



Photograph by Koos Raucamp, Nationaal Archief NL, Amsterdam 1945

Forgery and Imitation  
in the  
Creative Process

*Glenn Gould*

Hans Van Meegeren, for reasons which have appeared since the war as being less a matter of profit than of self-justification, decided to paint some pictures in the style of Vermeer and managed to pass off these paintings to the art community as being original and newly discovered works by that master. The initial reaction was one of gratitude to the man for having come upon this incredible treasure and, of course, they sold like hotcakes, made him a good deal of money and a reputation as one of the shrewdest art detectives of his time. During the war, he continued to prosper by selling these works to the elite of the German Gestapo who were, at that time, engaged in making a collection of masterpieces for the estate of Hermann Goering. He was immediately denounced as a traitor by his countrymen—as a man who was profiting through collaboration with the occupying forces and selling them the great treasures he had so recently discovered. At the end of the war, he was, of course, charged with collaborationist activities. He presented as his defense, however, the evidence that these works were not by Vermeer but were, in fact, works of his own construction and that he had been guilty of nothing more than collecting large sums from the Nazis for works which had no market value whatsoever. With this revelation, he very nearly became a hero—until the embarrassed art historians who had certified the works in the first place began to retrace their steps and to announce that of course they had suspected all along that these were not worthwhile works of art, that they obviously contained stylistic blemishes which would not have been found in the works of Vermeer and that, therefore, this man was guilty of an outrageous affront to the artistic life of his country and ought to be sent to jail all over again. He was and he died there. I know of no instance in recent times which better sums up the incredible liabilities of the aesthetic attitudes to which we are heir.

Let's assume that I were to sit down and improvise a sonata in the style of Haydn, and let's assume also that, due to an unimaginable coordination of artistic factors, this sonata came out not only with a considerable likeness to Haydn, but provided a response of pleasure which

was in every way equal to a genuine work of that period. The approach which the snob culture of our time has adopted is that the aesthetic experience derived from this work would be highly valued only so long as the listener were fooled into thinking that the work was indeed a sonata by Haydn. Its value would be entirely dependent upon the degree of chicanery of which I was capable. The moment it was revealed that this was not by Haydn, and that it was a work of accident, not of deliberation, and was a creation moreover of someone living in the present, it would have an economic value, if one can calculate such a thing, of zero, or perhaps more accurately, near zero. Presumably, I could do a tour in which I improvised the same sonata as a curiosity piece and earn some money thereby. On the other hand, if I improvised that sonata and said it was not by Haydn, though it resembled Haydn, but it was perhaps by Mendelssohn, a musician who was born the year Haydn died, the response would most likely be that the work was quite a fine one, perhaps a bit old-fashioned, and certainly one that revealed what a strong influence Haydn had on the younger generation, but that it was rather insubstantial Mendelssohn. As a work, it would not be assigned a value anywhere near that which it would automatically receive if accredited to Haydn. If the work which I improvised were identified as being Brahms, there would undoubtedly be some platitudes offered about 'not bad for a youngster,' 'obviously a beginner's effort, though,' 'certainly showed a good old Teutonic influence.' And it would, of course, be considered as having some anthropological value since anything that could throw light on Brahms's character and development would be considered worth looking into. But its value as repertoire merchandise, so to speak, would be much less than it would have been if attributed to Mendelssohn and, of course, far less than if originally attributed to Haydn. Finally, if attributed to its rightful author—me—it would have almost no value at all. But then there is another side to this question: suppose this sonata which sounded like Haydn were attributed to an even earlier composer—let us say, for instance, Vivaldi. Depending on the current state of Vivaldi's reputation, this might

180

likely give it a value greatly in excess of any held by a legitimate work of that composer because it could then be shown that here, with one work, this great forward-looking master of the Italian baroque bridged the gap of three quarters of a century and forged a link with the masters of the Austrian Rococo. What foresight, what ingenuity, what prophetic qualities! I can hear the applause already.

What are these values then? What gives us the right to assume that in the work of art we must receive a direct communication with historic attitudes of another period? What makes us think that the work of art should preserve an open line between ourselves and the man who wrote it? And, moreover, what makes us assume that the situation of the man who wrote it accurately or faithfully reflects the situation of his time? What does this kind of response do, if not invalidate the relation of the individual to the mass—what does it do, except to read the social background, the entangled human conflicts of a complicated era by virtue of the work of one man who may or may not have belonged in spirit to that era, who may have admired and represented the time in which he lived, or who may have shunned and disinherited its likeness from his work? What if the composer, as historian, is faulty?

There was a time when such problems did not (because they could not) exist. When we look back far into our own past or when we examine the customs of primitive races or tribes of our own era, we find that the aesthetic approach is an indistinguishable part of the religious or mythic aspect of the culture. To a man of the pre-Greek world or to an Australian aboriginal of the present, the religious expression, the cultivation of myth, and the artistic creation are indistinguishable. An attempt to separate the tribal welfare from the aesthetic expression of some part of it would be inconceivable. To such ancient cultures, the present was meaningful only insofar as it represented a repetitive experience—only insofar as it was able to recapitulate the mysterious primeval occasion when, according to the legend of most early civilizations, man had directly confronted God. Mircea Eliade has pointed out that virtually all ancient cultures maintained

the idea that there was in their own prehistory an occasion and a place in which long deceased members of the tribe had made contact with the gods. In such cultures, the idea of repetition, of reaffirmation, necessarily becomes the most valuable aesthetic attribute.

The process of our civilization, however, has to a large extent been based on the idea of choice and of independent decision, a development in which the individual temperament separates to a degree from the tribal temperament—though not always without protest and recrimination from the tribe. And the conversation that is carried on between the separated individual and the affronted tribe, between choice and conformity, individual action and collective control, has become the dialogue of the humanities and very often the provocative agent in artistic endeavors. It was the Greeks who gave rhetorical form to this concept. It was they who first examined the relation of artistic impulse to the community with regard to the requirements of duty and of responsibility. From their time until the present, with certain major detours, our civilization has tended to direct itself toward what has become known, in the regrettably fashionable terminology of modern philosophy, as an existential destiny. Far from appreciating the repetitive values of early culture, this existential concept has led to the view that history is a series of man-made climaxes, of high points of social and artistic achievement, and that by constructing a theory of these high points we can predict the trends of our cultural evolution. History, in this framework, is seen as a series of victories of the extraordinary over the ordinary. It is the unique events in such cultures that are valued, not the repetitive ones. Now there are, of course, certain exceptions to this tendency of the last two millennia. One of these pertains to the medieval world, which offered, in the mandates of Christianity, a refinement of the unity-of-man-with-God concept of earlier cultures. And in which, because of the medieval view that faith precedes intellectual quest and is confirmed by it, we find once again the notion of the predisposition of mankind to a God-like conformation. We

find, consequently, that the medieval world places much less emphasis on the unique event than does Renaissance or post-Renaissance culture. In the medieval world, our concepts of forgery were virtually unknown. But just as surely as it is absent in those periods in which the unity of man and God predominates, forgery is prevalent in those periods which emphasize the individuality of the creative act. The act of forgery in such cultures is an inevitable protest against the resurgence of human endeavor.

Without it, we would have no counterbalance for that other extremity of the civilizing process—the demand for the tantalizing improbability of originality. No time has ever placed greater emphasis on the need for originality than has our own—for the reason that, unlike the cultures of antiquity, we shun a concept of history as the constant undulation of past events. Rather we see in repetition the great preventative, the hindrance to our notion of progress, the essential contradiction to the evolutionary destiny of man. And so, we develop a culture in which we insist upon promoting originality without realizing that it holds a position as far removed from the reality of the creative process as forgery. (Mind you, it would be inexcusable haggling to suggest that in the watered-down context in which it most frequently appears nowadays, the term ‘originality’ is entirely misunderstood. We all know what is meant by the kindly claim that so-and-so has delivered an original interpretation of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.) The paradox is that the more highly developed the era of culture we examine, the more unlikely it is that, in the true sense of the word, the ‘original’ artistic work can exist. The more involved a culture becomes with the idioms and traits of expression which comprise the artistic reservoir of its era, the more unlikely that out of the knowledge of those traits and idioms could venture any creation that is not in largest part simply the redistribution and reordering of certain selected principles drawn from the experience of others. The more a culture develops, and the more its growth is complicated by creations of genius, the greater the odds against the original act.

What, then, are the essential mechanical attributes of the creative act? They are simple processes of reordering and redistributing, of focusing on a new combination of details, of reexamining and ornamenting some long-quiescent trait of the culture. Nothing as dramatic as the quest for originality is involved—nor perhaps anything as restrictive as the inclination to outright forgery. What is involved lies between the two improbables of forgery and originality, processes which we might call imitation and invention. Imitation is considered, in some quarters, nearly as reprehensible as forgery. This is because it runs counter to the flattering self-deceit our culture has credited to the creative intelligence. The idea of imitation upsets the notion of historical progress, of the inevitable linear march of culture. It offends the sensibilities of those who assume that the artist's separateness from society is synonymous with his separateness from other experiences of separation. It ignores the fact that without imitation, without the continuous willful exploitation of artistic tradition, no art of any importance could exist in a culture such as ours. In point of fact, to make art every artist must be engaged in imitation most of the time. Nevertheless, the view from his own area of separateness could never be exactly the same as the view from any other area of separateness, no matter what bond might exist between the varying degrees of artistic estrangement. And consequently, no matter how conscious or unconscious, willful or unintentional the imitative process may be, the reordering and redistributing of detail will, of themselves, provide statistical assurance that no two artists are ever quite the same.

Invention is the other factor in the creative process of ornamentation, of providing for an already existing utility some small enhancement which it has previously lacked or which, perhaps more accurately, it has not thought necessary. The relation between imitation and invention is, on the whole, one of close harmony. Without imitation, without the conscious assimilation of previous points of view, invention would be groundless. Without the spur of invention, the desire to complement, to enhance, imitation, the urge to redistribute, would

lack a motivating force. Obviously, the rebel, the anarchist, the beatnik will hope to effect a higher invention-over-imitation ratio than the conservative who will be content to reorder the facets of the cultural kaleidoscope he already admires with only a hint of inventive ornamentation here and there. But even the anarchical disposition or the grossly rebellious beatnik temperament will sustain a preponderance of imitation in the creative pattern. We have only to examine the flaccid writings of Mr. Jack Kerouac or the ponderous musings of Mr. Henry Miller to realize how short a time is required for yesterday's rebel to retire into the senility of today's village atheist. It is no accident that those works of art which cater most deliberately to the specialized tastes and problems of their own time are the ones which become most quickly outdated. Entire careers, George Bernard Shaw's is one, can be put in jeopardy because of the urge of the artist to address himself in consciously contemporaneous terms to his audience.

But regardless of the inventive intent or capacity of the particular creative mind, the difference between the inventive act and the imitative process is likely to appear, with the passing of years, relatively minute. This is perhaps particularly true in music where, by the very nature of its abstraction, imitation is the essence of organic solidity. Music relies on organizational method more than any other art. This is true at all times, but it is particularly true at times of schismatic reformation. It is no accident that, in periods of major historical transformation such as the late Renaissance or the early years of this century, the uncertainty of a new concept of musical order tends to produce, as counterbalance, a particularly legislated and disciplined constructive attitude. We see this in our own generation in the twelve-tone theories of Arnold Schönberg and the serial formulations of his successors. Cohesion at such moments depends largely upon the ability to imitate. Granted, this is imitation within rather than outside of the organic structure but it is an answer to the problem of order within a dissolving theoretical structure. Remember, for instance, that in 1910 or so, most of his contemporaries regarded music such

as Schönberg's Little Piano Pieces, Opus 19, as being the most outrageously archaic expression imaginable. Nonetheless, with the passing of only fifty years, such music already seems to most of us, given the nature of its vehemence and exaggeration, to have more to do with the expressionism of its immediate predecessors, in fact to be a reshuffling of attributes already detectable in Wagner and in Mahler and others of the previous generation. Nevertheless, such moments of temporary anarchy, which are incidentally about as close as we are likely to get to the original creative act in our culture, usually throw the participant composers or artists into a realm of despair and uncertainty. They usually invoke, in compensation, some sort of arbitrarily imposed mechanical discipline in order to establish their work as that of an ordered and reasoned mind. On the other hand, it takes only a few years before the arbitrary formulation, the inner imitation as you might call it, finds that it cannot sustain itself without a recourse to outward imitation and, as happened to Schönberg, looks backward to another time—in his case, to the architectural models of the eighteenth century—for support.

I know that this concept is not necessarily borne out by the attitude and vocabulary many artists employ to describe their work. It often happens that by some miracle of creation which is beyond reckoning, an artist will be possessed of enormous creative gifts, but these will not be accompanied by even the slightest ability to articulate them. Hence the type of artist who talks about 'breakthroughs,' 'moments of truth,' and 'wild blue yonders.' These expressions do violence to the more thoughtful explanations of the creative process and would do more except for the fact that since they come from artists, nobody pays much attention to them anyway. In a recent lecture, the American composer Lukas Foss commented that some months ago at the end of a lecture on the technical manipulations of serial writing which the French composer Pierre Boulez had given at UCLA, one rather irate member of the audience got up and said, 'Well, Mr. Boulez, are you saying that that is all there is to music, just technique?'

Mr. Boulez thought for a moment and then said, 'Yes, that's about it.' Mr. Foss remarked that quite possibly, had UCLA hosted a lecture by Richard Wagner a hundred years ago, a member of the audience would probably have challenged Mr. Wagner with the question, 'Well, sir, is that all there is then to music, just inspiration?' – to which Mr. Wagner probably, and not too courteously, would have replied in the affirmative. Both would be describing, with all frailties of language, essentially the same composing situation. We tend to express ourselves in terminology which favors the absolute maximum of quasi-theoretical measurement when what we should be describing is a process which conforms, allowing for all the preferences and distinctions of each generation, to a ratio of the timeless mechanical procedures of craftsmanship.

The relation of the listener, the connoisseur, to the work of art is formed by this kind of inexact language. With the best intentions in the world, we tend to visualize an exaggerated concept of historical transformation. We tend, for all of the reasons that are necessary in order to make history understandable, approachable and teachable, to grossly exaggerate historical shifts of one kind and another, to assume that in the alternation of historical attitudes there exists the constant thesis – antithesis concept of point and denial. And we assign to these historical periods terms which are lamentably inexact and dangerous. In order to approach and understand and teach history, we associate, to as large an extent as we can, the predominantly identifiable historical traits with the significant works of art of their time. And so, for all of our high-flown talk about art for art's sake, we assume an approach which tends to a very large degree to be art-for-what-its-society-was-once-like's sake.

What it all adds up to is not that we have a particular regard for antiquity, not that we are persuaded that the good old days were best and cannot be retrieved, but rather that we have brought into our critical decision-making the notions of scientific perfectionism. We have borrowed from the scientific world the idea that things get better as

the world grows older and all of our talk about fashion and up-to-date-ness in art is but a rather obvious sublimation of this idea. The only concept which would provide that greatly diminishing scale of value to the fake Haydn sonata is the idea that the closer it came to our own time, the less clever it could be and the greater the distance by which it preceded its own assumed time (Haydn's), the cleverer it must surely be. This is the same set of values which made Bach's sons ascribe little worth to the old man's last work and which make budding serialists scornful of the last works of Richard Strauss. It implies that the determining factor in the aesthetic process is the accumulation of stylistic awareness. It asserts, although it would never admit to it, that we today could forge a better Matthew Passion, build a better Beethoven's Ninth simply because the example of how to do it and how to extend it already exists—but that to do so would perhaps not be playing the game. It is not an argument which validates the concept of the originality of art as it would like to do. Rather, it simply seeks to disguise and discredit the inference inherent in its own argument that art can proceed by imitation, but perhaps shouldn't. It attaches rightness and wrongness, ideas of historic fitness to art which do not belong there. It applies a protective tariff on the appropriateness of style by propounding the argument that the timeliness of the occasion, or the lack thereof, is responsible for some sort of badge of authenticity, some sort of patent approval which is easily detectable by any right-thinking connoisseur. To enforce this, it attaches a morality to art which does not belong there either.

Now then, if, as I have indicated, this duplicity of judgment has existed for some very considerable time in Western civilization and if, during that time, great art has continued to be created by great artists, the questions may reasonably occur: why worry about it? what needs to be done about it? If this concept of forgery is simply part of the protective mechanism of snobbery which guides most decision making in a sophisticated culture, then is it not indeed an inevitable correlation of that culture? Is it not likely that for all the speeches that may

be made against it, it will go right on existing hand in hand with the acquisitive instincts of mankind, provoking and denying great works of art as it approves and sponsors others perhaps equally great? Is this not the inevitable economic gamble of the aesthetic impulse turned loose in the world?

Note: Glenn Gould was a prolific thinker and writer. His writing was always painstaking and precise. This article is taken from an essay written by Gould in or before 1964 that was never finalized for publication. It appears here in abridged form (approximately 25 percent of the latter portion of the essay has been cut) and is not to be taken as a final text.

Stephen Posen, *Executor The Estate of Glenn Gould*



Sketch for a Painting, Harkeerat Mangat, Düsseldorf 2018