



Comparative Analysis: Interpretations of Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 333 by Glenn Gould and Mitsuko Uchida

Wenyan Quan

School of Music Education, Xinghai Conservatory of Music, Guangzhou 510006, Guangdong, China.

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*Corresponding author: Wenyan Quan, School of Music Education, Xinghai Conservatory of Music, Guangzhou 510006, Guangdong, China.

Abstract

This article conducts a comparative analysis between two renowned pianists, Glenn Gould, and Mitsuko Uchida, on their interpretations of the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 13 in B flat major, KV 333. With advancements in recording technology, it is now possible to analyze diverse renditions of classical music pieces. The study references the clean and minimally annotated Henle Urtext edition to discuss the nuances and performances of each artist, taking into account their individual backgrounds. The decision to use Henle's edition underscores the importance of closely adhering to the composer's original intentions, free from unnecessary dynamic markings or fingering suggestions. This approach enables performers and researchers to concentrate on the composer's score and its intended expression. This comparison not only showcases the unique artistic approaches of Gould and Uchida but also highlights the rich interpretive possibilities inherent in Mozart's compositions, illustrating how varied performances can capture different facets of the composer's musical vision.

Keywords

Mozart; Piano Sonata; Glenn Gould; Mitsuko Uchida; Interpretation

Mozart stands as one of the most illustrious classical musicians globally. His works are cherished by piano learners and virtuosos alike. The progress in science and technology has enabled high-quality reproductions of musical performances through recordings, which not only cater to the auditory preferences of audiences but also furnish music scholars with resources for comparing different interpretations of the same piano piece across various recordings. Given that pianists from diverse backgrounds exhibit distinct styles, renditions of 'Mozart' by performers from different nations or cultural contexts naturally vary. In light of these considerations, this study has chosen the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 13 in B-flat major, K. 333, for a comparative analysis between the recordings of Glenn Gould and Mitsuko Uchida. For this research, reference will be made to the Urtext edition (G. Henle Verlag) and the individual backgrounds of the two pianists will be taken into account to elucidate the distinctive features of each version.

For the comparison of the two piano recordings under consideration, the Henle Urtext edition has been selected as the reference score. This choice was motivated by Henle's reputation for presenting clean and minimally annotated editions, thereby enabling the music itself to convey its message more directly. Additionally, Henle includes a supplementary page with specific instructions on how to interpret ornamentation, providing clear guidance without overly influencing interpretation. As an Urtext edition, Henle respects the composer's original intent by avoiding the addition of personal annotations or dynamic markings that could constrain a performer's creative expression—unlike some other editions, such as those by Schirmer, which include editorial dynamics that might limit artistic freedom.

Glenn Gould, the renowned Canadian pianist, was one of the most celebrated classical musicians of the 20th century. Renowned for his versatility, Gould could masterfully interpret a wide range of musical styles, from the intricate compositions of J.S. Bach to the improvisational nature of jazz music. His distinctive performance style set him apart from his contemporaries; he often broke away from traditional modes of piano playing by incorporating vocal elements and adopting unconventional postures, offering audiences a refreshing and unique auditory experience. For the purposes of this comparative study, Glenn Gould's 1966 recording of the first movement of Mozart's Sonata No. 13 in B-flat major, K. 333, has been deliberately chosen. This recording will serve as a point of comparison against Mitsuko Uchida's rendition, using the Urtext edition (G. Henle Verlag) as a reference to ensure an accurate and respectful analysis of both artists' approaches to this classic work.

In contrast, Mitsuko Uchida, a Japanese classical pianist, is often referred to as "the professor of Mozart" for her ability to convey exquisite emotions through her music and express personal sentiments beyond mere virtuosity. Starting in 1980, Uchida embarked on a project to record a collection of Mozart sonatas, earning acclaim for her "magical palette of tonal color" (Erik Smith, 1988). For this study, we have selected her 1985 recording of the Sonata in B-flat major, K. 333, one of Mozart's most sophisticated and musically rich piano compositions (Edward Greenfield, 1987). Composed upon his return to Vienna in 1778, this sonata epitomizes Mozart's elegance, with its first movement oscillating between sweetness and enthusiasm, offering listeners a pure and unpretentious auditory experience.

1. Tone Color

It is well-known that Mozart played the harpsichord, clavichord, and pipe organ during his childhood. With the advent of the fortepiano, Mozart began composing music for this instrument, which served as the precursor to the modern piano. Although distinct from its modern counterpart, the fortepiano's characteristics should ideally be reflected in performances on today's pianos. In both recordings under consideration, it is evident that they were performed on modern pianos. Despite this commonality in instruments, differences in timbre emerge due to varying interpretations and understandings of the music.

In Mitsuko Uchida's recording, the sound is characterized by its brightness and delicacy. Her approach, whether employing legato or staccato techniques, is meticulous and precise, akin to handling individual particles. Additionally, she skillfully utilizes the pedal to enhance the tonal nuances. Conversely, Glenn Gould's rendition presents a clear and refined quality throughout, starting with detached notes before transitioning into legato passages towards the end. He pays special attention to bringing out subtleties within the performance, highlighting less obvious elements of the score.

2. Tempo

The first movement spans 165 bars and is marked *allegro in tempo*. However, the two pianists adopted different tempi in their renditions. Glenn Gould opted for a slower pace, completing the movement in approximately 6 minutes and 23 seconds. In contrast, Mitsuko Uchida played at a quicker speed but chose to repeat the exposition, resulting in a total duration of around 6 minutes and 58 seconds. This illustrates that tempo is not rigid; it should be tailored to suit the performer's interpretation. Different artists utilize diverse tempos to convey their unique emotional perspectives.

An important aspect to consider is the use of *rubato*. As Mozart had ever said "...the accompanying parts are to remain steady while the melody makes slight rhythmic alterations for the purpose of expression" (Eva & Badura-Skoda, 1962, p. 43). In this sonata's score, Mozart did not put the *rubato* as a footnote in cadence. However, in these two recordings, both pianists played it in *rubato*. It felt like telling the audience that this is the ending (bar 165).



Figure 1. Bar 165.

In Mitsuko Uchida's recording, she employs a subtle *rallentando* in the first three beats (bar 93) and uses the final beat as an entry point into the recapitulation section. This technique enables the music to transition smoothly between melodies and introduces variations that enhance the vividness of the performance. Conversely, Glenn Gould maintains a steady tempo throughout this passage in his recording, without any changes in speed.



Figure 2. Bar 93.

The essence of true *rubato* is that the accompaniment remains steady and does not follow the slight *accelerando* and *ritardando* in the melody (Eva & Badura-Skoda, 1986). In fact, these two pianists did not use much *rubato* in this work and occasionally employed this tempo in the ending and coda. The overall tempo of the piece is smooth and steady. Meanwhile, at bar 58, Gould allowed more freedom in the trill, whereas Uchida did not.



Figure 3. Bar 58.

3. Dynamic

The *fortepiano* is capable of producing not only *forte* and *piano* but also the effect of *crescendo* and *diminuendo*. Mozart was familiar with all the dynamic gradations between *pp* and *ff* (Eva & Badura-Skoda, 1962, p. 20). These dynamic markings can give important motivic material or mere accompanying figures (Eva and Badura-Skoda 1962, 21). We could see Mozart had signed some dynamic in his score, like bar 148 marked *crescendo* and bar 149 signed *f*. As Mitsuko Uchida noted, "The music of Mozart is full of unpredictable corners that you could not predict where they are proceeding."

In these two recordings, pianists played similar parts following the notes' direction to change dynamic, for example playing the *crescendo* when the melody ascends and playing the decrease when the melody descends. Different pianists showed different levels of dynamic. Glenn Gould performed the first movement with a great dynamic change. It reminded us of connecting it with the dramatic characters in Mozart's opera. This obvious processing of dynamics was Gould's performance style. For example, in some repetitive melodies on the same page, he preferred to play them not only *forte* and *piano* but also *staccato* and *legato* respectively. But in Mitsuko Uchida's recording, she used fewer dynamic changes.

4. Articulation

In piano performance, three primary playing methods are employed: *legato* (smooth and connected), *staccato* (short and detached), and *non-legato* (neither smooth nor connected). In the two recordings under review, Uchida closely adhered to the markings in the *Urtext* edition, incorporating only subtle *rubato* tempo variations during her performance. *Rubato* refers to flexible timing where the tempo can be slightly sped up or slowed down to add emotional expression.

Conversely, Gould adopted a more interpretive approach, especially at the beginning of the piece. He did not follow the *slur legato* indication for the left hand but instead played the right-hand *legato* and the left-hand *staccato*. This created an interesting contrast between the two hands. Later in the piece, at bar 10, the left hand returned to a *legato* style and was played *forte*, meaning loudly.

Both musicians chose to break up certain chords or intervals in their performances. For instance, Gould played octave intervals separately at bar 158, while Uchida played a seventh chord as an arpeggio at bar 119. Arpeggio involves playing the notes of a chord in a rapid, successive manner rather than simultaneously. This technique helps avoid overly prominent notes and creates a more balanced and elegant sound throughout the piece.



Figure 4. Bar 158.



Figure 5. Bar 119.

Moreover, the divergent approaches of Glenn Gould and Mitsuko Uchida become particularly evident in their treatment of decorative elements within Mozart's compositions. At bar 131 of the first movement of Sonata No. 13 in B-flat major, K. 333, a striking contrast is observed between the two pianists' interpretations. Gould, known for his idiosyncratic and highly personalized style, chose to enhance the melodic line by introducing an ornament before the execution of the first G note. This embellishment not only demonstrates Gould's tendency to infuse his performances with unique flair but also reflects his keen appreciation for the expressive potential of ornamentation in classical music.

Conversely, Uchida opted for a more straightforward approach, playing the G note without any added ornamentation. This decision aligns with her reputation for maintaining a high degree of fidelity to the score, focusing on clarity and transparency in her interpretations. By eschewing the additional ornament, Uchida presents the piece in its most unadorned form, inviting listeners to appreciate the purity and directness inherent in Mozart's compositional style. Her performance thus underscores the composer's melodic invention without the extra layer of decoration, offering a clean and uncluttered musical experience that stands in stark contrast to Gould's ornate interpretation.



Figure 6. Bar 131.

This subtle yet significant difference at bar 131 encapsulates the broader stylistic tendencies of each pianist. Gould and Uchida's performances both showcased the distinct characteristics of Mozart's music, each highlighting different aspects of his genius. As the renowned pianist Fu Cong once said, "There is an abundant range in Mozart's music." Indeed, Mozart's music knows no bounds. Gould's performance was brimming with energy; he employed dynamic contrasts to bring out the graceful features in his interpretation. On the other hand, Uchida played at a faster tempo than Gould and used fewer dynamics to convey a sweeter temperament.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Glenn Gould and Mitsuko Uchida's interpretations of Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 333 offers a fascinating glimpse into the diverse ways in which two exceptional pianists approach the same musical composition. The nuances in their performances—ranging from tone color to tempo, dynamics, and articulation—underscore the inherent flexibility and depth of Mozart's music. Each artist brings their unique perspective, technical mastery, and emotional sensitivity to the piece, illustrating how vastly different experiences can be crafted from the same score.

Mitsuko Uchida's rendition is characterized by clarity, precision, and an almost academic adherence to the score, making it an excellent choice for educational purposes. Her performance is structured and regular, providing a clear roadmap for students or audiences seeking to understand the fundamental architecture of the sonata. On the other

hand, Glenn Gould's interpretation is more freewheeling and imaginative, injecting a sense of spontaneity and urgency into the proceedings. His use of dynamic contrasts and expressive timing variations invites listeners on a more emotionally charged and unpredictable journey through the piece.

Both performances are valid and valuable in their own right, showcasing not only the performers' individual styles but also the multifaceted nature of Mozart's compositional genius. In many ways, these recordings serve as a testament to the enduring relevance and richness of classical music, which continues to inspire and challenge performers and listeners alike. They remind us that music, like any form of art, is continually reborn through the act of interpretation, with each performer leaving an indelible mark on the work they engage with.

For those seeking a deeper understanding of Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 333 or desiring to immerse themselves in the full spectrum of emotions and techniques it embodies, listening to both Mitsuko Uchida's and Glenn Gould's versions is highly recommended. Each performance captures a distinct spirit of the composition, acting as a beacon that illuminates different facets of Mozart's opus. Through such comparative analyses, we not only celebrate the artistry of individual performers but also pay homage to the timeless appeal and complexity of classical music compositions.

In the final analysis, what truly stands out is the adaptability and universality of Mozart's music, which transcends historical periods, cultural boundaries, and personal tastes. Whether one prefers the meticulous elegance of Mitsuko Uchida or the passionate intensity of Glenn Gould, Mozart's composition remains a monumental work that continues to captivate and inspire generations of musicians and music lovers around the globe. It is this enduring power of his music that cements Mozart's place as one of the greatest composers in the history of Western music, whose works will continue to be dissected, admired, and performed with fervor for centuries to come.

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