Piano Concerto Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubles piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion, strings

Duration: 19 minutes in four movements (played without pause).

THE COMPOSER – FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886) – Liszt spent the 1850s in Weimar and created some of his finest works there. The composer settled there (an odd choice for his stature) because of two important people, his employer and his second great love. With Grand Duke Carl Alexander, Liszt hoped he might found an intellectual “Athens of the North” and in the Princess Carolyne he saw nothing less than his future wife. Neither dream would be realized.

THE MUSIC – Both of Liszt’s piano concerti had long incubation periods. No. 1 was apparent in sketches from the early 1840s (possibly even before) and, though ostensibly complete by the end of that decade, it was revised in 1853 and not premiered for another two years. Liszt, ever preoccupied with structural innovation, chose to set his concerto as a continuous flow of ideas rather than a standard three-movement work with breaks in between. Compared to the nearly-contemporaneous Concerto No. 2 which, according to essayist Michael Steinberg is “for poet’s only”, No. 1 is a simple dazzler for “keyboard athlete[s].” We should be careful, however, not to let such assessments of this music’s showy nature (which are common and fair) blind us to its truly novel formal accomplishments. Other composers certainly noticed and, like in so much of what Liszt did throughout his composing life, they saw the future in his inventive, boisterous spirit. A wonderful legend about the concerto’s opening theme plays well into the notion of Liszt as a man fully aware of his place in the vanguard. According to the lore, Liszt and his son-in-law Hans von Bülow put words to the notes which (translated) say “None of you understand this, haha!” That dismissal, if true, seemed to predict and wave away the opinion of critics and colleagues that Concerto No. 1 lacked the “poetry” mentioned above. It also embedded a reminder that, for all his swagger and fame, Liszt was an artist of incredible intellectual depth.

THE WORLD – Alexander II ascended to the Russian throne in 1855. Also that year, *The Daily Telegraph* began publication in London and the first bridge over the Mississippi River was constructed in Minneapolis.