

M 32351

Glenn Gould Wagner

PIANO TRANSCRIPTIONS OF ORCHESTRAL SHOWPIECES
GLENN GOULD, Piano

Produced by Andrew Kazdin

Side 1
MEISTERSINGER PRELUDE
DAWN AND SIEGFRIED'S RHINE JOURNEY from "Götterdämmerung"

Side 2
SIEGFRIED IDYLL
The selections are CAPAC.

TRANSCRIPTION. See "Arrangement."

ARRANGEMENT. An adaptation; the musical counterpart of literary translation. Voices or instruments are as languages by which the thoughts or emotions of composers are made known to the world; and the object of arrangement is to make that which was written in one musical language intelligible in another. . . . The meanings and values of words and notes are variable with their relative positions, and the choice of them demands knowledge of the work generally as well as of the details of the materials of which it is composed. It demands, in fact, a certain correspondence of feeling with the original author in the mind of the arranger or translator.

—Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians

In this album, Glenn Gould demonstrates another facet of his Protean musical personality. With these performances of his own transcriptions of excerpts from the works of Richard Wagner, he proves, beyond doubt, to be an interpreter whose knowledge of his basic material reveals a true correspondence of feeling with the original author. More, he shows himself to be a creator of extraordinary imagination and fidelity in his trans-

lation of Wagner's orchestral sonorities into the language of the piano.

Mr. Gould's transcription of the "Siegfried Idyll" was premiered on a radio recital for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in early 1973. Included herewith are some first-person program notes in the form of a conversation between Glenn Gould and C.B.C. announcer Ken Haslam on the pitfalls and pleasures of piano transcriptions.

Engineering: Kent Warden, Frank Dean Denowitz
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Glenn Gould Plays His Own Transcriptions of Wagner Orchestral Showpieces

Richard Wagner 1813–1888

1 **Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg:
Prelude to Act I**

9:35

2 **Götterdämmerung: Dawn and
Siegfried's Rhine Journey**

13:08

Morgendämmerung und Siegfrieds Rheinfahrt
Aube et voyage de Siegfried sur le Rhin

3 **Siegfried-Idyll**

23:35

Total Time 46:35

Glenn Gould piano

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The following conversation between Glenn Gould and announcer Ken Haslam took place in February 1973 on a radio broadcast for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It is reprinted here courtesy of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

KH: Well, Glenn, what I'd like to know is – why Wagner, why the *Siegfried Idyll*, why a piano transcription at all? I mean, I know that, a few years back, you did record Liszt's transcription of the Beethoven Fifth, although I'd always assumed you did it as a bit of a lark, and I should have thought that, given your – shall we say – puritan temperament, you'd be – well, perhaps not opposed to transcriptions, per se, but certainly rather skeptical about the process of adapting orchestral masterpieces for the keyboard.

GG: Well, good question, or rather, good questions, Ken. Which one would you like me to field first?

KH: Oh, well, I think your attitude to transcriptions as a whole is what interests me most, Glenn.

GG: Well, it's undergone a certain metamorphosis through the years, Ken. Certainly, in my student days, the nose was an organ down which to look at any enterprises of that kind.

KH: Could it be said that you're mellowing, Mr. G.?

GG: Learning to make distinctions, anyway. But, of course, you've got to remember that in those far-off student days, just about the only transcriptions

one heard, and one's fellows played – and, needless to say, to be contrary, I never did – were Bach organ pieces fitted out for the piano by Liszt, or Tausig, or ...

KH: ... or Busoni.

GG: Right. And I took umbrage at this sort of thing – and, as a matter of fact, I still do – because I played the organ in those days, and knew, or thought I knew, what those pieces were all about. I always felt that it was an extraordinary exercise in perversity for students to open up their graduate recitals – and virtually all of them did – with somebody's transcription of the G minor Fugue – “big” or “little” as the case might be – in a conservatory concert hall equipped with an organ. I felt that, if they really identified so strongly with that repertoire, the logical course was for them to start off their concert at the organ or simply forget the whole thing. The truth of the matter is, of course, that, in the long run, those transcriptions effectively prevented a whole generation from coming to grips with baroque performance criteria. I mean almost nobody opened a concert in those days with excerpts from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, or with a French Suite, or whatever, probably because they were too difficult and consequently ...

KH: ... difficult? But, surely, the organ transcriptions with all those thundering octaves and so forth were actually ...

GG: ... were actually much easier to play. They look impressive in a “Look, Ma, no hands” sort of way but they don't require the transparency of sound and digital independence without which you can't really manage the harpsi-

chord works of Bach. The need for such tactile felicities is minimized precisely because of those “thundering octaves” of yours.

KH: Well, then, that said – how do you justify your recording of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony as arranged by Liszt?

GG: Precisely as you described it, Ken, as a “bit of a lark.” Mind you, there was more excuse in it for Liszt than for me. He really did transcribe those symphonies so that they could be heard after a fashion in provincial centers where no orchestra adequate to the purpose existed. But, generally speaking, I can’t think of any less felicitous material for the purpose of piano reduction than the later Beethoven symphonies.

KH: Well, then, we’ve come full circle. If that’s the case, how can you possibly justify a transcription of a Wagner masterpiece which succeeds quite well, thank you very much, in the milieu for which it was designed?

GG: Well, obviously, if you’re conducting an academic inquisition, Ken, I can’t – at least not entirely – but ...

KH: No, I’m not trying to back you into a corner, Glenn, but I gather that you have several other reductions in addition to the *Siegfried Idyll* on the drawing board at the moment and ...

GG: Yeah, I’m attempting a realization of the “Rhine Journey” and the *Meistersinger Vorspiel*.

KH: Exactly. And if, as you say, you have reservations about transcribing Beethoven, then, surely, Wagner, whose musical outlook demands an even grander orchestral apparatus, would seem a still less likely prospect.

GG: Well, yes and no, Ken. Yes, most emphatically, if you’re referring to the early works. I can’t think of anything less inherently pianistic than the Overture to *Tannhäuser*, for instance ...

KH: ... or the Act III Prelude to *Lohengrin*.

GG: Exactly. No, it’s precisely those potboilers which won’t work, and yet, interestingly enough, it’s precisely the Wagner of that period – to be fair, perhaps with the same sense of missionary zeal – that Liszt did have a fling at transcribing.

KH: Oh, really?

GG: Yeah, he by-passed practically all of the later excerpts with the exception of the “Liebestod” in favor of such goodies as the “Spinning Chorus” from *The Flying Dutchman* and “Elsa’s Dream” and “Lohengrin’s Rebuke.”

KH: Well, now, the reason that you feel early Wagner wouldn’t work in transcribed form is – what? – because it’s bombastic and ...

GG: ... Yes, because it’s bombastic, but not in any decibel count sense. The early pieces are not ineffective because they’re loud and brassy, but because, relatively speaking, they’re harmonically static. You know, take the “Fest March” from *Tannhäuser*, for instance ...

KH: ... or the *Rienzi* Overture, perhaps?

GG: Exactly. They're fitted out with glorious themes which, as themes, can be made to work very well indeed on the piano, but the accompanimental figures sound like the proverbial oom-cha-chas at a church social. Now this is fine in an orchestral texture. It's all part of the post-Weber heroic opera style. You can repeat the same chord ad infinitum and, as long as you emphasize the beat with some assistance from the percussion battery or by constantly modifying the orchestral color involved, all's well. But it doesn't work on the piano precisely because you emphasize percussive elements on that instrument at your peril.

KH: Well, a light begins to dawn, Glenn, because in the *Siegfried Idyll*, of course, you have what is possibly the least bombastic work Wagner ever wrote.

GG: Absolutely, it's a natural. It's as lyrical as a Chopin nocturne, it makes all its dramatic points through counterpoint, never through percussive effect. As a matter of fact, there are no percussive traps, as they say, in the orchestration – not even a tympano.

KH: Well, that should make your job as a transcriber a lot easier.

GG: It should, but in a funny way, it makes it more challenging. It means that there is every opportunity to rebuild the piece for piano and, if it doesn't come off, then I'm to blame.

KH: Wait a minute, Glenn, whoa! You use the word “rebuild.” Surely you're not concocting a “paraphrase” of the original as Liszt did to – what? – to *Rigoletto*, and so on?

GG: No, that was a slip of the tongue, Ken. It's an almost entirely accurate representation of the score, structurally. There are no cuts, no additions. But it's not a literal representation, by any means, and that's a lesson I learned, in a reverse sort of way, from Liszt.

KH: How come?

GG: Well, I came to feel that, in the Liszt transcriptions, he was too faithful to the score for his own good. You know, in an orchestral work, you can put in all sorts of octave doublings, for example, and, according to the diverse impulses of the instruments involved, you will have a rich and glamorous texture. Do the same thing on the piano, even within the options available to ten fingers, and, although you may get marks for authenticity, what you end up with is mud, glorious mud. Liszt, of course, is much more puritanical than I am in a funny sort of way. He tends to solve these problems by left-hand tremolandos – or, even worse, right-hand tremolandos – which, to me, always sound like the worst excesses of Aunt Sadie at the parlor upright ...

KH: ... in a moment of rapture!

GG: Exactly.

KH: But you don't mean to say that you played fast and loose with Wagner's textures, Glenn?

GG: Not "fast and loose," no! I simply decided that – well, for instance, that you can't hold a chord indefinitely on the piano without allowing for diminishing returns – pun intended – and you certainly can't expect that chord to build dynamically as, in the string choir, it can be made to do. So what I did, on occasions like that, was to activate inner voices, make them imitative, wherever possible, of Wagner's motivic conceits, stagger incoming motives and so on – anything to preserve a realistic sense of time and movement. For instance, there's one ten-bar sequence which occurs about one and a half minutes into the *Idyll*, and in which the orchestral textures are singularly uneventful ...

KH: Which makes for problems!

GG: Which makes for problems, precisely, because, as I've said, a string choir can sustain one chord for four bars, say, but a piano simply cannot – at least, not without making it sound like a transcription.

KH: And that you were determined to avoid!

GG: Indeed. You know, my first draft of the *Siegfried Idyll* was written very matter-of-factly, very conscientiously, and the result was a thorough pedantic effort which simply reproduced the score verbatim:



KH: Now then, that represents precisely what's in the score?

GG: Yes, it does. There are no tamperings on my part whatsoever.

KH: Uh-huh. But, now, this was a first draft ...

GG: ... Right. And, in the second draft, I decided to pretend that Wagner had an acute pianistic sense – which, insofar as we can judge from the accompaniments to the “Wesendonck” songs – the only relatively “mature” piano-writing he got involved with – he didn't. But I decided to pretend that he had a keyboard flair to match his orchestral flair though, of necessity, representing a difference in kind, and I deliberately dispensed with all textural scruples and tried to imagine what might have been if someone with both orchestral and pianistic flair – Scriabin, let's say – had had a hand in it.

KH: Well, now, in relation to the example you quoted, what amendments were involved, Glenn?

GG: Well, for instance, in the first two bars, the second violin and viola, which Wagner moves synchronously, are heard, in my version, as a syncopated phenomenon; in the next four bars, when Wagner comes to a dead stop on the chord of F-sharp minor, I invent, in the equivalent of the cello line, a series of horn-call-like motives which keeps the action going, so to speak.

KH: Well, now, do these motives of yours relate thematically to the rest of the work?

GG: Well, Ken, I'll tell you. I'd like to know the *Ring* cycle as well as Anna Russell does, so that I could say with assurance that they're really an inversion of the forge-motif, or something – but I don't, and they aren't – at least as far as I know. They're simply a very pragmatic solution to a very real problem – but, if I do say so myself, they do sound convincingly Wagnerian. Anyway, in the final four bars of the excerpt you heard, the only major change was the interpolation of the double-bass on the off-beats, as opposed to the downbeats, where Wagner placed it – so that it, too, manages to set up its own octave dialogue with the cello.

KH: So that, really, each of these tamperings of yours, Glenn, is directed to the same end – to a kind of non-stop thematic or quasi-thematic activity.

GG: Exactly.



KH: Well now, I can understand how that sort of judicious tampering would work within the context of a pastorella like the *Siegfried Idyll*, Glenn, but you've confessed to having similar designs on "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" and the *Meistersinger* Prelude and, even though the *Siegfried Idyll* is the first order

of business tonight, I'm curious as to whether any modification of method was involved vis-à-vis either of these obviously more flamboyant scores?

GG: Well, as far as the "Rhine Journey" goes, I anticipated problems which, with the exception perhaps of the interminable tympani rolls, turned out to be far less troublesome than I'd imagined. The tympani was a problem – as I said, I can't bear piano tremolandos – but I tried to vary its participatory quotient, in effect, to change the rhythmic intensity of the tympani part from moment to moment and thereby relieve the monotony as best I could.

KH: And *Meistersinger*?

GG: Well, in the case of *Meistersinger*, one has to differentiate, I think, between the first two-thirds of the *Vorspiel* and the remainder of the piece.

KH: The distinction being?

GG: The distinction being that, for approximately seven of its ten minutes, because of its glorious counterpoint, because it's endowed with a degree of abstraction which is quite unique in Wagner's canon and which allows for, but is largely indifferent to, the presence of percussion, *Meistersinger* is an absolute joy to play.

KH: And the last three minutes?

GG: Well, the last three minutes are a bit of a *bête noire*. You know, *Meistersinger* has been a sort of party-piece of mine for more years than I care to count and, without ever bothering to concoct an "official" transcription, I used to play it strictly for my own amazement. But, as you know, Ken,

the last three minutes represent Wagner's simultaneous send-up of, and homage to, the traditions of German musical academe and, ingeniously but inconsiderately, he condenses all previous motives into a kind of *Kunst der Fuge*-like congestion that is, literally, impossible to render on the keyboard unless you deliberately divest it of at least a portion of its contrapuntal invention ...

KH: ... which, of course, would be to lose the whole point of the piece.

GG: Exactly.

KH: Well, now, before you wrote out your transcription, how did you navigate that segment in performance at home?

GG: By the simple expedient of leaving out one or other of the principal voices and adding a *Sing-Along-with-Mitch*-style descant.

KH: Of which there is already quite enough on your records as they stand, if I may say so, Mr. Gould!

GG: Your comments noted and filed, Mr. Haslam.

KH: But, seriously, Glenn, how did you navigate this passage for the record?

GG: For the record, I wrote a piano *primo* part for the last three minutes, recorded it, put on earphones, and then added whichever voice was missing as a piano *secondo*.

KH: Good heavens, Glenn, you're confessing to electronic hocus-pocus, to a violation of artistic integrity, to ...

GG: ... well, perhaps we could argue the moral imperatives involved on another occasion.

KH: Agreed. But did your three minutes of *primo-secondo* over-dubbing persuade you that the *Meistersinger Vorspiel* can work *in toto* on the piano?

GG: That, sir, is not for me to say. But, given the nightmare of endeavoring to sync to my own rubato, it proved conclusively that Ferrante and Teicher, I'm not.