

GLENN GOULD: THE LAST PURITAN

By Eric Koch

It was not every day that I received a phone call from the Soviet ambassador.

“You mentioned the other day,” he opened the conversation, sounding like a bass singing Boris Godunov slightly off key, “that you know Glenn Gould. You may remember we met at the French embassy.”

“Of course I remember.”

In the spring of 1961 I found it useful, for a number of reasons not relevant to this story, to get myself invited to events on the diplomatic cocktail circle in Ottawa.

“I hope you don’t think it is an imposition,” the ambassador continued, “if I ask for your help. A lady arrived a couple of days ago from Moscow who wishes to meet Glenn Gould. This is in fact the only purpose of her trip, to meet Glenn Gould. Her name is Tatyana Yaminskaya. The name may ring a bell.”

“Is she by any chance related to Dmitri Yaminsky?”

“The mother.”

I had a vision of the Ukrainian peasant face of Mrs. Khrushchev.

I can’t carry a tune but I happen to know quite a lot about music. Dmitri Yaminsky is a superb young Soviet pianist, a couple of years younger than Glenn and often compared with him, well known for his recording of the Glazunov concerto, which is hardly ever played in the West. Glenn mentioned meeting Dmitri just before the end of his two-week tour in the USSR four years ago, in 1957, a tour, I might add, which has become a legend. It was the first time a pianist from North America performed in the USSR since the death of Stalin four years earlier. It was a magical occasion.

“Tatyana Yaminskaya,” the ambassador went on, “is now on her way to Toronto where she will be staying at the Windsor Arms Hotel. The lady would not have received permission to make this trip if she wasn’t the widow of a senior official and is very well connected in the highest circles.”

“May I ask...?”

The ambassador did not let me finish the question. “The lady came here in a state of acute consternation. Apparently, soon after Glenn Gould’s tour Dmitri had a nervous collapse. There was fear of suicide. But he recovered, with some help from the doctors, and started playing again, though not with the same energy and brilliance. But now he has had another collapse. His mother is desperate. She will grasp at any straw. One of his psychiatrists suggested a phone call from Glenn Gould, or perhaps a personal letter, might be invaluable to help him become himself again.”

“I see,” I said, without much enthusiasm. “This seems rather unlikely, don’t you think?”

“I am not a psychiatrist,” the ambassador said gruffly. “By the way, the lady used to be an English teacher. Language will not be a problem.”

“Good.” I tried to sound positive. “Of course I will do all I can.”

“That will be a great service, also to your country. You may remember that your government was heavily involved in organizing Glenn Gould’s tour in 1957.”

I was grateful to the Soviet ambassador for reminding me of my obligations as a Canadian patriot.

The next day, after breakfast, I called the hotel. Tatyana Yaminskaya had arrived the evening before but was unavailable. So I left a message at the desk. After an hour she called. I suggested I visit her in the afternoon.

“I don’t suppose you could come right away?”

Her English was indeed amazing.

“If you prefer.”

I was immensely relieved to discover that Tatyana was the precise opposite of Mrs. Khrushchev. She had sparkling blue eyes, a wonderful complexion and a warm, winning smile, and wore an elegant dark blue dress and three rows of pearls. She looked like a movie star in a French film playing a grand duchess at the turn of the century.

Tatyana took me to the Courtyard Café, the large, tree-shaded patio in the back where a few guests were having a late breakfast. She ordered tea.

“It is very good of you to assist me in my painful task,” she said, “I appreciate it very much. No doubt you have better things to do.”

I told her I was pleased to make this my priority but Glenn was a notoriously difficult man and I was by no means sure that I could arrange a meeting. At the moment he was at his cottage on Lake Simcoe, anyway.

“Oh,” she said, frowning heavily. “How terrible. The ambassador told me he was in Toronto.”

“I am sorry,” was all I could say.

“This is a heavy, heavy blow. I cannot stay longer than five days.”

“I am quite prepared to drive you to his cottage there. But I can assure you he will not receive you.”

I explained to her that Glenn is a fanatic about his privacy. He insists on being left alone with his dog. He will see nobody.

“How far is it?”

“It would take us less than three hours, depending on the traffic.”

“I would not want to waste your time,” she said, “unless we had his agreement to receive me beforehand. I understand my ambassador has told you why I have come. My son could be a younger brother of your friend. Also a child prodigy. A genius, everybody says. But these are words

I avoid because they are so imprecise. I prefer to say that Dmitri is exceptionally gifted and exceptionally sensitive and, alas, fragile. I don't know anything about Canadian literature, but Dmitri's head is full of Dostoevsky. I hope your Canadian authors are more cheerful."

"I would think they probably are," I smiled.

"You must think that I am on – I just learned this idiom – 'on a wild goose chase'. I don't blame you. You weren't in Moscow and Leningrad when Glenn Gould appeared, like the first musician to land on Mars. The standards for the best piano playing in the USSR had been set by Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels, Radu Lupu and by my son. But we had never heard or seen a phenomenon like Glenn Gould, so original, so captivating, so intensely serious, so deep, so ecstatic, so *radical*. Dmitri came closest."

"You were unprepared?" I asked. "You had not heard his recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*?"

"No. We are less isolated than we used to be but we still live in another world. Not only was his Bach a revelation but the moderns on his programs were entirely new to us, people like Schönberg who had been taboo. We had only read about them, but that was all. Especially the young people, musicians like Dmitri. For them all this was earth-shaking. My son was thrown off balance, totally. With horrible consequences. I was frightened to death. He said what was the point of struggling on, in a world that had produced Glenn Gould, in some obscure place on the other side of the planet no one had ever heard about? He would never be able to reach such heights. And then I found the draft of a suicide note on his desk.... Waiter, some more tea, please."

I said nothing because there was nothing I could say. The one admittedly irreverent thought I had I could hardly reveal, namely, did I really need this? Why didn't I kill this project in the bud the moment I heard about it and tell the ambassador, "Sorry, Your Excellency, I don't think I can help. I don't know Glenn Gould well enough." Which was entirely true. Hardly anybody did. The new English idiom Tatyana had just learned – "wild goose chase" – seemed to me entirely appropriate to describe her mission.

"If I phone him, he won't answer," I said. "He never answers. He wants to be left alone. He may not phone me for weeks, and then only in the middle of the night, in the small hours, at two or three o'clock in the morning. And keep me on the phone for an hour when all I want is to go back to sleep."

The waiter brought a new teapot.

I wanted to repeat to her what I had already told the ambassador, namely that, even if in the end we did get through to him and he complied with her request, I could not imagine anything Glenn could convey to her son that would change her son's mind. But fortunately I stopped myself. Who was I to say this? I didn't know Dmitri. Obviously she thought otherwise or she wouldn't be here.

“Do you know of anybody who visits him?” she asked. “Under the circumstances, could that not be our best approach? We might just go along and hope for the best.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” I exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of it? It’s certainly worth trying.”

I pulled out my pen and scribbled on a napkin, “manager, friend (?), mother.”

“You have to give me a little time,” I said, getting excited. “Let me see what I can do. I will go home and do some phoning and get back to you in an hour. At the minimum, I am sure you can probably meet them. It’s better than nothing. Something may occur to you while they talk that might help you.”

“I don’t see how. What I need is Glenn Gould himself. But I suppose you are right. One never knows.”

I went to my place and phoned his agent, Hans Rosenbaum, his oldest friend Stuart Macdonald, and Mrs. Gould. I told them that the mother of Dmitri Yaminisky was in town, that she was beautiful and hoped to see Glenn. She had heard him in Moscow and had little time. Were they intending to go up to Lake Simcoe during the next day or two and could they be persuaded to take her and me along? None of them said yes, but they all wanted to meet this beautiful Russian lady. Very few visitors from the Soviet Union had arrived in Toronto in recent years.

We went to see Glenn’s manager, Hans Rosenbaum, first, in his basement office at home, just north of St. Clair Avenue West. Hans was in his early thirties, handsome, not tall, well groomed, just two or three years older than Glenn, who was thirty this year. They were good friends. Hans was a refugee from Nazi Germany and Glenn his first client. He had taken him on immediately after hearing his first Bach recital at the Royal Conservatory and since then struck gold.

“I’ve heard your son’s recording of the Glazunov concerto,” Hans said to Tanyana after we had taken our seats. “It’s superb. I hope he’ll soon be able to play in the West.”

“So do I,” she sighed. “Things are gradually loosening up but Dmitri is passing through a difficult phase.”

“Oh, I’m used to ‘difficult phases,’” Hans laughed. “It seems you can’t be a great pianist without going through a ‘difficult phase’ once in a while. Just ask Horovitz’s agent!”

“Perhaps you can tell us a little about Glenn’s troubles, Hans,” I said. “That is bound to help Mrs. Yaminskaya see her son in a new perspective.”

“Glenn has serious health problems, both real and imagined. He is terrified of germs. He will not shake hands with anybody and cannot abide anybody touching him. No room is ever warm enough for him. Even at the height of summer he wears an overcoat and a woolen scarf, and at least one pair of gloves. He has to soak his hands in warm water for twenty minutes before he touches the piano. He is an insomniac. He suffers from stomach cramps, severe headaches, frequently recurring colds. He has the terrible habit of canceling concerts at the last moment. Flying is an ordeal. Most hotels are. He cannot abide air conditioning. Surely Dmitri isn’t as bad as that!”

Tatyana inspected her fingernails.

“Yes – and no,” she said.

Hans was not sure what she meant so he went on.

“Glenn is never satisfied unless he plays alone and nobody listens. His performances in public always leave him frustrated, dissatisfied, unhappy. He can’t bear it if anybody he knows is in the concert audience. How about Dmitri? Does he behave like that?”

“Before he heard Glenn Gould,” Tatyana replied, “he wasn’t too bad. Moody and often depressed, yes, up and down, but it was bearable. But four years ago, after hearing Glenn Gould, he broke down and cancelled his entire season. He refused to go near the piano again. We have very good doctors. They prescribed all kinds of treatments. But he never fully recovered. That is why it was suggested that perhaps a word from Glenn Gould....”

“Hm.... I see.”

Clearly, Hans was at least as skeptical as I was.

“I asked you on the phone,” I said to him, “whether you are intending to drive up to Lake Simcoe during the next day or two.”

“I might. I will let you know.”

Our next appointment was with Stuart Macdonald, his oldest friend and, during much of his childhood, his next-door neighbour. Stuart worked out of his home, only a few blocks away from Hans, and his room was crowded with books and papers. Stuart was one of Canada’s leading newspaper columnists. He had a lively round face and wore glasses and seemed to be glad to be interrupted. He clearly found Tatyana attractive.

“I wish I had more time at the moment,” he said. “I want to hear about musical politics in the Soviet Union and write a column about it. Maybe tomorrow or the next day?”

Tatyana said she would be delighted. Maybe they could talk it in the car on the way to Glenn’s *dacha*?

“Maybe,” he laughed. “But I have three deadlines at the moment. Now, what would you like to know about Glenn that you don’t already know? After all, he talks about himself incessantly, with brilliant verbosity, in print, on the radio, on television, enjoys giving abstruse interviews, has breathtaking self-confidence that often makes him talk about things he knows little about, uses big words and long sentences that sometimes sound as though they were translated from boring German textbooks, loves clowning around and mimicking people, which he does amazingly well. You also probably know that he reads a lot, that he calls himself *The Last Puritan*, identifying himself with the hero of George Santayana’s story about self-education, that he loves Russian novels and Thomas Mann, that he wants to compose and conduct, is in touch with all the latest recording technologies, is deeply superstitious and talks freely about his dreams, is pathologically picky about his pianos, insists on sitting on a low folding chair when he plays, which he usually carries with him – what else? – oh

yes, that he says he loves animals more than human beings, that he often makes friends with people and then drops them for no apparent reason, which is very upsetting to them, that he is very interested in the stock market and keeps on top of the day's political news and tells the entire world at great length what music he likes and doesn't like, and why, especially if he can shock people by saying that the trouble with Mozart was that he lived too long."

"Does he say that?" Tatyana smiled.

"Yes, he also believes Mozart didn't know how to write a piano concerto. He says he doesn't care much for music written between Bach's *Art of the Fugue* and *Tristan*, which then leads to his favourites, Hindemith and Schönberg, Alban Berg and Webern. With the exception of some Haydn, some Beethoven, but not what he calls the heroic and pompous Beethoven of the middle period, a lot of Mendelssohn, strangely enough, and Richard Strauss whom he admired *hugely*. But that's not what you want to know."

"No. I want to know how he pulls himself together after he has been sick."

"By taking pills. He keeps our entire pharmaceutical industry happy single-handedly. You cannot imagine how many pills he takes. For every occasion. He consults doctors all the time, makes them prescribe pills of every colour and doesn't listen to them. He tells *them* what is wrong with him."

"I see. What about girl friends?"

"He is secretive about them. Nobody knows for sure and I wouldn't ask. I know he receives a lot of love letters from girls he has not met. I don't know what he does with them. He likes to gossip about other people's sex lives but about his own he is very puritanical."

Tatyana frowned.

"Did you say puritanical?"

"Yes," Stuart Macdonald laughed, "the Toronto Presbyterian kind, not the Soviet or Russian-Orthodox-Ascetic kind."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"I mean other teenagers of Glenn's background rebelled against their parents' Presbyterian horror of sensual pleasures. Which was typical of the Toronto of Glenn's childhood. When Glenn was thirteen and fourteen he saw nothing incompatible between his parents' puritanism and his overwhelming urge to make and understand music. He never rebelled. There was no need. I did, but he didn't. That puritanical tradition shaped his musical tastes. Not right away, but eventually. That is why he dislikes what he thinks of as sensual, self-indulgent, emotional music and prefers rational, abstract, well-structured, cerebral, otherworldly music. He says he believes in Bach's God and is not interested in music that does not meet his ethical and spiritual standards. When he was a boy he never used four-letter words, unlike the other boys, me included."

"What kind of words?" Tatyana wondered, turning to me.

While I tried to explain to her what a four-letter word was – not easy for a gentleman like me – the telephone rang reminding Stuart Macdonald of one of his three deadlines. So we took our leave.

The next morning I picked up Tatyana and drove out to the comfortable neighbourhood of the Beaches in the east end of the city on Lake Ontario to 32 Southwood Drive, the Gould home, to visit Glenn's mother, Florence, whom I never found particularly appealing and who was certainly, compared to Tatyana, decidedly unspectacular. I always found her husband, Bert, more agreeable but he was dominated by his wife and Glenn, and never quite understood why Nature had given him and his wife such an extraordinary son who never had the slightest inclination to follow him in the fur business.

I repeated to Florence what I had said on the telephone. Was she going to visit Glenn during the next few days?

"I really had no intention," she said. "I talk to Glenn almost every evening and try to leave him alone. But, of course, if I can be useful, I would like to help. One musician's mother," she smiled, "must help another musician's mother." I noted that she carefully avoided saying "one *genius's* mother," etc.) "It would depend very much on what Glenn would have to say. I will ask him tonight."

She did and, to my great surprise, Glenn said Dmitri Yaminsky's mother and I were more than welcome, as long as we didn't stay longer than two hours *at the most*.

We drove up the following day. In the car, Florence and Tatyana compared notes. Both mothers had made enormous efforts to make sure their sons had normal childhoods. Neither mother was particularly successful. Their sons' talents set them apart and isolated them. Florence was a piano teacher and taught him herself until he was ten. Both boys detested school, wanted to become professional pianists when they were five. Both strongly disliked competitive sports. Both had remarkable musical memories at an early age. Glenn had memorized all of Bach's preludes and fugues in the first book of the "Forty-eight" by the time he was ten. When Dmitri was ten he knew the first ten Beethoven sonatas and all seven Scriabin sonatas by heart.

Glenn's black-and-white shaggy sheepdog, Banquo, greeted us enthusiastically when we arrived and Glenn welcomed Tatyana with great warmth and charm. It was a lovely, sunny spring day. The *dacha*, the lake, the landscape generally, she said, reminded her very much of her place near Moscow.

He seated the four of us on deckchairs on the lawn looking out at the lake. "Mother told me you are worried about Dmitri," he said to Tatyana after we had settled down.

"Yes." She made a determined effort not to waste time and to come straight to the point. "He has again cancelled all his concerts."

"Again?" Glenn rubbed his chin.

"Yes, he did it the first time after hearing you play."

“Surely you don’t believe that?”

“Oh yes. No question about it.”

“Let me assure you, *madame*, that was only an excuse. I know how these things work. When you are about to explode, you’ll think of any reason. I cancel concerts when I have a little twitch in my left toe, never mind how many people I upset and how much money I lose. Dmitri’s timing was a mere coincidence.”

Tatyana explained the course of events and said that the connection with him, Glenn, was not only Dmitri’s own opinion and also the view of a number of doctors they had consulted. It was one of them who had suggested a word from him, Glenn, might make all the difference.

Florence felt she had to come out on Tatyana’s side.

“Surely you can think of something constructive to say, Glenn,” she said. “Obviously you made a great impression on him.”

Glenn turned to me with a twinkle.

“What do you think I should say to Dmitri Yaminsky?”

“I think you should say what Schopenhauer would say.”

“No,” Glenn beamed. “I will say what the old Tolstoy would say. ‘What took you so long to see the light?’ he would say. ‘Concert audiences are forces of evil. Get rid of them! They bring about mob rule. Slavery. They are enemies of Truth and Beauty, instruments of the devil. Tell the devil to go to hell where he belongs! Become a free man at last! Throw away the shackles. Become yourself!’”

Tatyana stared at him.

“Concert audiences?” she gasped. “How can Dmitri do without them?”

“Make recordings! Edit the tapes until you are satisfied. Throw out the mistakes. Come as close to perfection as it is possible for a mere mortal. Take your time! Relax! Live up to your own standards and be faithful to what you believe the composer had in mind. Don’t believe the sordid propaganda that says a performer must communicate with a live audience to be at his best. That is a dastardly lie perpetrated by concert managers and people who go to concerts not to hear music but to torture performers, to take sadistic delight in the false notes they play, show off their clothes and pick up the latest gossip in the intermission. After all, people used to love going to executions, too!”

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As the whole world knows, Dmitri Yaminsky followed Glenn’s advice His latest recording of the *Goldberg Variations* are outselling Glenn’s two to one.