

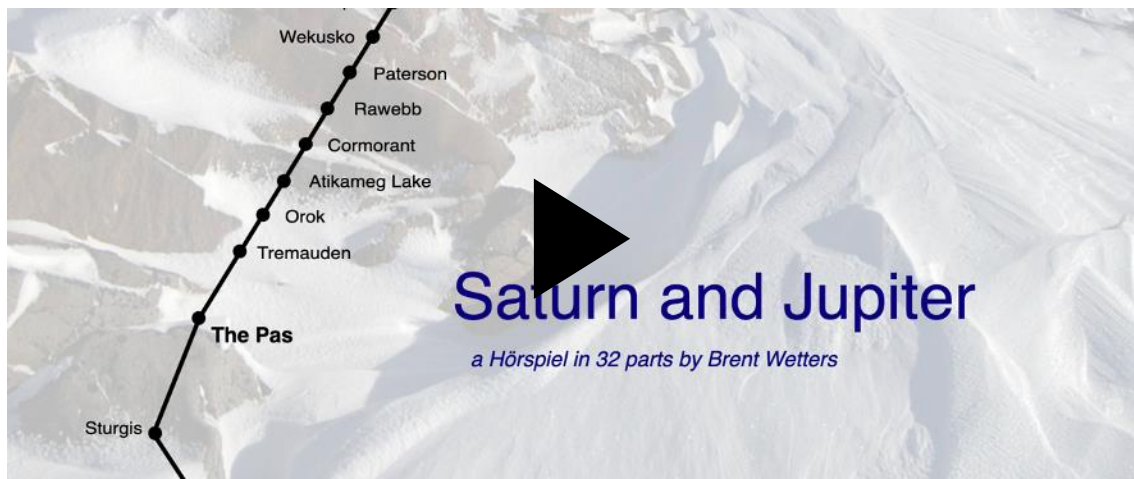
## SATURN AND JUPITER REVISITED

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### Abstract

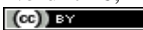
I composed *Saturn and Jupiter* as part of my Master's degree thesis at Wesleyan University in 2003. It is an electro-acoustic and soundscape composition that responds to Glenn Gould's 1967 radio documentary, *The Idea of North*. I made the source recordings while on a week-long trip to Churchill, Manitoba, where I took the same train that Gould had taken some thirty years earlier. *Saturn and Jupiter* responds both to the ideas in Gould's documentary in the form of interviews, and compositionally by imposing considerably more atmospheric space into the work. Where Gould's documentary is noisy with talking – Gould famously pioneered a technique he called 'contrapuntal radio' where he layers multiple speaking voices simultaneously – the spoken components of my documentary are quite sparse. This new presentation commemorates the re-opening of the Winnipeg – Churchill train line after suffering massive flooding damage in 2017. In this version, listeners are invited to hear and view to the 32 movements in a customizable configuration. The interactive map allows users to select the movements, which are each named for a stop on the train line, and have them compiled into a playlist.

**Keywords:** Hörspiel; Soundscape; North; Glenn Gould; Radio; Documentary



On May 23, 2017, flooding suspended the train service on the line running north from Winnipeg to Churchill on Hudson's Bay. The flooding was caused by a series of immense blizzards in March of that year, which, once melted, overwhelmed the train's infrastructure. The train, in addition to being a lifeline for the community of Churchill and the native communities further north in Nunavut (there are no roads connecting Churchill with the rest of Canada) played a pivotal role in Glenn Gould's northern

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explorations some fifty years earlier when he produced his radio documentary, *The Idea of North*. My own experiences of the north are intimately tied to both the train and to Gould; in January of 2003, I took the train as part of a graduate school project at Wesleyan University, culminating in my own radio documentary that was conceived as a response to Gould.

Glenn Gould left the concert stage in 1964 to commit himself to a full-time exploration of the possibilities of the recording studio, and to reportedly try his hand at composition. He made good on the first half of the promise with a series of inspired studio recordings, but the compositions never arrived. That is, unless one considers (as does Robert Hurwitz (1983)) that the radio documentaries that began in 1967 with *The Idea of North* were musical compositions. Of all of the documentaries, *The Idea of North* has had the most lasting impact and has been of most subject to academic inquiry – Hurwitz calls it Gould’s ‘symphony’. Gould composed it, with assistance from audio engineer Lorne Tulk, as part of the Canadian centennial celebrations, and its status as a patriotic work is palpable – as it seeks to situate ‘the north’ as something with a peculiarly Canadian character. The documentary is composed of interviews with five subjects who could each offer unique perspective on the north, and whose voices were sonically distinct enough to accommodate ‘contrapuntal radio’.

‘Contrapuntal radio’ was the term Gould gave to a procedure of layering the speaking voices polyphonically, allowing him to experiment with various musical techniques as means of structuring his documentary. Sometimes Gould constructs virtual conversations by alternating two or more speakers, at times certain voices recede to the background, and at other times multiple voices are presented at equivalent volumes, making it incumbent on the listener to decide which to privilege. While the interviewees each provide their own perspectives, Gould’s mostly unheard voice (apart from a short introduction at the beginning) is discernable in the scripting and presentation of the other voices. The resulting documentary is a meditation on the north and its perpetual importance to the Canadian psyche (a recording of Gould’s documentary can be played at <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1121723971930>).

A documentary in 32 movements, *Saturn and Jupiter* is composed from field recordings and interviews conducted on my trip, where I spent a week at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre. I named each movement for a stop along the train line – some of the names like Pikwitonei, Ilford, Gillam, and The Pas being evocatively mentioned in Gould’s documentary. There are not, however, direct connections between the sounds heard and the places named by the titles. The only exception to that rule is the first movement, ‘Winnipeg’, a six-minute recording of ambient sounds in the Winnipeg train station. After waking up in a hotel in Winnipeg and my train not departing until the evening, I spent the day exploring a frozen city devoid of people – or at least it was devoid of people until I happened upon a sign alerting me to the existence of a food court below one of the town squares. At that point, I realized that the inhabitants were all comfortably inside, navigating the city via a series of tunnels and walkways. I nevertheless found myself at the train station with many hours and nothing but my books and recording equipment to keep me company; as a result, the recording of that first movement is made up entirely of a recording of someone vacuuming the space for what seemed like an eternity.

On the 36-hour train trip I listened to every one of Gould's documentaries I could find, starting with *The Idea of North*, then the other two in the 'Solitude Trilogy', and finally the documentaries on Pablo Casals and Leopold Stokowski. For my recording project, I mostly used my homemade contact microphone, affixing it alternately to the sink in my sleeping compartment, the bed, and finally the window. The window made the nicest recording, as it picked up sounds from outside in addition to the train sounds. The sink recordings picked up an unexplained rhythmic clicking sound that are clearly heard in the movement 'Leven'.

If the goal of my trip was to find the kind of isolation sought by Gould, then I found it on the train. Without GPS or any kind of internet connection, I never had more than a fleeting sense of my location, and then only based on the passing station signs. The easiest metric was to gauge my location was via time: it's been twelve hours, therefore I still have twenty-four to go. I did not, as Gould suggested I might, find myself striking up conversations with my fellow passengers. Both nights I thought I saw the northern lights from the train, but couldn't decide if I was just seeing lights from the train reflecting off cloud cover.

I arrived in Churchill in the early morning, a day and a half after leaving Winnipeg. The temperatures never went above minus 30 degrees Celsius for the entire week I was there. I was greeted by two staff members from the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, who drove me and two participants in a 'learning vacation' to the centre, located some twenty miles outside of Churchill proper. There I met the other staff members who are heard in my documentary. Michael Goodyear the director of the centre, Jen McCulloch a research technician, Gerry Mobey a volunteer, Mark Cleaver the cook, and Roger Woloshyn, an astronomer who was teaching classes on the northern lights for the aforementioned 'learning vacation'. More than once I found myself reflecting on what seemed like a utopian community. In the documentary, Roger explained it best: 'the only people who are there are people who want to be there'. One does not end up in Churchill by accident (although Gerry Mobey's interview might challenge that assertion).

The most notable intervention vis-a-vis Gould is the imposition of space onto Gould's north; it has been frequently noted how noisy Gould's north is, and that, for a documentary ostensibly about solitude, it is packed with speech. I wanted a north filled with expanses of time and space. The interviews in my documentary form only a small percentage of the whole, the rest being ambient sounds from the northern environment and a small amount of music.

My documentary was an aestheticized response that coincided with written theoretical reflections on Gould's *Idea of North*. While my thinking on Gould has matured over the intervening years culminating in a forthcoming chapter ('Monstrous North' in *Matter of North*), *Saturn and Jupiter* remains a time-capsule of my reactions to Gould in 2003. In addition to the issues of silence and solitude, I was most interested in addressing what I saw as rhetorical tensions within Gould's documentary. On the one hand, it follows the conventional structure of a Beethoven symphony by presenting a series of thematic ideas that are ultimately overcome in a triumphant ending. But while Gould's documentary is undeniably triumphant – with a soliloquy paired with the finale of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony – that triumph is squarely at odds with the pessimistic content of that soliloquy. As a kind of corrective, *Saturn and Jupiter* ends with a sense of resigned dissolution and profound regret at the natural habitats that have been lost

and are still to be lost in the Arctic. Videographer Mark Laurie did something similar in his 2009 documentary, *Pilgrimage to Solitude*, where he ends his documentary with a diffusion of voices rather than a soliloquy, and a Brahms *Intermezzo*, rather than the triumphant Sibelius. The thirty-first movement of *Saturn and Jupiter*, 'Tidal', does end with a soliloquy from Roger Woloshyn, but the music is the ethereal 'Material Test Unit' by Belgian composer Thomas Smetryns.

*Saturn and Jupiter* features very little in the way of studio processing. Most of the sounds are presented with only minimal alteration of the recorded source material, but that does not mean that the sounds are necessarily realistic representations of their sonic objects. The sounds were often the result of a complex interaction between the sounds themselves, the environment, and the practical limitations of recording in temperatures that hovered around forty degrees below zero. For example, in those temperatures it was physically impossible to monitor the incoming sound, and I had to prepare my equipment prior to going outside and only listen to the recordings much later. Sounds were often subjected to secondary mechanical effects caused by the climatic conditions. In one instance, I accompanied Jen and another researcher to a frozen lake where they were collecting data from a monitoring device. I brought my contact microphone for that trip, and recorded sounds of the snow by placing the microphone directly into the hardened snow drifts. I collected quite a bit of material which can be heard in 'Wekusko' and other movements, but eventually the temperatures were too much for the fragile wires, and they became brittle and snapped. When using a traditional microphone set-up, the challenges were different. To keep the battery warm, I had to keep the recording device inside my jacket, and the multiple layers of clothing meant that I had to snake the microphone cable through my clothes. My gloves and mittens were necessarily too thick to allow me to operate the device, so I started the recordings inside the centre before going out into the cold.

The limited performance practice for *Saturn and Jupiter* dictates that only a selection of those 32 movements would be chosen for any particular performance. In this way, it is a little like deciding whether to disembark the train at a particular spot. For the first performance (a screening at Wesleyan University, April 17, 2003) I selected 26 movements and paired the audio with pictures taken on my trip. For a more recent screening (Logos Foundation, Ghent, March 3, 2014) I selected 18 movements and used pictures from the initial trip and from a second trip I made to Churchill in 2005. In both of these performances, as well as the versions presented here, the audio is paired with a video track. I do not, however, consider the video to be an integral part of the work, and I do not consider *Saturn and Jupiter* to be a video work. It is, first and foremost, a Hörspiel and soundscape work, with the video merely being an accompaniment.

For 'Contextualizing the North' in *Nordlit*, I revisit *Saturn and Jupiter*, taking advantage of the participatory possibilities afforded by the online environment. As presented here, each user can select those movements at which they want to stop from an interactive map, and their listening experience can then be compiled 'on the fly'. The drawback to this approach, however, is that the compilation of movements was never intended to be random. Certain configurations will work better than others, and there are certain movements (like 'Thicket Portage', 'Leven', 'Weir River', and 'Tidal') that I view as more or less essential. However, selecting only the essential movements would result in a composite work where the interviews would once again dominate. To alleviate that issue, the interface also includes options for several pre-selected

configurations, but listeners who wish to enter more deeply into the structure of the work will have the option to fully customize the presentation.

This new presentation alters the relationship between the listener and the work. Previous versions were all ‘directed’, and I was the one directing the listener’s experience; now, the listener has the final say on the ultimate configuration of the work. My hope, however, is that a coherent meaning of *Saturn and Jupiter* will emerge in spite of (or perhaps because of) the divergent presentations. Realistically, this understanding will only happen for those who devote the time to immerse themselves in the possibilities here afforded. I cannot hope that this will happen for everyone, but like the north itself, and to paraphrase Roger Woloshyn once again, the only people who are there are people who want to be there.

The Winnipeg–Churchill train line resumed service on December 2, 2018 to considerable fanfare and relief for the communities that rely on it. When Glenn Gould’s interviewee (or perhaps narrator) Wally McClean said in 1967, ‘this [taking a 36-hour train to Churchill] is going to be impossible’, he may have been right, but not yet (Gould, 1992 [1967]). The charm and allure of places like Churchill and the north more generally are precisely in their precariousness.

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