MUSIC, McLuhan, MODALITY: 
MUSICAL EXPERIENCE 
FROM “EXTREME OCCASION” TO “ALCHEMY”

DEANNE BOGDAN

Introduction

This essay was originally presented on June 29, 2005, as part of a Lecture Series on Marshall McLuhan’s concept, “The Medium is the Message,” held at The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, in the Faculty of Information Studies at the University of Toronto. The invited speakers variously addressed McLuhan’s famous maxim, “the medium is the message,” from the point of view of their own disciplines, and in light of “information literacy in a multimedia age.” I was invited to speak on music.1

Originally presented as a lecture-performance, this essay has two contrasting but related parts under the umbrella topic, “musical information literacy.” The first part was an experiment in musical listening, which included my own live piano performance. In the latter part of the presentation, McLuhan met the legendary pianist/composer Glenn Gould. I use the word “met” not just metaphorically, as the two men (who lived within about a square mile of each other in central Toronto) worked together on at least one occasion.2 Gould interviewed McLuhan for a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary, Dialogue on the Prospects of Recording, which McLuhan edited and published in Explorations, a journal he founded in the 1950s with anthropologist, Edmund “Ted” Carpenter. Gould further revised the essay before publishing it in High

1 Although I am neither an expert in the theories of Marshall McLuhan nor a musicologist, but a philosopher of education specializing in literature and the arts, musical performance had been my primary discipline and first love. Early in my career, I taught McLuhan’s Understanding Media with his son, Eric McLuhan, in a first-year undergraduate course “On Human Communication,” directed by Frank Zingrone, a McLuhan specialist at York University, in Toronto. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone are co-editors of Essential McLuhan (New York: Basic, 1995).

Fidelity in 1966 as “The Prospects of Recording.” Moreover, it seemed to me not coincidental that the publication of Understanding Media in 1964 was synchronous with Glenn Gould’s announcement to the cultural world that he was abandoning the concert stage for the recording studio.

What follows is in four sections, each addressing information literacy and multimedia from the perspective of music. First, I summarize the intent and content of my initial experiment in musical listening. In the second section, I offer some brief reflections on modality, the conceptual linchpin between the arguments offered in part one and those I present in the rest of the essay. Section three looks at salient passages from Understanding Media regarding McLuhan’s revolutionary redefinition of the relationship between form and content. The fourth part showcases Glenn Gould as an exemplar of McLuhan’s ideas about the influence of technology on music and the arts.

I. An Experiment in Musical Listening

The late cultural critic Edward Said coined the phrase, “performance as an ‘extreme occasion’” to describe the concert experience. In my initial presentation in 2005, I used this expression to describe the comparative distance that separates composer, performer, and listener. For Said, the contemporary classical concert listening experience is acontextual and “beyond the everyday,” separated from the real world of social life. He contrasted this kind of performance with what he called the “worldly,” that is, listeners’ awareness of the social processes that can integrate art with society. For Said, these social processes are hidden from the audience in a professional concert performance. As he wrote, “[w]hat today we experience in the concert hall is the completed relocation of the site of a score’s realization from . . . an ordinary, mainly domestic and private passage of time, to an occasional, heightened public experience,” one that is “concentrated” and “rarefied.” He regarded this kind of experience as “self-referential “and “self-consultive;”

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6 Said defines “worldly” as “possible, attainable, knowable.” See the last line of the book on page 105.
rather than connected to the social fabric of cultural life—thus the appellation, “extreme.”

(Although this paper is not primarily about the alleged superiority of recorded music over live performance, a tenet famously held by Glenn Gould, it is admittedly an insistent sub-text of it). My claim is that both McLuhan and Gould extolled the use of electronic media as serving to close the gaps between composer, performer, and listener, and, more generally, that the ways in which the two men thought about electronic media and these relationships are foundational to understanding the contemporary cultural milieu.

In short, McLuhan’s and Gould’s approaches to technology militate against “performance as an extreme occasion.”

One way of mitigating the alienating effects of Said’s “extreme occasion” in the experience of a live musical performance would be to build up, in the minds of listeners, a storehouse of information, thereby enhancing their musical literacy. I proposed to provide the information needed to narrow the gaps between composer, performer, and listener that Said contends are “hidden” social processes. Accordingly, I devised an experiment in music listening which is described below.

My theoretical framework employed Said’s concept of “performance as an extreme occasion,” in conjunction with two crucial questions posed by musicologist Leonard Meyer, viz., Is musical enjoyment enhanced or diminished by increased exposure to any one musical composition? Is pleasure heightened or lowered by added knowledge about the work and/or the circumstances surrounding its composition?

In the first part of my presentation, these two ideas worked together—in McLuhan’s parlance, as a “probe”—for considering larger questions about musical experience as medium and message. Meyer predicates his argument on

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7 Said 10, 11.
8 Cavell 46. Cavell outlines philosophical links between McLuhan and Gould, including the notion that hearing is a more powerful sense than sight, their mutual interest in Schoenberg as marking the divide between the literate, visual culture of the book (its counterpart for Gould being the concert hall) and the new atonal orality of acoustic space (typified for Gould by the recording studio).
9 McLuhan comes close to what he means by “probe” in his interview with Playboy: “Playboy: To borrow Henry Gibson’s oft-repeated one-line poem on Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In—‘Marshall McLuhan, what are you doin’?’
McLuhan: Sometimes I wonder. I’m making explorations. I don’t know where they’re going to take me. My work is designed for the pragmatic purpose of trying to understand our technological environment and its psychic and social consequences. But my books constitute the process rather than the completed product of discovery: my purpose is to employ facts as tentative probes, as means of insight, of pattern recognition, rather than to use them in the traditional and sterile sense of classified data, categories, containers. I want to map new terrain
the premise that music is “meaningful communication.” He draws on “information theory to specify as precisely as possible the particular way in which the kinetic processes of music become meaningful communication.” He argues that “the better the work is known, the more difficult it is to be enthralled by it and, consequently, the more crucial becomes the power of the performance to make us believe again.” He concludes that as listeners/audience, we become re-enchanted by virtue of our forgetting what we have heard.

My experiment in musical listening was intended as a preparatory counterpart in praxis to exploring a theoretical study of McLuhan’s insights concerning music, media, and information literacy. I employed a phenomenological heuristic with the aim of integrating Meyer’s question about the impact on musical enjoyment of remembering, forgetting, knowing and not-knowing with Said’s premise that “performance as an extreme occasion” entails a minimum of information. My modus operandi was to challenge the audience to “rehear” the same musical piece, Mazurka in C-sharp minor, op. 63, no. 3, Frederick Chopin, several times, first played on the piano by me and subsequently, by professional pianists on a variety of recording media. The “hearing” and “rehearings” were interspersed with various kinds and levels of information about the musical work.


11 Meyer 48, 53. Of course, the opposite viewpoint is held by many (some would say most)—those who believe that repeated encounters with a great piece of music inexorably and ineluctably bring with them deepened love and greater appreciation. For example, in a personal interview with the late literary critic, Northrop Frye, I suggested the possibility that “an alien structure of the imagination, strange in its conventions and often in its values” (Frye, Stubborn Structure 77) might be inevitably lost. “Vehement in his disagreement, his body shaking, Frye offered a counter-example from his experience with the ‘Sanctus’ from J.S. Bach’s Mass in B minor, insisting that his anticipation of its glorious climax and his ever-increasing understanding of its structure had never once failed him” (Bogdan, “Musical-Literary Boundaries” 58). Performances of the Bach Mass are mentioned twice in the published letters from Frye to Helen Kemp, but Frye does not discuss his experiences of them. See Robert D. Denham, ed., The Early Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932-1939 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996), 210, 373.
First, I invited the audience to participate in creating the conditions, insofar as that was possible, of Said’s “musical performance as an extreme occasion.” I asked them to imagine that I was on a stage seated at a concert grand piano instead of at the upright upon which I actually played. I also asked them to imagine themselves not in the lecture hall, but in a darkened theatre, hushed and waiting to be transported out of time and space.

– VIDEO OF DEANNE BOGDAN PLAYING THE CHOPIN MAZURKA, OP. 63, NO. 3 –

Such an exercise assumes that even within the context of performance as an extreme occasion, listeners bring to their listening event specific kinds of information, both intra- and extra-musical. This information colours their listening experience and helps narrow the gaps between composer, performer, and listener, thereby making the performance less of an extreme occasion and more continuous with the conditions of its production. Listener subjectivity would also ultimately bear upon the issue of the decrease and/or increase of enjoyment. With these provisos as a backdrop, I introduced several kinds and levels of information that would directly affect the listening experience. My objective was to see if members of the audience might discover for themselves whether or how their pre-existing and newly acquired musical information influenced their musical responses. These categories of information were as follows:

1) Personal Background Information

Personal background information relates to whether the “musical capital” the listener brings to the musical event influences musical reception. We might regard personal background as part of one’s a priori “musical situatedness.”

2) Perceptual Information

Perceptual information involves the listener’s awareness “of the particular process by which the event came into being,” that is, the degree to which the listener knows about, attends to, and is conscious of the intra- and extra-musical conditions of a performance.

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12 Citing Edgar Coons and David Krachenbuchl, “Information as a Measure of Structure in Music,” Meyer asserts that “it is the flux of information created by progression from event to event in a pattern of events that constitutes the reality of the experience” (Edgar Coons and David Krachenbuchl 145, qtd. in Meyer 45).

13 Meyer 43-44.
3) Historical and Biographical Information

Under the category, historical and biographical background, I include what we can know about the composer’s life, and where the composition occurs in his or her canon, etc. At this point, I asked the audience to consider how discovering such information might influence a subsequent listening of the mazurka or affect the quality of their enjoyment of the musical experience.\(^{14}\)

4) Musicological Information

This sort of information covers the method of composition, genre, structure, and character of particular pieces, as well as access and exposure. One example of such information would be the fact that the mazurkas are among the least known of Chopin’s works.\(^{15}\)

5) Tonal and Syntactic Information

This category includes specific details of the elements of musical design within a style or genre. Frederick Niecks, cited above, extols the beauty of all three of the op. 63 mazurkas, marveling at how much Chopin could do musically within such a miniature musical form.\(^{16}\) As well, I quoted Chopin specialist, Jim Samson, who notes that “the finely controlled balance in the mazurkas between statement and variation is the result of Chopin’s building on these embodiments of a long-lived folk tradition and investing them with the individual imagination of an exile.”\(^{17}\)

At this point in the lecture, I invited the audience to rehear the mazurka as performed by recording artist, Ivan Moravec. I asked them to note, in their mind’s eye and ear, whether this rehearing affected their musical experience and/or enjoyment of this work.

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\(^{15}\) Meyer writes about the importance of understanding why “intra-musical changes occur”: how a musical convention becomes internalized in the collective consciousness, sometimes degenerating into a formulaic pattern and thus becoming outworn, predictable and thereby ultimately furnishing only “minimal musical information” (50). Musicologist James Huneker holds that in Chopin’s hands the mazurka as a musical genre developed; Chopin incorporated several features of the mazurka as an actual folk dance, but it is generally thought of as a “dance of the soul.” Huneker gives us a picture of Chopin as the nineteenth century melancholic Romantic as isolated musical genius. (James Huneker, *Chopin: The Man and his Music* (New York: Dover, 1966), 199-200). For a recent inquiry into the relationship between knowledge about and the experience of music, see Armando Iannucci, “Soundbites/Finding my Place,” *Gramophone Awards 2006*, spec. issue of *Gramophone* (2006), 37.

\(^{16}\) Niecks (qtd in Huneker, 207).

6) Interpretive Information

I suggested that Moravec stresses the “real” rather than the symbolic aspects of the mazurka, at least as I heard him play it: one can almost visualize couples swirling around the floor. I drew upon Meyer again to emphasize that interpretive “information” really is a co-creation between the musician and the listener.\(^{19}\)

7) Perspectival Information

Whereas interpretive information relates mainly to the performer, I used the category “perspectival information” to relate to musical reception. A common premise in traditional musicology is that music is heard, enjoyed, and understood “architectonically,” that is, in “broad synoptic vistas,” in which all of the structural elements, “its symmetries, ratios, proportions and parallelisms” along with its mathematical correspondences not only constitute the music, but are grasped intuitively in a single act of simultaneity.\(^{20}\) Conversely, aesthetician Jerrold Levinson, in his book *Music in the Moment*, articulates a theory of “concatenationism.” Levinson holds that music “essentially presents itself for understanding as a chain of overlapping and mutually involving parts of small extent, rather than either a seamless totality or an architectural arrangement.” Accordingly, we hear and rehear music in “individual bits . . . and immediate progressions from bit to bit.” If Levinson is correct and musical experience “is had only in the successive parts of a piece of music, and not in the whole as such, or in relationships of parts widely separated in time,” then his theory has major implications for our understanding of musical experience.\(^{21}\)

As I approach the study of McLuhan and music in more detail, perspectival information, along with modal information in my listening experiment, become a pivotal theoretical link between the arguments in the first part of this essay and those I offer in the remaining sections. For McLuhan,

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19 Meyer 48-51. I suggest that McLuhan, would have considered the mazurka, as he did the waltz, a “hot” medium. I would categorize the Chopin mazurka as a genre that is arguably a virtual, “cool” art form (McLuhan 36, 38, 40). (I shall deal later with definitions of “hot” and “cool.”) I recognize that in McLuhan scholarship, the terms “hot” and “cool” and their applications have been rendered problematic, but for purposes of this paper I follow McLuhan’s own categorizations.


21 Levinson 13, 14.
both perspective and modality are loaded terms, as they entail his radical redefinition of the relationship between form and content: perspective itself becomes a throwback to literate book culture and modality becomes the conceptual heart of “the medium is the message.”

8) Modal Information

It is with modal information that McLuhan’s notion of medium as message really comes to the fore. A significant effect of his ground-breaking redefinition of form and content was the dispelling of the notion that any medium is ontologically “neutral.” McLuhan regarded the prevalence of the mistaken idea that media are neutral as evidence of the “somnambulism” of so-called “media literacy” in an electric age. For McLuhan, the change in communication technology that triggers a shift from book-oriented literate culture to electronic culture restructures the environment (including our psychic environment).

The main questions posed by this paper are: What are the hallmarks of the changes wrought by advances in technology? What might these technological changes mean for probing McLuhan’s conception of music literacy in a post-electronic, multimedia, information age? As I argue below, I maintain that the answer lies in McLuhan’s reconceptualization of form AND content to form AS content, and—in Glenn Gould’s musical and non-musical embodiment of it—music and medium as message.

Leonard Meyer talks about musical meaning or significance as “inseparable from the means employed in reaching it.” He offers this view in the context of a discussion concerning the influence of probability and ambiguity on musical significance. For example, a musical experience is less significant if the relationship between the event and the means of reaching it is too predictable; our minds tend to get bored in moving from one musical bit to the next bit. Conversely, the less predictable the music, the more meaningful it is. I suggest that in these remarks, Meyer conceives of musical means and object within a conceptual framework that is essentially Aristotelian.

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22 As McLuhan writes in *Understanding Media*, “Only the extremely literate and abstract society learns to fix the eyes, as we must learn to do in reading the printed page. For those who thus fix their eyes, perspective results . . . Our own TV generation is rapidly losing this habit of visual perspective as a sensory modality, and along with this change comes an interest in words, not as visually uniform and continuous, but as unique words in depth” (251-252). Concatenationism may well be the musical equivalent of “words in depth.”

23 McLuhan 26. Also, “Our conventional response to all media, namely, that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot” (32).

24 See McLuhan ix.

25 Meyer 45.
Recall that Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* distinguished four causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. Material cause constitutes the matter, the stuff or content of the object; formal cause, its shape; efficient cause, the means of its fashioning; and final cause, its purpose.\(^{26}\) Theoretically, how something is done constitutes the efficient cause. However, within Meyer’s context, efficient cause collapses into material cause. That is to say, though Meyer contends that means and object are inseparable (which may be true in practice), there is for him a conceptual divide between musical content (content as the material cause, that out of which the music is made) and music’s form (its actual entity, its formal cause or shape—the musical work). Concomitantly, there is, on the one hand, the musical medium (i.e., musical performance, how the music is played), as its content or its material cause and, on the other hand, musical experience, its message, its formal cause. This separation is paralleled in McLuhan’s theorizations about “the sharp cleavage between form and content” characteristic of print and “book culture.”\(^{27}\) In contrast to Aristotle, McLuhan, like Meyer, collapses the four causes into two: medium and message; but under McLuhan’s hand, the causes more or less dissolve altogether. Meyer and Said both write about live performance and its technological reproduction without remarking upon the differences in their modality as a substantive issue. We might go so far as to say that, conceptually, for them, the medium is ontologically neutral. The ontological neutrality or non-neutrality of modality constitutes a central premise of the way in which my musical listening experiment is integral to the argument in the rest of this paper.

II. Modality: The Conceptual Link Between the Listening Experiment, McLuhan, Music, and Information Literary in an Age of Multimedia

In hindsight, I realize that my experiment in information literacy as it pertains to music did enjoy some success with some listeners. It may well have increased the musical enjoyment of some audience members, both by narrowing the gaps between them, the composer and performer as well as by demonstrating to them how context influences effects in musical response. Even so, it is clear to me now that my experiment was, within McLuhan’s conception of the relationship between form and content, anachronistic—hopelessly Gutenbergian even—a musical version of the “sharp cleavage

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\(^{27}\) McLuhan 274.
between form and content” with which he characterized print and book culture. Indeed, the views expressed in the entire first part of this paper could be enclosed within the same Aristotelian conceptual framework within which I asserted that Meyer was working. It may well be that the framework I presented was a means-versus-ends road to musical literacy for my audience, wherein fragments of information were offered in incremental bits, the direct experience of music (nous) and knowledge about music (dianoia) operating as alternating states of engagement and detachment.28

Moreover, this information was conveyed by me, as “teacher,” within a pedagogy of transmission, what McLuhan would have called an instructional rather than a “discovery” mode, detained in the domain of the pre-electronic age.29 In McLuhan’s terms, as I will explain more fully later, my exercise in musical literacy was a “hot” medium. Meyer’s question about the effect of knowledge on musical enjoyment, while perfectly logical within his own conceptual framework about form/content and means/ends, now seems somehow wrongheaded. Within McLuhan’s context, the question now becomes rather one of the effects of various media on involvement as a form of deep engagement.

In addressing the implications of McLuhan’s ideas on the literacy of musical experience, it should first be recognized that he was departing radically from received wisdom about the very concept of literacy. Concomitant with McLuhan’s reframing of form as content, medium as message, is his conception of the change in the sensory ratios entailed by literacy. For McLuhan, literacy goes “beyond communication.”30 McLuhan relied on Eric Havelock’s arguments concerning the transition from orality to literacy in ancient Greek culture.31 If Havelock is right, as McLuhan wrote that he was, Plato’s banishment of the poets from his Republic was a bid to alphabetize the

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28 For an elaboration of these states in literary reading, see Deanne Bogdan, *Re-educating the Imagination: Towards a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Portsmouth: Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, 1992), Chapter 5.
29 McLuhan x.
oral/aural culture of the Hellenic tribal encyclopedia, to separate ear from eye, mind from body, sense from intellect, and ultimately, cognition from affect.32

For McLuhan, the intended effect of banishing the poets was to erode telepathic, right-brained modes of communication in favour of more linear left-brained modes. This historical neural shift became foundational to McLuhan’s notion that a restructuring of the psychic environment takes place whenever technological change bears upon human communication generally. The challenge posed by the above is to shift frameworks from those of Aristotle and Meyer in order to better probe and build on McLuhan’s conception of musical information literacy, to bring it up to date with the post-electronic age. And so, my stress on the phenomenological “rehearing” aspect of my experiment in musical listening recedes and gives way to an emphasis on the purely metaphorical significance of music and musical experience to the concept, “the medium is the message.”

III. McLuhan, Music, and Information Literacy: Towards a Theory
1) McLuhan, Music, and Medium as Message

Music figured prominently in McLuhan’s views on information literacy after the invention of electricity. This is not surprising, given that music typified his belief that hearing takes dominance over the sense of sight.33 As suggested earlier, McLuhan’s arguments concerning information were based upon his rethinking of the relationship between form and content by way of collapsing the Aristotelian four causes into one—the medium IS the message. McLuhan would have regarded the Aristotelian framework as epitomizing the visual hegemony of print culture, unfit for and unable to contain the synaesthetic envelopment wrought by the electronic age.34 By extension to musical experience, McLuhan’s framework informs his dissolving of the three entities of composer, performer, and listener into what he called the immersive experience of the “unified sensorium,”35—something which I see as the polar opposite of performance as an extreme occasion. In this section of the essay, I

33 McLuhan 264.
34 McLuhan 275.
35 McLuhan 269.
focus on the ideas McLuhan presented in *Understanding Media* concerning the phonograph and television.

2) Melody: From ‘Form vs. Content’ to ‘Medium=Message’

Regarding his redefinition of form and content for the electronic era, McLuhan explained how readers are to understand “the medium as the message.” For him the main point was that new media recapitulate previous ones. Thus the “the medium is the message” means

that a totally new environment has been created [and that new media recapitulate previous ones]. The “content” of this new environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age. . . Each new technology creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading. Yet the new one turns its predecessor into an art form.36

Early in his chapter, “The Medium is the Message,” McLuhan illustrates the necessary change in thinking about the form/content problem before and after the electric age with a musical analogy. The significance of his musical analogy to modality is, I believe, a crucial part of the theoretical centre of his aesthetics: i.e., melody is not about aboutness.

Before the electric speed and total field, it was not obvious that the medium is the message. The message, it seemed, was the “content,” as people used to ask what a painting was about. Yet they never thought to ask what a melody is about . . . In such matters, people retained some sense of the whole pattern, of form and function as a unity.37

Here, not only is melody not about anything, it is experienced holistically. For McLuhan, it seems that melody is the one musical element that best reflects the desire in the present day for unity and engagement.38 This aspiration for wholeness and involvement mirrors McLuhan’s radicalization of the concept of form vs. content to medium = message. Melody comes into play as a metaphor for the power of media and the need for education in its effects. If melody encapsulates the dangers of charm, it also, however, embodies what for McLuhan is a requisite alternative to patterns of meaning and communication imposed by a literate society, that is, the internal self-consistency of speech, in

36 McLuhan ix.
37 McLuhan 28, emphasis original. Cf. Levinson on the relationship between concatenationism and melody as “a string of successive auditory impressions” heard as “single unified motions . . . somehow adding up to a single impression comprising them all” (4)
38 McLuhan 21.
which “the resonant intention” is “meaning enough.”\textsuperscript{39} The greatest antidote to the spell of any media, argued McLuhan, is the knowledge that one may be drawn in by its power, charmed into a trance. Knowledge is both power and antidote. To know there is a spell and to be vigilant concerning its effects from the instant one hears the first notes helps keep the listener from falling into the spell-induced trance of the melody.\textsuperscript{40} This simultaneous engagement and detachment is directly connected to the concept melody as both medium and message.

3) The Phonograph, Source of the “Unified Sensorium”

Though McLuhan declared the phonograph (as the extension of the voice), a “hot” medium, “a form of auditory writing,” the phonograph morphed into the electric age by way of the tape recorder, which released it from its mechanical trappings. That the world of sound is essentially a unified field of instant relationships lends it a near resemblance to the world of electromagnetic waves. This fact brought the phonograph and the radio into early association.\textsuperscript{41}

The phonograph and its progeny—the LP, hi-fi, stereo, the CD, DVD and digitalization—best highlight some of the requisite features of musical experience as holistic and structurally integrated within the context of sound as a “unified field”—this in contrast to Said’s notion of the concert hall experience as the extreme occasion of comparative separation and detachment.

McLuhan particularly valued the phonograph’s importance as recapitulating previous technologies. It was the evolution of the phonograph from the telegraph that, according to him, most dramatically “expressed the turning point from mechanical explosion to electrical implosion” from linearity and disconnected fragments of experience to total engagement. For “the brief and compressed history of the phonograph includes all phases of the written, the printed and the mechanized word.”\textsuperscript{42}

With the interventions of radio and eventually television, the phonograph enhanced the musical world as ‘global village,’ both in terms of increased accessibility and in terms of the qualities of tactility and embodiment that typify the ideal musical experience for performer and listener. This is precisely what McLuhan saw as a form of deep engagement. For McLuhan, the

\textsuperscript{39} McLuhan 34.
\textsuperscript{40} McLuhan 30.
\textsuperscript{41} McLuhan 241.
\textsuperscript{42} McLuhan 242, 243.
success of any musical performance may be gauged by the degree to which the
listener/audience experiences the music as embodied sensory realism. He saw
the phonograph as going a long way towards furthering this objective. As he
reminds us, “the bond between the phonograph and song and dance is no less
deep that [sic] its earlier relations to telegraph and telephone.”

At this point in my original presentation, I invited the audience to listen
to an LP version of the Chopin Mazurka, op. 63, no. 3, and to ask themselves
how their experience of Witold Malcuzynski playing this piece might be
influenced by McLuhan’s concept of medium as message. I reminded them that
this LP version was recorded in mono and thus, for McLuhan, would have been
very much a legacy of the mechanical age and book culture. In what now seems
like a prescient and somewhat defensive disclaimer against technological
change, the LP’s back cover reads: “monophonic, microgroove recording may
be played on monophonic or stereo phonographs. It will not become obsolete. .
. . [and] will remain the source of excellent sound.” (See the Coda to this
paper.) Holding the record cover, I enthused that, in my memory, this was
vintage recorded Chopin of the 1950s and 1960s. Malcuzynski was a native-
born Pole from Warsaw, who died at age 63 in 1977. His renditions of Chopin
introduced the composer to an entire generation.

I love the specifically book-like tactility of the packaging, with its spine,
paper casing and plastic “protective” covering. (I’d picked up my copy at
Second Vinyl on Queen Street in Toronto and it cost about as much as it did
when it was produced—$3.99.) The care that has to be taken to avoid touching
the vinyl and in placing the stylus at precisely the right spot without damaging
the record makes it virtually impossible for works recorded this way to become
“wallpaper music.” In the presentation, I had a cadre of technical people
assisting me with the AV component, but no one would risk damaging the vinyl
by putting a needle on it and so I placed it myself.

-- WITOLD MALCUZYNSKI’S LP OF THE CHOPIN MAZURKA, OP. 63
NO. 3 --

43 McLuhan 246.
45 Malcuzynski was awarded Third Prize at the prestigious Third Warsaw International Chopin
Competition in 1937.
46 For Glenn Gould’s comments on “wallpaper music” of a different sort, see the beginning of
section IV.
As the mono recording evolved into later forms, there appeared to be a corresponding change in McLuhan’s thinking. The emergence of new recording media lead McLuhan to describe a tactility of a different order from that which he would have said was typified by the LP record cover. McLuhan writes about the significance of wrap-around sound as quadraphonic envelopment:

In 1949 . . . [t]he hi-fi quest for “realistic sound” soon merged with the TV image as part of the recovery of tactile experience. For the sensation of having the performing instruments “right in the room with you” is a striving toward the union of the audile and tactile. . . . Stereo sound, a further development, is “all-around” or “wrap-around” sound. . . . The hi-fi changeover . . . [allowed] the acceptance of multiple facets and planes in a single experience. . . . [s]tereo is sound in depth, as TV is the visual in depth.48

4) “Hot” and “Cool”

To explain just how TV enhances tactility and depth involvement, I invoked McLuhan’s theories about “hot” and “cool” media, which I reviewed briefly with the audience:

A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in “high definition.” High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, “high definition . . . hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience.”49

Cool media, on the other hand, require greater audience participation:

A cool medium, whether the spoken word or the manuscript or TV, leaves much more for the listener or user to do than a hot medium. If the medium is of high definition, participation is low. If the medium is of low intensity, the participation is high.50

Next, I prompted the audience to wonder how McLuhan might have characterized the DVD. I commented that the DVD of a musical performance I was about to show them was a deft combination of film and the audio CD, one that that raises interesting issues about the prospect of a medium being both “hot” and “cool.” At that point in the presentation, I played a DVD of the same Chopin mazurka we had heard earlier. This last in the series of “rehearings”

48 McLuhan 247.
49 McLuhan 36.
50 McLuhan 278.
was performed within the genre of Said’s “extreme occasion” by one of today’s giants of the piano, Grigory Sokolov. The DVD is actually a film of Sokolov playing the Chopin mazurka as the first of five encores in a live concert at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, 2002.

– **GRIGORY SOKOLOV’S DVD OF THE CHOPIN MAZURKA, OP. 63 NO. 3**

Following this DVD performance, I raised three main points:

1) The genre of the piece itself is more of a nocturne than a mazurka, made more effective by the filming against the spare backdrop of the darkened theatre. How is the dream-like quality of the nocturne constructed by the media space of film, theatre, camera angle, etc?

2) To what extent might this be an “extreme occasion” of live performance, one made even more extreme by the distance of the camera from a somewhat aloof performer, who is seemingly unaware of his audience, with his back to us and almost indifferent to its applause?

3) What meaning is conveyed by the close-ups, by literally seeing Sokolov’s pianistic “touch” in such intimate proximity?

While McLuhan explicitly ties the terms “hot” and “cool” to the media themselves, he also opens the way for performances to be deemed “hot” and “cool,” depending on how close they are to becoming extreme occasions at the one end of the spectrum of musical listening or mythic invocations of experiences of the unified sensorium at the other. Where might the Sokolov performance rank here? I then offered the audience a performance of what I

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52 Arved Ashby cites James Huneker on the character of Chopin’s nocturnes as being “essentially for the twilight, for solitary enclosures, where their still, mysterious tones—‘silent thunder in the leaves’ as Yeats sings—become eloquent and disclose the poetry and pain of their creator.” Ashby then discusses *rubato* as a central link between the nocturne and the mazurka (“Chopin’s Nocturnes” 56.)

53 “One way to spot the basic difference between hot and cold media uses is to compare and contrast a broadcast of a symphony performance with a broadcast of a symphony rehearsal. Two of the finest shows ever released by the CBC were of Glenn Gould’s procedure in recording piano recitals, and Igor Stravinsky’s rehearsing the Toronto symphony in some of his new work. A cool medium like TV, when really used, demands this involvement in process. The neat tight package is suited to hot media, like radio and gramophone” (McLuhan 43-44, emphasis added). Also, “[T]he instant speed of electricity confers the mythic dimension on ordinary industrial and social action today. We live mythically but continue to think fragmentarily and on single planes” (McLuhan 39, emphasis original).
deemed the “hot” variety, a CD of pianist Maurizio Pollini playing the first of the Chopin Études, op. 10. Without recourse to McLuhan’s theories, Said describes Pollini’s powerful and technically brilliant rendition of this Étude, which was created by Chopin to teach his students keyboarding techniques, as “immediately establish[ing] the distance between these performances and any amateur attempt to render Chopin’s music.”

– MAURIZIO POLLINI CD OF THE CHOPIN ÉTUDE, OP. 10, NO. 1

The absolute perfection of the Pollini performance might strike us as too hot to handle, an analogue, perhaps, of Moravec’s “hot” recreation of the mazurka as actual rather than the virtual folk dance of Sokolov’s mazurka-cum-nocturne. I posed the following question to the audience: How much in purely musical terms does the technological medium really matter in the phenomenology of performance as either extreme occasion or personal integration of intimate aesthetic experience?

5) Television, Depth Involvement and Closing the Gaps of Extreme Occasion

Earlier I cited McLuhan’s assertion that stereo is the merging of hi-fi with the TV image. It is this hybrid that moved recorded music, in terms of sheer medium, from the mechanics of the phonograph, from the product-oriented quality, in my view, of both the Sokolov and Pollini performances to the depth engagement of television. We recall that, for McLuhan, it is the low-definition TV image that epitomizes the cool of “cool” and “rejects the sharp personality [in favour of] the presentation of processes rather than of products.”

This “cool” of TV is all about the respondent completing processes bodily. As the ultimate medium of a “nonverbal gestalt or posture of forms,” TV becomes “a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger.” Television stands in contrast to film, which offers “the full image as a package deal.” Further, TV shares with hot media such as photography and

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54 Said 4.
56 One graduate student remarked that Sokolov’s demeanor as a “diva” rendered his performance more “hot” than “cool.” The question remains—in which ways does the filming construct such an impression?
57 McLuhan 269. [TV in McLuhan’s day was more low-definition than it is today—Eds.]
58 McLuhan 272.
59 McLuhan 273.
film the promise of a “nonverbal gestalt.”60 The TV image engages the operation of the sensory nervous system because its configuration as a “mesh” demands “‘closing’ the spaces” by way of a “profoundly kinetic and tactile” “convulsive [interplay of] sensuous participation.”61 If, for McLuhan, the Gutenbergian world of books and films engenders quiet isolation in “an inward world of fantasy and dreams”—in contrast to the TV “mosaic image [that] demands social completion and dialogue”—would he have endorsed Said’s critique of concert performance as “extreme occasion” and Meyers’s notion of “forgetting”?62 This may have to remain an open question.

For the remainder of this paper, the main question now becomes: Once the TV age has accommodated us to “the tactile and nonpictorial modes of . . . mythic structures,” how can the significance of TV as “mesh,” “tactility,” and perception through “mythic structures” help us achieve greater understanding about musical engagement and modality—music and medium as message?63 McLuhan’s assertions that media evolve as they are sped up by other media and that an “improved” technological medium is no longer the same medium64 would serve to make musical experience more complex as it is affected by various new media. This point is central to my final section on Glenn Gould—to me the apotheosis of the merging of “old” and “new” media worlds—Gould the musical icon, pianist extraordinaire, “bad boy” of concert audiences, prolific writer and technological innovator.

IV. Glenn Gould as the Extension/s of McLuhan: Ecstatic and Sonic Environmentalist

1) Sound as Space

In the first few minutes of Bruno Monsaingeon’s recent retrospective DVD on the life and work of Glenn Gould, Hereafter, Gould is filmed driving his oversized Cadillac on a highway in Northern Ontario. With the soundtrack of his recording of a Brahms Intermezzo as backdrop, Gould, in a voice-over tells viewers that he couldn’t imagine a life in which he would not be surrounded by music—in “McLuhan’s sense of music” as “electronic wallpaper” decorating

60 McLuhan 272.
61 McLuhan 273, emphasis added. Also “The TV image requires each instant that we ‘close’ the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses, rather than the isolated contact of skin and object” (273).
62 McLuhan 255.
63 McLuhan 282.
64 McLuhan 273.
one’s room, as encasement, shelter and protection from the outside world. He continues by asserting that he would be “unhappy as a nineteenth-century man.”65 Wallpaper music within the context that Gould is speaking of it here is not elevator music, but music for the serious artist and listener—as in-depth experience of a consciousness that, in McLuhan’s terms, is an inclusive process of consciousness itself.66 In the same DVD, Gould disavows artists as necessarily myopic and limited. That notwithstanding, I believe that Gould typified McLuhan’s assertion that “[t]he serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.”67

In contrast to musical performance as an extreme occasion, which, according to Said, alienates composer from performer from the listener, Gould gives us, through the recording studio, television and early computer technology, a “double-depth” engagement by making it possible for musical experience to go in two directions at once. First is the inward attunement toward the ideal musical experience—what he called “ecstasy”—in defiance of the physical constraints of performance.” Second is the outward extension toward Said’s “worldliness,” i.e., engagement with the social context of music through McLuhan’s “sensory extensions of man” [sic] and through Gould’s exploration of music’s relationship to the genres of speech and writing.68 As fitting McLuhan’s conception of the serious artist, Gould was exquisitely equipped with the requisite sensory apparatus to counter the deterministic effects of the technological society. As both artist and technological pioneer, Gould can be thought of as merging the philosophy of media with the philosophy of sound.69

Richard Cavell reminds us that McLuhan had a major influence on Gould and that McLuhan regarded Gould’s leaving the concert hall as a cultural step forward:

It was the rejection of visual space with which McLuhan most often associated Gould’s retirement from the concert stage and his subsequent immersion in the space of the sound studio...

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66 For McLuhan “‘depth’ means ‘in interrelation,’ not ‘in isolation.’ Depth means insight, not point of view; and insight is a kind of mental involvement in process not at all dependent on content. Consciousness does not postulate consciousness of anything in particular” (McLuhan 247).
67 McLuhan 33.
68 By “ecstasy” Gould meant “essentially incorporeal” (qtd. in Said 29). See also Said 31, 105.
69 Cavell 45.
Thus Gould’s retirement had profound implications for the way in which we understand acoustic space. Drawing on McLuhan and other writers such as Brian Eno and Mark Prendergast, Cavell argues that this shift from visual to acoustic space focused attention on the inner dynamics of sound and its concomitant social processes. Thus the social dimension of music changed when music was no longer inseparable from the performance space. Both classical and popular musical artists were enacting their own version of what I am calling the inwardness of Gould’s “double-depth” involvement, which for them was simply the immediacy and pure intensity of wrap-around quadraphonics. Gould’s own sonic inwardness extended to a persona of “priestly solitude,” in which he seemed to be encased in a world of self-communing extasis at the same time that, through TV, he was “an artist-performer interacting with a medium of mass communication.”

At this point in my 2005 presentation, I enjoined the audience to see and hear Gould playing, not Chopin (a composer he rejected), but Beethoven—one of his bagatelles. This videotape is, to be sure, an “improved,” much higher-definition television, and thus for McLuhan would constitute a different medium. I find that it heightens the way the medium produces the message of depth involvement and high participation on the part of the respondent, what McLuhan refers to as the capacity of electric technology to extend “our senses and nerves in a global embrace.” For me, this recorded performance combines the aural, synaesthetic qualities of radio and the tactility of recording with what McLuhan called the “yen of the TV medium for themes of process and complex reactions.”

This track is not the filming of a live performance with audience, as was the case with the Sokolov DVD. We may never know the endless editing that went in to making the four most intimate musical minutes that Gould would ever give us. Before playing this clip, I noted that the bagatelle, as a musical genre, is defined as a “trifle” (many misconceive the miniature dance form of the mazurka as a trifle as well). I then posed the question, How does the electronic medium Gould used to record his playing of this bagatelle provide a kind of commentary on the way he “plays with” the genre and how he seduces and transfies respondent so they share in his extasis?

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70 Cavell 45.
71 See Cavell 45, 48, 47.
72 Cavell 46.
73 McLuhan 83.
74 McLuhan 278.
2) McLuhan and Gould as Idealistic Environmentalists

In this section, I show how Gould exemplifies McLuhan’s most idealistic aspirations for technology. I also discuss the ways in which both men become technological environmentalists. With regard to McLuhan’s idealism, we discover a utopian electric age reawakening of a non-verbal collective awareness that was interrupted by language and book culture. In his chapter “The Spoken Word,” where he mounts his critique of the world of print, McLuhan envisions the long-term potential of the electronic age to lend hope to the human condition. There is even a suggestion of a nostalgic attempt to reclaim something of the lost bicameral mind:

> Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale . . . computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. . . . The condition of “weightlessness,” that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.\(^{76}\)

What we might call McLuhan’s “neo-electronic orality” was paralleled in music, according to Cavell, by the post-Schoenbergian “shift in musical patterns from tonality to modality,” a shift warmly embraced by Gould as a lover of Schoenberg’s music and as a self-styled concert drop-out.\(^{77}\) Cavell further notes that when Gould moved from the concert stage to the studio, his recordings became “internally resonant” instead of being “resonant in terms of the space in which they were recorded.”\(^{78}\) In reading Adorno’s essay on Schoenberg, according to Cavell, Gould bracketed the passage indicating Adorno’s opposition to mass culture, and apparently highlighted the paragraphs

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\(^{75}\) Glenn Gould, perf., Bagatelle in E-flat major, op. 126, no. 3, by Ludwig von Beethoven, rec. 1970, *Glenn Gould’s Greatest Hits: Highlights from the Glenn Gould Collection*, 1970, Videocasette, Sony Classical, 1992. Permission courtesy of the Glenn Gould Estate and Sony Music Entertainment Canada Inc. I wonder how his experience of this medium as message prompted one of my graduate students, a young man who was not himself musical and who had never even heard of Gould prior to his initial viewing, when asked about his reaction to this clip, said unabashedly, “It’s a lesson in a new way to make love.”

\(^{76}\) McLuhan 83-84.


\(^{78}\) Cavell 46.
in which Adorno asserted that the challenging nature of Schoenberg’s composition forces hearers “to compose its inner movement and demands...not mere contemplation but praxis.”

3) Gould and Praxis

As media environmentalist, Gould was both “hot” and “cool,” in McLuhan’s parlance. His was a Janus-like thrust toward the inwardness of what some would call “pure Soul” on the one hand and social responsibility on the other. Gould’s version of McLuhan’s ethically inflected electronic environmentalism was manifested in what Adorno called “praxis,” what Edward Said called “worldliness,” and what academicians call “discursivity.” Cavell cites Said who, in adulation of Gould’s commitment to the “worldliness” of music (we might say “to filling in the gaps” of the “extreme occasion” of musical performance) noted that, following his abandonment of the stage, Gould invested considerable energy in developing musical avenues that went “well beyond the two-hour concert experience.”

These other avenues were the instruments of the discursive side of Gould’s “double-depth engagement” in his move from stage to studio.

While praxis appears as the polar opposite of Gould’s “priestly solitude,” for him contemplation and praxis were two sides of the coin of his “double-depth engagement.” A significant aspect of Gould’s praxis was his foray into popular culture. Praxis also entailed Gould’s exuberant, voluminous, elaborate analogues of music: notes on record liners, essays, radio documentaries and movie soundtracks. Kevin Bazzana remarks that “Gould...through his performances was putting forth theses, exploring new terrain, seeking new paths through scores.” And, like McLuhan, he used exaggeration,

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79 Cavell 46 (Adorno qtd. in Cavell 46).
80 Said (qtd. in Cavell 47).
81 As Cavell puts it, “[F]or Gould, writing about music had a purchase that extended beyond the high cultural aficionado to a domain where Streisand mingled with Schwarzkopf” (47). Gould had a well-known fascination with Petula Clark’s “Downtown,” especially with what he noted as its hegemony of C major. Gould’s democratizing musical instincts echo the literary ones of his compatriot, Northrop Frye. Frye writes in his famous Anatomy, “Bunyan and Rochester, Sade and Jane Austen, The Miller’s Tale and The Second Nun’s Tale, are all equally elements of a liberal education” (Frye, Anatomy 114.) Also, in reflecting on his form of literary criticism in Anatomy, Frye remarked, “I have even compared the literary universe to Blake’s Beulah, where no dispute can come, where everything is equally an element of a liberal education, where Bunyan and Rochester are met together and Jane Austen and the Marquis de Sade have kissed each other” (Frye, “Reflections in a Mirror” 143). I am indebted to Jean O’Grady, Victoria College, University of Toronto, and Robert Denham, Roanoke College, Virginia, for the sources of the references to Frye.
82 Cavell 46.
irony, jest, surprise, bombast—anything that might throw new light on a familiar work. (He did that as a writer, too.) Praxis for Gould also meant, as it did for McLuhan, exposing the seams of the construction of the medium as message. Bazzana tells us that Gould’s philosophy of performance made use of McLuhan-type “probes” for the purpose of upsetting conventional ideas. Overturning of conventional ideas was certainly one side-effect of Gould’s (for the time) audacious practice of tape-splicing in the recording studio, his method of what he called “take two-ness”—a strategy that transmogrified the medium of live performance into a kind of musical montage/collage.

4) The Alchemist

Gould engages in “take two-ness” as his own kind of “probe”—his self-conferrred license to edit-cum-splice—to sculpt a performer’s ideal performance at any one point in time. “Take two-ness” is more than just a recording strategy: it became part of Gould’s praxis: “take two-ness” is a “notion that questions not only traditional ideas about artistic production, but also the ‘humanistic ideal’ and related notions of ‘authorship’ that underpins them.” Even the most sophisticated music technologists would do well to experience one of their greatest progenitors in situ—and to re-read Understanding Media.

In Glenn Gould: The Alchemist, Gould enacts the polar opposite of Said’s performance as an extreme occasion. For Gould technology was “not a way of removing the performer from the world but of re-integrating the performer with the worldLY, and . . . [truly] breaking down the barriers between composer and performer, performer and listener.” For example, in this DVD there is a session in which Gould literally conducts his sound engineer Lorne Tule, his “take two” accomplice. That is, Gould first gives us a complete “take one” live studio performance of Scriabin’s Désir and Caressse Dansée, op. 57, Nos. 1 and 2, a set of elaborations on what Scriabin called the “chord of ecstasy” (F-sharp, B-flat, E, A, D), music that Gould insisted in his interview with producer Bruno Monsaingeon “cries out” for technological manipulation. Before the recording session had begun, Gould had staged four strategically-placed microphones in the recording studio, a recital hall “full” of empty seats. After the “take one” performance, the viewer observes Gould and

83 Bazzana 250-251.
84 “. . . the sensation of having the performing musicians ‘right in the room with you’ is a striving toward the union of the audile and tactile in a finesse of fiddles that is in large degree the sculptural experience” (McLuhan 274).
85 Cavell 46.
86 Cavell 46.
Tulc in the recording lab “alchemizing” the strains of the recorded performance, with Tulc at the sound controls following precisely Gould’s instructions as to which and how each microphone should recede or be foregrounded to produce the “take two” version of the Scriabin work.

That this example of musical co-creation between Gould as performer/musical engineer and Tulc as listener/performer was executed as far back as 1974 is extraordinary. This historical recording event is an embodiment of the narrowing of the gaps between composer, performer and listener, while simultaneously disclosing the social processes that Said says are hidden in performance as an extreme occasion. Here Gould demonstrates “McLuhan’s idea that in our technologies we are most human,” but Gould’s own philosophy of sound goes even further. Cavell notes that “[i]n his 1970 CBC TV special, The Well-Tempered Listener,” Gould’s sonic environmentalism even blurs the boundaries between the musical and non-musical, so that our basic conception of music is no longer something separable from the sounds and noises present everywhere in our environment: “I think our whole notion of what music is has forever merged with all the sounds that are around us, everything that the environment makes available.”

88 Cavell 46.
89 Cavell 47.
90 Glenn Gould, perf., The Well-Tempered Listener, The World of Music, prod. John McGreevy, CBC Television, 18 Feb. 1970. (qtd. in Cavell 47). Bazzana gives the date as 1969 (290). The text was published as Glenn Gould and Curtis Davis, “The Well-Tempered Listener,” Glenn Gould: by Himself and his Friends, ed., John McGeevy (Toronto: Doubleday, 1983), 275-94. In Bazzana’s Wondrous Strange, the program is described as a “somewhat McLuhanesque TV essay” (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2003), 290-91. Philosopher of education Susan Laird wonders whether there is a “macho” element in sonic environmentalism, whether the very power of “its almost inborn sense of entitlement to be heard exceeds the power [she] can imagine in any woman’s ‘voice.’” Laird offers Janis Joplin as an example of a pop artist with “the same sort of inward-outward doubleness in the enveloping quality of her recordings as [I] cite in Gould” (e-mail to the author, 5 Jan. 2006). One contemporary female sonic environmentalist in the classical music world would be the incomparable Hélène Grimaud, now thirty-seven—a formidable pianist and writer, whose innovative recordings discover and explore new musical ideas. Her first Deutsche Grammophon CD, Credo, combines Beethoven’s Fantasia for piano, chorus and orchestra in C minor, op. 80 (“Choral Fantasy”) with his Tempest Sonata, op. 31, no. 2. Arvo Pärt’s Credo for piano, mixed choir, and orchestra, and John Corigliano’s Fantasia on an Ostinata for solo piano, for which Grimaud provides a “Listening Guide” to the disc’s underlying themes. (Grimaud, Credo). She is also the author of a memoir (Grimaud, Wild Harmonies, New York: Riverhead, 2006). Grimaud protects wolves against potential extinction by establishing a wolf preserve. Her “double-depth” engagement embraces both the meditative dimension and social action through music and word.
As a thinker who espoused the roles of art and artist as the perceptual “radar” systems of the technological universe, McLuhan would undoubtedly have agreed with Gould.\(^{91}\) Gould and McLuhan, both interlocutors in the dialogue between print and technology, foresaw the liberating force of automation in furthering the possibility of “artistic autonomy.”\(^ {92}\) Gould, however, went beyond McLuhan: first, by exemplifying how the artist can simultaneously perform and engage in meta-awareness of the conditions of musical production; and second, as “alchemist,” as the artist dirtying his hands to achieve the final product. By turning the dross of a “take one” extreme occasion into the gold of the listener cooperating in an intimate musical experience, Gould held out the promise for listeners to become artists “and for their lives [to] be art.”\(^ {93}\) Thus Gould can be seen as the sonic counterpart, even as soul brother, to McLuhan, the media visionary who, in his attempt to unfetter culture from its nineteenth century print mentality, embraced the twenty-first century merging of technology and the arts with its infinity of possibilities.\(^ {94}\)

**Coda**

On September 25, 2006, what would have been Glenn Gould’s seventy-fourth birthday, the Glenn Gould Studio, housed in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation building in Toronto, hosted a “reperformance” of Gould’s 1955 recording of J. S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations, an event heralded as an artistic technological breakthrough. John Q. Walker, President of Zenph Studios, a music production company that specializes in producing live performances from past recordings, created a complete live mechanical reproduction of Gould’s mono recording through the medium of the Yamaha Disklavier piano. The recording had been digitalized and the data fed back into the Disklavier. According to Walker, “There are about 10 different musical attributes that we can analyze... including pitch, moment of impact, strike velocity, duration, how the note ends and the angle of the key when it’s depressed. We can do

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\(^{91}\) McLuhan xi.

\(^{92}\) McLuhan 311.

\(^{93}\) Glenn Gould, “The Prospects of Recording” (qtd. in Cavell 47).

\(^{94}\) An observation about what some may deem the downside of this kind of infinity is curiously redolent of McLuhan in a *New York Times* article. Recounting the recent acquisition of a plasma television set, Verlyn Klinkenborg writes, “I’m like a lot of people with a new flat-screen television—like anyone who bought a television in the early 1950s, for that matter. It’s hard to care much what you are watching when the picture is so good. But... I suspect this will last only a week-end” (“The Television Has Disintegrated,” 13 Aug. 2006: WK9).
everything we want with the instrument through the computer.” The Gould reperformance has now been recorded for commercial use and Walker plans next to recreate “live” reperformances of recordings by Sergei Rachmaninoff and Art Tatum for public consumption.

What are the implications of the phenomenon of recreated live performances in relation to the arguments I present in this study? I was present in the audience for that reperformance and admit to being more than a little perplexed by the absence of Glenn Gould, even as he was being purported to being replayed “live.” The scene was an uncanny reversal of the one mentioned earlier in the The Alchemist DVD, in which Gould, prior to mixing the four microphones in the recording lab, had played the Scriabin pieces “live” in an empty recital hall. In the reperformance, the audience sat in the oxymoronic concert hall named The Glenn Gould Studio(!), beholding the spectre of Gould depressing the keys as close as technologically possible to the way he had done so in 1955 in the recording studio. On that September afternoon in 2006, audience reaction was mixed, but the consensus seemed to be that we had all had a deeply “embodied,” “profound” experience. The friend who accompanied me was visibly impressed and remarked on the importance of technological innovation in the arts. I was surprised by my own non-reaction. What we had here, I thought, was Said’s “performance as an extreme occasion” in extremis. Maybe I just didn’t get it, but for me, Gould clearly wasn’t there. Later that evening, though, I listened to the radio broadcast of that same performance and found myself revelling in the brightness of what seemed to me to be an entirely fresh interpretation of the Goldberg, even though it was “essentially” the same old 1955 Gould recoding with which I was so familiar.

What might it mean to musical experience to be able to resurrect past recordings “live?” (I somehow can’t bring myself to write “live” without quotation marks in relation to reperformance.) For my own part, I continue to enjoy CDs, DVDs and my vinyl collection, but my greatest pleasure has been

96 This reperformance is an eerily ironic playing out of Gould’s unique form of disembodiment. “Gould neither ate, slept, nor behaved socially like anyone else. . . . [He] allowed himself to be absorbed into a sort of airless but pure performance of the very concert platform he had deserted” (Said 23).
97 In what now seems like a prescient remark about the 1995 recording of the Goldberg, Said regards Gould as using this work “as a way of immediately seeing himself apart from other debut recitalists . . . as if instead of continuing the romantic tradition that sustained virtuoso performers, [he] was starting his pedigree earlier than theirs and then vaulting past them into the present” (Said 24, emphasis original).
my recent resumption of the serious study of the piano, which I began as a child and pursued to the end of my first degree before forsaking music for a career in “words.” I also attend, on average, fifty live (without quotation marks) concerts a year. The big question is what McLuhan and Gould would make of the idea of reperformance. For both men, the answer must somehow lie in the answer to a larger question: How would the sale of mechanical “live” recordings democratize culture and act as a radar system against the culture industry’s inexorable tendency to commodify taste? In the nineteenth century, Franz Liszt transcribed the musical works of past and contemporary composers in order to increase their exposure to segments of society with little or no access to opera or lieder. Gould himself luxuriated in playing and composing such transcriptions, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that they so rattled the classical music chattering classes; and I personally applaud the work of many of today’s cross-over artists. It is hard to argue against blurring the boundaries between high art and popular culture.  

Whatever the responses to the provocations of this Coda, they are perforce rooted in the fact that both Gould and McLuhan sought the future of music in the unified field of instant relationships. The CBC radio broadcast on September 25, 2006, featured John Q. Walker, who took as a given that the reperformance of the 1955 Goldberg by Gould was a more “immersive experience” than the mono recording. Perhaps it was for some. But for me, the phenomenon of reperformance is haunted by the ghost of its own technology. In recording “live” performances of past recordings, are we not stoking our nostalgia for presence, for the liminal return of the living performer existentially moving listeners out of ordinary time into the acoustic space of an extreme occasion? Is not the Gould reperformance a mechanical “live” reinstitution of his brand of extasis made possible by a technological extension of the very means that had initially freed him from the constraints of the live extreme occasion? Reperformance situates Gould as both there and not there in “the utopia of an infinitely changeable and extendable world where time or history [does] not occur and because of which all expression [is] transparent, logical and not hampered by flesh-and-blood performers or people at all.” Thus is confirmed “the ecstasy he characterized as the state of standing outside time and within an integral artistic structure.”  

And so we come full circle. Let it

98 The democratizing influence of these efforts notwithstanding, Said notes astutely that the ultimate effect of such compositions (mainly because of their “formidable digital difficulty”), especially in Gould’s hands, is “to reassert the pianist’s prerogative to dominate over all other fields of music … as a function of [the piano’s] unapproachably superior, uniquely ‘different’ capacities for instrumental display” (Said 6, 7).

99 Said 30-31, emphasis original.
suffice to say that whether through live performance, recording, or reperformance, without the message\(^\text{100}\) of Marshall McLuhan and Glenn Gould, we are less somnolent today about our musical listening than we otherwise would be had they not been so smart about understanding media.

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\(^{100}\) “Art as anti-environment becomes more than ever a means of training perception and judgment” (McLuhan ix).
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