms of a continuous *counterpoint* between the camera and the microphone.<sup>6</sup> From this contrapuntal movement between a mobile visual image and a sound tracking the possibility emerges of locating distinct zones or fields of sonorities outside of the simple scientific identification or amplification of audible phenomena.

Gould argues, therefore, for an “intense molecular analysis” of sounds through a process of mobile microphonic dissection<sup>7</sup>, a microphony, that comes to embody the very reality of

music. Once everything is imbued with the clarity of the microphone, the sounds of life, of all moving phenomena - voices static, the wind, music, engines turning over, the buzz of electrical currents, brain waves - can be extracted from the circumscribed forms of musical expression (eg. the sonata, symphony popular song) and rendered expressive in themselves. This is what we might define, following Gilles Deleuze, as the ‘active sound-frame.’<sup>8</sup>

The tendency, though, of “the times” is towards the destruction of this sound frame into a pure acoustic replication of the audible universe as the most natural thing of all - into a natural sound picture. It is a conception of an art of sounds that exercises a morphological imperative in the name of an increasing immersion of the listener in an undifferentiated or homogeneous sonic landscape. We are well aware, however, of the limits of sound, the obvious incursions that take place in the name of an enclosed listening, of an ear that is completely immersed in sound. It has been noted elsewhere, this potential fascism of sound,<sup>9</sup> and it is important to resist calls for a sound state, to question an electronic arts practice that grounds itself in the idea of sound design, in the necessity for sound as the sum or totality of all experience.

Even the name of the first commercially available tape recorder in the United States - the *Sound Mirror*<sup>10</sup> - suggests a concept of the sonic event as a reproduction of the natural order of things that is completely of its time, that attempts to become the essence of “the times,” and as such amounts to nothing more than a reinforcement, a sounding out, of the various modes of capitalist distribution and exchange. After all, once sounds are interchangeable at the level of electronic processing, that is, once all sounds are subjected to codification, to a system of intelligible equivalence (within the capitalist market and the military industrial complex), it becomes increasingly difficult to produce a sound that does not simply effect its code (and I’m thinking here of a lot of sound montages or computer generated productions) as the limit of a technocratic or informatic process.

This desire, for the conflation of what is heard as sound with a mechanical image of our hearing, informs the very structure of sonic events and points to an overwhelming tendency of “the times” to inscribe a compositional directive as the limit of what can be heard, to simulate the very condition of audition. For Bach, it was the demand for thematic control and harmonic continuity; for Glenn Gould it was the movement from a monophonic sound source to a stereophonic sound image; and more recently, it’s been the ascendancy of the digital domain in relation to the composition of auditory space itself. In fact, the history of sound can now be posed as a series of problems of perspective and projection that increasingly works to combine what is heard with the object of our hearing.

The chimera of sound. In the current rush to confront and embrace multimedia, digital and 3D sound possibilities, however, it's not just a case of arguing for, and manufacturing, *new* aural experiences in which the sound event and the production of sound are held to the same kind of formal or mechanical properties that see all electronic productions in terms of their generative potential; that is, as energy to be harnessed in terms of an assumed threshold of audibility or visibility or productivity. Rather, if we think again of Gould's untimely notion of *The Art of the Fugue*, it is a case of inventing a continual variation or thread that acts on our conception of the sonic event; that makes it, in Deleuze's and Guattari's terms, "...necessary for the non-musical sound of the human being to form a block with the becoming music of sound..."<sup>11</sup>

In following this thread of Bach's contrapunctus, the final motive in this brief speculation affects a certain transformation or introduces a new compound, a new collectivity, into our thinking about the invention of a sound image or sound tracking. The opening sound-image of François Girard's film *32 Short Films About Glen Gould* produces a remarkable concept of musicality. The character of Gould drifts from the rear of the image across the ice, pushing into the sound of the wind which, mixed slightly back, becomes Bach's Aria from the *Goldberg Variations*. This moment carries with it a complete transition in the sound-image along a melodic line of composition; neither sound is privileged, nor is one sound established as prior to, or originary of, the other one.

Rather, the sounds inhabit the force of the elemental (the wind, the ice, the biological body) and the cybernetic (the mixture of sounds and music by way of a recording/editing process) through a third phase or character; a solitary musical motif that incorporates the untimely power of Bach's final great inventions, the texture of Gould's *Idea of North*, and the tracking of the visual image with the melodic compound of the Goldberg Variations.<sup>12</sup> Girard's film suggests, in this way, a profound engagement with the relation of a visual image - that of the musician as a combination of different types and materials, rhythms and resistances - to the texture of the recorded sounds as they inflect on and transport the image in time. The combination of sound and visual image into the 32 short films about Glen Gould forms a series of levels that transforms the whole force of infinity, creating a break with the expectations of a musical or creative life, through the melodic counterpoint of this well-tempered sound-image.

So what is an art of sounds to do with "the times"? and how is the artist to work against every possible tendency of the time? to resist the ideological imperatives of networks and codes, of informatics, without falling into a naive naturalism? Obviously, too much time is spent chasing echoes. Subtle manipulations that gather all that is felt and thought and desired into an over-exposure to the times...Once what we hear and apply to life as a rendering of sound is expanded to incorporate

all audible phenomena, the real question is not what we have heard? but how to compose in such a way that the life in the sounds follows this modulation from sound image to visual image and back again along a single musical line that extracts from the audible world the actual audio-visual complexity of an event.

An art of sounds moves, in this case, along the twin peaks of sonorous impulsion and compulsion, producing itself as a sound tracking or a modulation of the sound frame that no longer accompanies or inflects upon the structure of aesthetic production, but rather imbues it with a melodic motive that never returns sound to itself. In this way we can dispense with endless reverberations, with desultory echoes, with the telephonic, televisual, or radiophonic murmuring of voices that only ever restore the power of informatics to itself as the essence of a sound picture.

No sound should be called, or considered, inherently musical, but neither is it a case of simply making the whole cosmos an effect of sound, a sound effect. Elsewhere, a melody produces an audience, a crowd, a gathering and a band; it collects people and objects and voices and throws them together as a singular expression of rhythm and precinct and motive to create an art of sounds that abandons the technocratic and corporate structures of "the times" (and its history) altogether; an art of sounds that is composed in the duration **between** a resonant visual image and a melodic sound texture; that is, in the microphonic framing of an audio-visual moment, neither completely heard nor seen, but collected and transposed in time through an extensive musicality.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Glen Gould, Interview with Tim Page *The Glen Gould Reader*, edited by Tim Page, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p.460

<sup>2</sup>Glen Gould, *Glen Gould Reader*, p.17

<sup>3</sup>Glen Gould, *Glen Gould Reader*, p.15

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Richard Wagner In Bayreuth," *Untimely Meditations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.247

<sup>5</sup>Resistance to the present is central in creating the untimely in art. See Deleuze & Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.108

<sup>6</sup>Jonathan Cott, "Interview with Glenn Gould," Parts One and Two, *Australian Rolling Stone*, August 29, 1974, p.34

<sup>7</sup>Glen Gould, *Glen Gould Reader*, pp.332-346

<sup>8</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), p.cf329, n69

<sup>9</sup>Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.348

<sup>10</sup>Russell J. Tinkham, "Anecdotal History of Stereophonic Recording," *Audio*, May 1962, p.27

<sup>11</sup>Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.309

<sup>12</sup>This idea of a melodic compound stems from the chapter on percepts and affects in Deleuze & Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, pp.163-199