

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Learning Surgery from a Classical Pianist

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Glenn Gould was a household name while I was growing up in Ontario. A child prodigy, he was well-known as a talented classical pianist throughout Canada while still a teenager. After he arrived in New York City in 1955 in his early twenties and recorded the previously obscure Goldberg Variations¹ (Bach, 1741), he became an overnight sensation and from that moment onward was recognized as one of the greatest classical musicians of the 20th century.

Gould was 17 years my senior, and other than a love of music, I had little in common with him except perhaps the desire to seek refuge in nature. As a young child, I aspired to be a great pianist myself, but realized by the age of eleven that greatness was well beyond my reach. I nonetheless continued to follow Gould's career closely. Though I didn't realize it at the time, his understanding and interpretation of J.S. Bach, especially the contrapuntal form, and his ability to perform it in ways that were unique, unusually creative, and breathtakingly masterful, was to have an enormous impact on my professional career.

More than any other instruction, Gould's recorded performances taught me about the art of surgical technique (I would become a boarded surgeon²), and later how to lead a college as dean. Though I never met him, Glenn Gould would become my most important mentor. To this day, I return to his music episodically, sometimes listening to recordings over and over again.

Among the tributes at his death in 1982—he was just fifty years old when he suffered a fatal stroke—is one that I always thought personally relevant. It was that of a heart surgeon in London, who "made it a practice to operate only after he and his patient had both listened to Gould recordings."³

What is it, that inimitable quality, about Glenn Gould, the man whose interpretation of Bach was selected to be placed on the Voyager spacecraft in 1977 so that potential forms of life some 500,000 years from now could understand life on earth?⁴

In the following paragraphs, I describe what I consider to be the relevance to surgical technique.



Photo of the back cover of Glenn Gould. A Life and Variation⁵
(Photo by the author)

If you watch recordings of Gould performing pieces like the Goldberg Variations, you are struck by the independent power of each of his fingers. You immediately are overwhelmed by the strength, the power, and the clarity of sound that is generated by the normally weak fourth and fifth fingers of the non-dominant hand (the left, for him and most of us). A childhood friend, and later a woman who loved and knew him well, spoke of how the strength of his "weak" fingers was simply amazing, yielding a powerful and fully-united force in all of his fingers.

You then note the independence of his fingers, each working dynamically as a completely separate machine, yet creating a horizontal energy that produces a linear flow of music. In his later years, Gould commented on Bach's ability to combine the linear contrapuntal flow that looks back to the Baroque period, with the horizontal harmonic sound of the coming romantic era. (More on that in a subsequent story of how Gould's interpretations formed the basis for my administrative style as dean.)

Finally, you notice the position of his seat, several inches closer to the floor than the average pianist, forcing his elbows into an acute angle while his hands appear like claws hanging over the keyboard. As awkward as the appearance is to the first-time observer, this position demonstrates the strength of the hands and fingers, whether working separately or together.

These strengths, and the independence and codependence of the fingers, didn't just happen. As a teenager, Gould would routinely practice with his mentor, Alberto Guerreo, late into the night, often past two or three in the morning. His was an amazing example of the love and interpretation of musical sound, coupled with the development of manual dexterity at the

highest level.

The best surgical trainees, whether in human or veterinary medicine, spend several years mastering operative technique and manual dexterity at the side of master surgeons. A single hour watching Gould play Bach would be a wonderful accompaniment.

One hundred hours could very well change your life, and in ways beyond your surgical technique. It did mine.

¹ Bach, J.S. Goldberg Variations BWV 988 (1741).

² [Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgeons.](#)

³ Friedrich, Otto. *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations*. (New York: Random House, New York, 1989), 329.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

KEYWORDS:

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LEADING COMMENT:

Exploring the relationship between music and veterinary surgery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.