

Gould may have had autism

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OTTAWA -- Glenn Gould may have suffered from a mild form of autism, the keeper of the Gould archives says. The theory may explain both the pianist's musical genius and his eccentricities, which included an overfondness for scrambled eggs and an aversion to shaking hands.

Timothy Maloney, a musicologist and director of the music division of the National Library of Canada, has worked for two years on a paper contending that the late virtuoso had a neurological disorder characterized by social deficiency, obsessiveness and intolerance of change.

Maloney sees Gould's retirement from the concert stage at 31 as an effort to cope with the condition, Asperger's syndrome. "Every new hall, every new piano and every new person was extremely stressful to Gould," Maloney said in an interview at the National Library in Ottawa. "As he grew older, he needed to be at a remove from society. This is an arch example of an Asperger's sufferer."

Maloney cites Gould's reclusiveness, obsessive work habits, prodigious memory, even his strict diet of scrambled eggs and arrowroot biscuits, as symptoms of the disorder.

In Gould's time, many reviewers expressed irritation at his humming, rocking at the keyboard and conducting the orchestra when either hand was momentarily free. According to Maloney, "Gould could no more control such mannerisms than play the violin. They ruled him, not he them."

Asperger's syndrome was named for Viennese doctor Hans Asperger, who published a paper in 1944 describing a pattern of behaviour in young boys. Although they demonstrated normal language and intelligence levels, they had deficiencies resembling autism in social and communication skills.



Canadian Press files / AUTISTIC? Canadian pianist Glenn Gould relaxes during practice for one of his early performances in the late 1950s. Gould may have suffered from a mild form of autism.