



## “FLIP-SIDE OVERLAP”: THE MEDIUM IS THE MUSIC

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### I. An Experiment in Musical Presentation

Had Deanne Bogdan chosen to communicate her thoughts via long play (LP) record rather than through the medium of print, her essay might have been called “Understanding Music: The Greatest Hits of Glenn Gould and Marshall McLuhan.” I see Bogdan’s paper as a much needed step in continuing the explorations on musical performance of two of Toronto’s greatest communications thinkers.

My live response to Bogdan’s critical discussion of performance was an experiment in music performance. I wondered: Can the audience move from a lecture and public presentation on the *problem* of performance to a more immediate aesthetic response, to what Bogdan calls a “heightened public experience”?<sup>1</sup> I sang “Ich Grolle Nicht” (I Bear No Grudge), a piece from a song cycle by Robert Schumann using the text of Heinrich Heine. The *All Music Guide* describes the Schumann piece in the following way:

Using Heine’s text, the vocalist directly renounces an unloving, serpentine vixen, supposedly detaching from previous affections. The accompaniment’s relatively narrow dynamics and static chords (many of which are unresolved sevenths) suggest the frigidity of the woman’s heart and the seriousness of the man’s intentions; even so, the composition provides enough leeway for the two performers to establish a sense of malleability in the first four measures. With the application of thoughtful artistry, this tune is capable of exceptional expression, despite being set in the key of C major in common time.<sup>2</sup>

For a singer to present a song, to “sell it” to the audience (so to speak), so that they fully engage in the experience of the musical performance, the meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> Deanne Bogdan, “Music, McLuhan, Modality: Musical Experience from ‘Extreme Occasion’ to ‘Alchemy.’” *Marshall McLuhan’s “Medium is the Message”: Information Literacy in a Multimedia Age*. Ed. Twyla Gibson. Spec. issue of *MediaTropes* 1 (2008): 73–101.

<sup>2</sup> *All Music Guide*, “Ich grolle nicht, song for voice & piano (Dichterliebe), Op. 48/7,” available at [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com), <http://www.answers.com/topic/ich-grolle-nicht-song-for-voice-piano-dichterliebe-op-48-7>.

the piece must be understood and captured within the singer's own life experience. It is the singer's "thoughtful artistry" that transposes his or her experience into music and that allows an audience, in turn, to experience meaning through the performer. In this case, the occasion of my performed response to Bogdan was live, "off the floor." In other words, I knew that few members of the audience had previous knowledge of the song, so I could not rely on prior information to aid their engagement, understanding, and experience of aesthetic enjoyment. My challenge was to communicate the meaning solely through performance techniques.

This sort of live "first time" experience of a musical composition is a throwback to a bygone era when all concerts were live. If we consider McLuhan's arguments concerning technological environments, such throwbacks may be considered "high brow" or "high art" forms. Given the likelihood that most of the spectators had no previous experience of the Schumann piece, I was hoping they might feel for a moment the kind of singular aesthetic experience that is only possible before a critical perspective and the "problem" of performance announces itself. If even a few members of the audience felt this aesthetic dimension, then this would have been, for me, sufficient to demonstrate that "the medium is the message"—that they were connected by the music to the shared experiences, meanings, and expectations that bind us all in a common social fabric and cultural life. This connection in a community of listeners seems to refute Said and Bogdan, who argue that there is a disconnection between the origin of the piece and its eventual recital—a number of informational gaps that cannot be overcome in or through the performance itself. Instead, I hoped to offer a performance in which my life as the singer became the medium. I am suggesting that this aesthetic dimension of the performance, an "exceptional expression," helps to close the informational gaps that separate the various participants in the performance equation.

## **II. The Composer/Audience Dichotomy and McLuhan's Musical Aesthetic**

For this written portion of my response, I argue that Gould's performances remain essentially tied to the old-world paradigm of performance. Even in retiring to the studio, his performances continued to be "extreme occasions"; he did not manage to break down the traditional boundaries between composer, performer, and audience. While the live audience is of course removed from Gould's virtual or in-studio performances, the audience is nevertheless present, implied in and through his gesticulations, in his every action, in the way he "conducts," and even in the way he engineers and re-engineers a musical composition. Gould remains faithful to the composer—ironically, more faithful

than the composer might have expected of his or her own piece of music. In an interview, Gould reflects on one of his own recordings: “Two days after having made that record, had I not listened to it in a playback booth and thought—this really is fun and really does make sense, it really does say something about the architecture of that work—I would have chucked it and gone back and done it as Hollywood would prefer it” ([YouTube clip here](#)). In other words, Gould maintains that there is an “architecture” to the composition, he remains faithful to the composer and has an audience in mind. In returning to the studio, then, the goal was to record the definitive rendition of a piece of music, not “for Hollywood,” but bearing in mind the composer and a discerning audience.

Gould could not let go of the old performance models, upholding the traditional distinctions between composer, performer, and audience. Many of Gould’s theoretical commitments contradict his performances. Theoretically, Gould resonated strongly with McLuhan’s writings on performance. In McLuhan’s view, the divisions between composer, performer, and audience had become obsolete—and performance had to be reconceptualized. And while McLuhan’s performances were completely aligned with his theories, in performing, Gould betrayed these theories, and his performances did not embody his (or McLuhan’s) theoretical insights.

McLuhan was, I believe, cognizant of the “disconnect” between Gould’s theory and his practice. For example, on 4 June 1964 (*Letters of Marshall McLuhan*), shortly after the University of Toronto conferred on Gould an Honorary Doctorate, McLuhan wrote to him, lauding the University for its perceptiveness. He acknowledged with appreciation that Gould had used some of his ideas and he made reference to Gould’s theoretical work. Significantly, he made no mention of Gould’s performances. This “argument from silence” on McLuhan’s part suggests that this omission was intentional.

Junichi Miyazawa discusses Gould’s theories on media, performance, and Canadian identity, noting the ongoing relationship between the two men, including Gould’s visits to McLuhan’s home and his telephone conversations with the media guru.<sup>3</sup> Miyazawa compares Gould’s theoretical ideas with McLuhan’s views, and argues that Gould developed his analysis of media sometime after his meetings with McLuhan and before his first full-scale

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<sup>3</sup> Junichi Miyazawa, *Guren gurudo ron [Glenn Gould: A Perspective]* (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 2005). Miyazawa’s purpose is to understand Gould’s thinking as well as the way he arrived at his conclusions. This work is published in Japanese, but summaries may be found at [http://www.walkingtune.com/ggron\\_e.html](http://www.walkingtune.com/ggron_e.html). The author has posted research findings related to this book at [https://email.rutgers.edu/pipermail/f\\_minor/](https://email.rutgers.edu/pipermail/f_minor/), which includes a piece about September 11, 2001.

lecture on media, “An Argument for Music in the Electric Age,” which Gould delivered in October of 1964 at Convocation Hall, University of Toronto. Close examination of Gould’s discussion in this lecture shows that his major theoretical distinctions parallel McLuhan’s previously published description of human history.<sup>4</sup> The chart below makes this parallelism clear.

<b>McLuhan’s Media Stages</b>	<b>Gould’s Music Stages</b>
preliterate or tribal age of orality	the pre-Renaissance age (where everyone is a performer-composer)
Gutenberg age of visuality	the age of concert media (the composers, the performers, and the listeners are divided and ordered into a hierarchy; music as public spectacle)
the electronic age of “retribalized” new “orality”	the electronic age (the end of concert; the domination of recording; the collapse of the musical hierarchy; music as environment; the appearance of high-participant listeners, the anonymity of art)

Miyazawa convincingly demonstrates that McLuhan had a significant influence on Gould’s views.

However, there is no question that Gould was thinking about technology and its interaction with performance before he met McLuhan. Geoffrey Payzant cites Gould’s essay about his first public performance at age fourteen, when he played Beethoven’s Fourth Concerto accompanied by an orchestra. What speaks most clearly to Gould’s interest in alternative media is his description of how he went about learning the piece. Gould said that he practiced by spinning on his record player Artur Schnabel’s recording of the Fourth Concerto and playing along with the music, attempting to capture the smallest nuances of the virtuoso’s interpretation. Since the Concerto was recorded on four 78-RPM records—eight sides in total—there was a pause in

<sup>4</sup> Junichi Miyazawa, “Glenn Gould and the Media: The Influence of Marshall McLuhan,” *The Annual Review of Canadian Studies* (The Japanese Association for Canadian Studies), vol. 20 (September 2000). Published in Japanese, the author provides summaries in English at [https://email.rutgers.edu/pipermail/f\\_minor/2001-September.txt.gz](https://email.rutgers.edu/pipermail/f_minor/2001-September.txt.gz).

the music at regular intervals, when the automatic arm on the record player changed a record. Gould explained how the pauses influenced his interpretation of the work:

These changeover points provided an especially important formative influence; without them, the D major second theme, the ambivalent F natural inauguration of the development section, the E minor stretto at bar 235, and of course the cadenza—to mention only landmarks pertaining to the first movement—lost emphasis and pertinence and Beethovenian point....

I am unable to tolerate any performance of this mellow opus... that does not pay homage to that phenomenon of flip-side overlap.<sup>5</sup>

Gould underscores how the time lapse involved in the “flip” of the record by the automatic record changer affected the musical sensibility of an entire generation: “those of us reared in the 78 era came to cherish and anticipate” the musical structures of the “flip.”<sup>6</sup> His description offers a telling example of the “medium is the message.” By using as a key element of his interpretation the silence made necessary by the technology of the medium of the record player, Gould became an exemplar of McLuhan’s famous adage.

Even though Gould was aware of and used the latest recording and engineering technologies, incorporating these into his performances, the overall effect nonetheless manifests the ideals and paradigms of a prior age. Thus, while McLuhan’s and Gould’s respective critical views on technology converged, Gould was ultimately unable to bring his theory to practice. McLuhan became the oracle of the “retribalized” Electronic Age, while Gould essentially moves his performances from the stage to the studio, perpetuating existing performance conventions. Gould chose to leave the public eye just as McLuhan entered the eye of a media storm. While Gould’s departure from the concert stage to work exclusively in the studio has been widely discussed—as Bogdan illustrates—the effect of McLuhan’s arrival in the *Laugh-In*, TV world has received less attention, and the attention it has received has been mainly negative. This unsympathetic view of McLuhan’s media practice is, I contend, a sign that his performance art has been poorly understood. McLuhan left a

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Payzant, *Glenn Gould, Music and Mind*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1982), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

legacy for the virtual world that can be more fully comprehended through his theoretical views of the “discarnate man.”

McLuhan’s performances enact his theories of the “discarnate man.” Here is an audio clip [[Windows Media](#); [Real Media](#)] of McLuhan discussing the discarnate condition, calling it “angelism”—the effect that occurs when we extend ourselves through electric media. In other words, the bodily fragmentation that results from electric mediation is a disembodiment that is, at the same time, part of the “extensions of man” and part of our aesthetic experience. While Gould *intellectually* grasped the idea of the “discarnate man,” his artistic practice did not reflect this understanding. Ironically, of course, when Gould is mediated virtually (on YouTube, for example), he *is* just as discarnate as McLuhan; the difference is that Gould does not recognize the significance of his discarnation. Moreover, Gould fails to play on or to make use of this virtual dimension in his performance. Conversely, McLuhan’s performances are virtual plays, that is, his virtual performances always have the virtual as both their form and their content—they are always virtually mediated and *about* virtual mediation, thus embodying his adage that medium is the message. In this we can say that McLuhan’s style anticipated the digital world.

### III. McLuhan, Music, and Orpheus: Towards a Method

“[McLuhan]... was, I believe, a musician...”<sup>7</sup>  
—Jean Baudrillard

Bruce W. Powe offers:

In 1978, at the Centre for Culture and Technology, I heard Marshall McLuhan (who was a tired man then) respond to a guest’s speech on electronic media. “In the electronic age we are living entirely by music,” McLuhan said. I have never been able to trace this aphorism in any book, letter, or article. Yet the statement is a clue to McLuhan, and a clue to us.<sup>8</sup>

Like Bogdan, both Powe and Baudrillard viewed McLuhan as a musician, arguing that music is a metaphor for McLuhan’s thinking about media. I maintain that this view is both fitting and appropriate. Unpublished recordings of McLuhan exhibit his resonant voice, both as a singer and as a reader of

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Bayard and Graham Knight, “Vivisectioning the 90s: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard,” *CTheory*, 8 March 1995, available at: [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=66](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=66).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce W. Powe, “Noise of Time,” The Glenn Gould Archive, Library and Archives of Canada, available at: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/glenn Gould/028010-502.10-e.html>.

poetry. Describing his voice, Ted Carpenter stated, “he [McLuhan] burst into song, and he wasn’t John McCormick, but he was not bad.” McLuhan’s work on the shifting visual and acoustic environments from antiquity to the electronic era re-defines the basic concepts of music. McLuhan may be considered a musical composer and performer in the re-tribalized era, an exemplar of Gould’s third stage of music’s development: “the end of concert; the domination of recording; the collapse of the musical hierarchy; music as environment; the appearance of high-participant listeners, the anonymity of art” (Bogdan).

Two examples serve to illustrate the importance McLuhan ascribed to music, first, by probing the human need for structured sound (i.e., music), and second, by associating music with oral cultures and the right hemisphere of the brain:

One thing that musicologists have not been very explicit about is the human need to put the sounds of the environment through the vital social process of dialogue in order to humanize the merely mechanical sounds of the environment.<sup>9</sup>

All music comes out of oral cultures... right hemisphere people are the ones who produce the music.<sup>10</sup>

McLuhan was an explorer of spaces—acoustic, visual, and mental.<sup>11</sup> He created a new methodology to help understand how we live in the re-tribalized, mediated world. He called this new method “media ecology” because it brings together ecological and spatial approaches to understanding the world. I would refer to McLuhan’s methodology as “neo-environmental music.”

When noted composer and critic R. Murray Schafer wrote *The Tuning of the World*, he called for a “new Orpheus” to tune the cosmos. McLuhan took Schafer seriously. In his 1977–78 graduate seminar, he related the notion of “retuning” to his own concept of media ecology, whereby the environment can be programmed by controlling media consumption.<sup>12</sup> It is the Orphic structure of McLuhan’s method that needs to be understood. Cavell points out how

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Mr. Eliot and the St. Louis Blues,” *The Antigonish Review* 18 (summer 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “The Festival of Life” (1978). This material can be found in box 48, files 18 and 19 of the Herbert Marshall McLuhan Papers in the Public Archives of Canada. The address itself (Alliance for Life Festival, Ottawa, 6 May 1977) can be found in box 141, file 13.

<sup>11</sup> For an evaluation of McLuhan as more than a communications theorist, see, for instance, Richard Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

Schafer positions McLuhan as the “saint of the wired generation,” a “new Orpheus”:

Schafer in his 1985 essay “McLuhan and Acoustic Space” remarks on McLuhan’s use of the term acoustic space as a hybrid “which marks it as transitional caught between two cultures.... Thus McLuhan tries to intuit its character between the fissures of the Gutenberg crack-up.... Auditory space is very different from visual space—we are always at the edge of visual space, looking in to it with the eye. But we are always at the centre of auditory space, listening with our ear.”<sup>13</sup>

McLuhan understood the musical spirit of culture. How did McLuhan use this understanding to create and disseminate his ideas?

McLuhan expressed himself not only in books, but in multiple media, through essays and lectures, on television shows, records, and (the now obsolete medium of) slide/tape shows.<sup>14</sup> This multi-media communication strategy is consistent with his understanding of how the breakdown of the Gutenberg Galaxy is followed by the rise of a fragmented and fragmenting electronic world. Consider, for example, the way that his written work is presented aphoristically, rather than through extended prose analyses. These aphorisms are non-linear, acting as “probes” to acknowledge that human thinking in the electric age is discontinuous, associative, right-brained, and “hyper-active.”

Liss Jeffrey characterizes this methodology as follows:

[McLuhan] combined his publishing with oral practice, in lectures, interviews, broadcasts, and the conversational collaborations that produced most of his later books.... At the same time, he performed a diagnosis of the patterned conditions of culture, in a manner that deliberately echoed previous grammarians.... He devised counter-environments, including theories and aphorisms, in order to perceive the hidden ground for culture.<sup>15</sup>

The aphorism is suggestive, it is ambiguous, and it connotes a double-play that harkens back to oral cultures. The aphorism resonates between figure and

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<sup>13</sup> Cavell, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker’s *Through the Vanishing Point* originated as a slide/tape show.

<sup>15</sup> Liss Jeffrey, “The Heat and the Light of Marshall McLuhan: A 1990s Reappraisal,” Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1997, pp. 161–62.



ground, opening up new possibilities for meaning—new relations between figure and ground. McLuhan therefore recognized that music operates aphoristically, that the new electronic media environment drastically changes the figure/ground relation through which the public will “hear” the music. According to Jeffrey, McLuhan entered into the media matrix understanding that the hierarchy of composers, performers, and listeners is transmuted into what today we might call the Web 2.0 generation. McLuhan intuited YouTube and its fragmenting effects *avant la lettre*.

To return to Gould, for whom the days of the concert hall had ended, his work with recorded media represented modes of musical performance that were more like the compositions of Bach, Mozart, Schoenberg, etc. than the more innovative styles associated with John Cage, Frank Zappa, and Marshall McLuhan. Gould’s new compositions continued to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, as well as thematic structures, with Gould “conducting” his sound engineer to assemble and edit different “takes.” Unlike Gould, McLuhan understood that in the simultaneous electronic world, beginning, middle, and end are meaningless concepts, and that hyperlinked structures prevent such a “rational,” linear presentation.

McLuhan, in his role as media ecologist, understood musical composition/performance much in the way we see Orpheus and his lyre—Orpheus, whose music enthrals not just humans, but beasts, trees, rocks, and the entirety of the natural world. It is in this light that Baudrillard’s observation that McLuhan was a musician begins to make sense. The role of the media ecologist is to “program” the environment. The media ecologist is Orphic, the media ecologist plays the “lyre” of technology.

Unfortunately, studies of McLuhan often neglect his performances, focusing almost exclusively on his writings, specifically two books, *Understanding Media* and the *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. But to fully grasp McLuhan’s project, it is necessary to look beyond his writings to discover the hidden McLuhan, the composer/performer. To illustrate, I would like to present a few of the many examples of McLuhan’s insights that will, I believe, reveal his multimedia rhetorical strategies.

Consider the following three media texts by McLuhan:

Television is a serious medium, it is an inner-oriented medium, you are the vanishing point, it goes inside you, you go on an inner trip, it is the prelude, the vestibule, to LSD.

[[Windows Media](#); [Real Media](#)]

Waiting for go-go. The medium is the message; growing up absurd. The go-go girls ordinarily have a cage while appearing to manifest their energies untrammelled, unconstrained. Sound, in this kind of world is not used as something to be listened to, it's a kind of foam rubber, which you press against, it presses back against you, makes you feel kind of wanted. Sound in the new world of dance, song, it's not for listening, it's for making, and so the go-go girls, locked up each in her little world, represents a kind of theatre of the absurd, in which all communication has broken down. In fact, no attempt is really made to communicate. Each puts on his own show in his own little straight jacket.<sup>16</sup>

[[Windows Media](#); [Real Media](#)]

McLuhan: All news is fake. It's pseudo event. It's created by the medium that is employed. There is no honest reporting on any medium. It is all fake, necessarily created by the medium in question.

Interviewer: Well, that's not true, but go ahead.

McLuhan: It has to be! Newspaper news has nothing to do with TV news.<sup>17</sup>

[[Windows Media](#); [Real Media](#)]

[Follow up: [Windows Media](#); [Real Media](#)]

In the tradition of “practical criticism,” one can imagine I.A. Richards and C.K. Ogden giving these quotations (as text) to media students to analyze and interpret according to the principles of literary criticism. However, these texts are neither traditional nor literary texts; they must be “read” as performances, they are television clips that McLuhan presented as new modes of interpretation, designed to capture the multi-dimensional nature of discarnate man. McLuhan realized and played to the effects of a fragmentary environment. His playful way of using media mirrors and echoes the TV age, and prefigures the coming of the World Wide Web, “Internet musical,” boldly satirizing his audience—“immersive in a unified sensorium.”

In conclusion, I would suggest that there is a similar satirical moment in my own live performance/response to Bogdan. Since Bogdan's lecture/performance was recorded, it is, paradoxically, both an “extreme occasion” and its opposite—a “canned” version. She speaks of how media in a

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<sup>16</sup> “The McLuhan is the Message,” *Telescope Revisited*, CBC Television, 20 July 1967.

<sup>17</sup> W5, CTV, 18 May 1969.

recorded performance enhance the qualities of tactility and embodiment that typify the ideal musical experience for both performer and listener. She adds that one of the side effects of McLuhan's information theory is that the boundaries between composer, performer, and listener are dissolved into what he called the "immersive" experience of the "unified sensorium." This synaesthesia, Bogdan remarks, is the polar opposite of music as an "extreme occasion." My own performance/response was meant to be synaesthetic and "immersive," in McLuhan's sense, dissolving composer, performer, and listener. The added irony to this occasion was that Bogdan was complicit in my performance. By accompanying me on the piano, she became my accomplice in challenging the very argument that she presented.