



Edition Friedrich Gulda – The early RIAS recordings

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conoclast

Austrian pianist Friedrich Gulda spent his career straining against the stuffier aspects of the classical music scene in a life that embraced unorthodoxy to the full. Benjamin Ivry profiles this wild child of the piano

A new series from SWR Music containing unissued radio recordings of Friedrich Gulda's solo recitals and concertos (see Selected Listening below) remind us that the achievement of keyboard dropouts mostly depends on where they land. Gulda (1930-2000) has been compared to Canada's Glenn Gould, who also eventually renounced giving standard piano recitals. The Ukrainian virtuoso Sasha Grynyuk even released an album juxtaposing compositions by Gulda and Gould (Piano Classics PCL0043).



Yet differences are more striking than similarities. The puritanical Gould shunned crowded auditoriums for the pristine atmosphere of recording studios. The chain-smoking hedonist Gulda, loathing Isolation, wanted to press the flesh even more than he could at keyboard recitals. Gulda claimed to resent that the rigours of playing classical piano required limiting his alcohol consumption. According to the August 1996 issue of the jazz periodical Down Beat, Gulda once sauntered into a Vienna bar and shouted, 'Dry Martini!', whereupon a waiter who thought he was speaking German brought him three martinis (drei-Martinis). Down Beat gives no hint that Gulda sent back the excess booze.

Even in their intimate lives, Gould and Gulda were essentially dissimilar. Ever-secretive, Gould recorded emotive, valid renditions of lieder by Hindemith with a paramour, the Canadian vocalist Roxolana Roslak. By contrast, Gulda recorded execrable performances of Schumann lieder with a companion, Ursula Anders, and in an un-Gouldian way, traipsed onstage naked with Anders to perform them live. Alternatively, the nude Gulda would play the crumhorn, a Renaissance woodwind instrument. He also experimented on baritone sax, but spared audiences the sight of him tooting it ungarbed.

As a classical piano dropout, Gulda was closer to the Hungarian-American Ervin Nyiregyházi (1903-1987), who also jettisoned a concert career to experience earthier pleasures in the red-light districts of San Francisco and elsewhere. Yet Nyiregyházi languished in poverty for most of his life, unlike Gulda, whose trendy concert antics earned him enough to pay for frequent holidays in Ibiza.

This career began when Gulda's pianist mother urged him to take lessons as a boy, leading to quick, and seemingly effortless, success. During the war years, Gulda and his family braved Nazi strictures to listen to Allied Army broadcasts, including jazz. Gulda always identified jazz with liberation, especially since his lifelong friend Joe Zawinul, with whom he played impromptu clandestine concerts during the war, grew up to be a jazz fusion keyboardist with Cannonball Adderley and Miles Davis. Zawinul assimilated into a milieu where Gulda remained an investigative outsider, seriously interested in the idiom, but lacking the authenticity required of jazz.

Yet Gulda considered jazz the only new music, scorning contemporary piano works by Boulez and Stockhausen, while considering Bartók and Schoenberg to be insufficiently separated from the past. He made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1950 at age 20, following three days of detention at Ellis Island after admitting that 10 years previously, he had been obliged to join a Nazi youth organisation, whose meetings he never attended. As soon as his well-received Manhattan debut was over, he hurried to Birdland, a celebrated jazz club, to hear Duke Ellington's orchestra.

Despite early acclaim, reviewers reminded punters that Gulda had ample competition at a time when legendary keyboard talents still thrived. In November 1951, the Musical Times compared two renditions of Beethoven's Sonata Op 111 in C minor, by Edwin Fischer and Gulda, from that year's Salzburg Festival, concluding that 21-year-old Gulda's showed 'insufficient maturity and depth'. Similarly, the MT of May 1956 evaluated recordings of the first book of Debussy's Préludes, complaining that despite Gulda's interpretive qualities, he was 'no match for [the elder Walter Gieseking's] almost miraculously perfect performance'.

Small wonder that around the age of 30, Gulda rebelled against the elderly – performers and audiences alike. In interviews akin to rollercoaster rides of jokes, rage, and profanity, he described punters at piano recitals as 'centenarian paralytics' and 'stinking reactionary art lemurs' who expect to hear the same five sonatas performed ad infinitum.

On a personal level, Gulda had trouble coping with early success, which translated to chess games played against himself in lonely hotel rooms. He longed for the camaraderie of jazz clubs, in stark opposition to the chilly solitude and competitiveness of virtuoso piano careers.

As Flower Power evolved in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Gulda jumped on the bandwagon, transcribing versions of hits by the Doors and Stevie Wonder. Yet as his son Paul Gulda informed Welt am Sonntag newspaper in May 2010, the elder Gulda could be an old-fashioned choleric paterfamilias, citing an episode when Paul was around 15 and his father invited him to improvise on the recorder in the family garden. When Paul interpolated part of a Mozart symphony into his playing, his father reacted 'very contemptuously', concluding, 'My son does not appreciate freedom, my son does not feel my vibes, he defaces Mozart.'

Gulda could be a nightmare father-figure to grownups too, despite the laidback attitudes he professed to espouse. In September 1971, Helmut Müller-Brühl, director of Germany's Brühl Palace Concerts, told the New York Times that Gulda would never be invited again: '[Gulda] always gets angry. He's difficult about money, about what he wants to eat. He's difficult about his music, too.' This tyrannical side of Gulda makes it fitting that his most famous pupil, Martha Argerich, was allowed access to him only after blurting out (aged 12) to an admirer – the Argentinian dictator Juan Perón – that her most cherished dream would be to work with Gulda. Perón made

Argerich's studies with Gulda possible.

As part of his imperious tendencies, Gulda refused in later years to divulge recital programmes until the public was assembled, preferring to rely on spontaneity. Scorning most maestros, he insisted upon conducting from the keyboard, despite his lack of talent in leading orchestras. Yet the SWR reissues reestablish why Gulda enjoyed an early career breakthrough. A spry, impish rendition of part of Bach's English Suite No 2 in A minor, a psychologically fragile Impromptu in A-flat major and poignant Sonata No 16 in A minor, the last two by Schubert, are impressive. Yet Gulda repeatedly stated that he was too close to the Viennese-style mindset of 'smiles and suicide' epitomised by the oft-desparaging, doomed Schubert to frequent this repertoire, no matter how acutely he mastered it.

One wonders, on the other hand, if French compositions were really his cup of tea, from a limp performance of Couperin's *L'épineuse*, followed by a sketchily envisioned Second Book of Debussy's *Préludes*, lacking stylistic assurance. Meanwhile, his own compositions, of which *Prélude* and *Fugue* and the Doors transcription *Light My Fire* proved widely popular, were repetitious to a fault, although more rollicking than the usual drily sober-sided minimalism. Today, his transcriptions of pop and rock music do not seem to transcend the indigence of the original melodies.

Gulda was at his most attractive communicating domestic warmth and affection in Mozart, especially in the Sonata No 13 in B-flat major, with a final movement, marked *Allegretto grazioso*, like a richly imagined mise-en-scène from an 18th-century stage comedy. Instinctively imagining the spirit of the rococo, Gulda also perceived its sadly fleeting aspects, like an Austrian version of the painter Watteau. He could also be a philosopher in Beethoven's works, being drawn to the pensive Fourth Concerto and Sonata No 28 in A major. In the first movement of the latter, marked 'somewhat lively, but with intense feeling,' Gulda appears to be asking some essential questions about mankind's motivation for existence.

Unlike these highly personalised conceptions, Gulda's version of Handel's Suite in E minor HWV 429 sounds rather formal and anonymous. The more outlandish sides of Gulda are evident in his use of an amplified clavichord for Bach, its weird echoing twang like a puny electric guitar more suited to the Hawaiian shirts he sported onstage in later recitals, in addition to other exotic wear, than Baroque music.

On the SWR recital reissue, 30 minutes of portentous, dated sonic explorations with his jazz ensemble are included: Gulda's *Perspective No 1* lacks only the presence of Yoko Ono to become the definitive hippie-era waste of time. In concertos, Gulda is at his best in a January 1962 performance of Mozart's Concerto No 14 in E-flat major conducted by Hans Rosbaud, in which the pianist manages to be fizzy and celebratory in turn. Mozart's Concerto No 23 in A major from April 1959, also with Rosbaud, is equally fine, particularly an unadorned, moving second movement *Adagio* followed by a spiffy finale, marked *Allegro assai*.

Piano lovers may mourn that Gulda renounced artistic collaboration with the likes of Rosbaud, favouring instead onstage happenings with nubile disco dancers and Giuseppe Nuzzo, an Italian disc jockey known as DJ Pippi, who headlined at Pacha, Ibiza's stellar nightspot. Yet we can only conclude that Gulda knew his own psychological fragilities and emotional imperatives, and followed his heart. His legacy, one of wilful talent and wildly uneven results, remains substantial.

