

Creativity and Madness: The Complexity of Richter and Gould's Genius - and a bit of Madness

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The diagnosis of mental illness starting with Philippe Pinel's incipient design in the late 18th century sets forth categories of "lunacy". Pinel placed symptoms in boxes and fit various traits observed by inmates in asylums into those pre-determined boxes. It was an advance from the previous belief that "lunacy" was a product of the moon and – of course – the devil.

Boxes need to be filled; and diagnosis up to the newest version of the DSM5 is still a static, reductive process. Complexity is the fundamental condition of human behavior. Diagnosis takes a set of general conditions (symptoms/behaviors), that when applied to the individual *simplify that complexity*: The potential for distortion is inherent.

Two artists: What events in Richter's or Gould's early development caused both pianists to make their unique adaptation? The explanation is complex and non-linear; a slight shift in their early formation may have altered their development and shaped their perception of the world. Their 'genius' may have expanded exponentially, but at a cost of internal turmoil.

The recent article in the **NYTIMES** on the strange, inner need of the Soviet pianist, **Svatislav Richter**, to have near him a *plastic lobster* while he performed on stage is more than quirky, unsettling, and rather non-linear. Vladimir Horowitz allegedly said: "Of the Russian pianists, I like only one, Richter." Dmitri Shostakovich, one of the greatest 20th century composers said, "Richter is an extraordinary phenomenon. The enormity of his talent staggers and enraptures. All the phenomena of musical art are accessible to him." His range of repertoire, his technique and intensity were universally appreciated. The oddness of Richter's compulsive need is more than matched by another 20th century pianist, the Canadian **Glenn Gould**.

Gould's genius at the keyboard emerged at an early age (his *Goldberg Variations* of J S Bach was recorded when he was in his early twenties). It was a bombshell; few before had ever performed this piece with such articulation, intense pianism, and raw expression. His reputation was born that day and received worldwide attention. His interpretation of Bach and others artists from then on (Columbia Records gave him carte blanche to record what he wished), was considered pure genius

The article on **Richter** by Errol Morris is a lavish treat in the exploration of the mind of Richter and excellent commentary follows. Peruse it for the delight of it.

In **Gould's** case his need for all sort of 'armor' - gloves, scarves, sitting on a low chair while playing, gradually rejecting performance for studio recordings only, preferring to be out of in daylight, and by degrees, rejecting the direct contact with former friends in lieu of telephone-initiated contacts on his own terms. His isolation increased and so did his fear of germs, etc. His attachment to a worn-out studio Steinway (CD 318), a piano with a defective middle G (!?) is a story in itself. He insisted of recording – at one point - only with this instrument! Morris makes reference to this in his article.

The comments of **Peter Guttmann** on Gould could be expanded to include the many volumes written on Gould's unique genius and true weirdness.

What was going on with these two monumental artists? Do they but mirror the complexity that lies in all of us?

And finally, is there a relationship between creativity and madness?