Program Notes for VSO Concert – Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1 and Górecki Symphony No. 3, November 13-14, 2026

By Jonathan Berkowitz

FRANZ LISZT (1811–1886)

Franz Liszt may very well have been the first rock star in the history of music. Long before Beatlemania of the 1960s there was Lisztomania, a term coined by the German poet Heinrich Heine in the 1840s. *Lisztomania* is also the title and subject of a 1975 film directed by Ken Russell.

Liszt was not just the greatest piano virtuoso of his time but also a tremendously original composer. His life and work virtually defined the Romantic movement. Here are a few highlights from a biography that could fill a book. A child prodigy, Liszt began concertizing at the age of nine. He studied piano with Carl Czerny, a pupil of Beethoven, whom Liszt certainly met. Prodigies eventually lose their novelty, and by 19 Liszt was ready to settle down and learn.

Three musicians had decisive influences on his development. Hector Berlioz taught him colour and big thinking in music. Frédéric Chopin taught him that piano music could be poetic as well as bravura, and that subtlety should accompany ferocity. Niccolò Paganini inspired Liszt to do for the piano what Paganini was doing for the violin. At 21, Liszt worked feverishly to build up his piano technique and educated himself in the music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. When he resumed touring, it was as a mature artist.

Liszt changed concert performance forever, helping establish the solo piano recital as we know it today. He positioned the piano at a right angle to the stage. With the lid open, the sound projected better and audiences could see him in profile. He also pioneered performing entire recitals from memory and presented an extraordinarily broad keyboard repertoire, from Bach to Chopin. His recitals drew massive crowds, where hysterical fans tore at his clothes and hair and collected spent cigar butts or broken piano strings.

Pianists before Liszt generally kept their hands close to the keyboard, playing more from wrist and fingers than arm and shoulder. Mendelssohn noted Liszt's "degree of virtuosity and complete finger independence and a thoroughly musical feeling that can scarcely be equaled. I have heard no performer whose musical perceptions so extend to the very tips of his fingers."

Liszt gave up touring in 1847 and helped turn Weimar, Germany, into a centre of the progressive musical movement. He taught, conducted, and composed. Among his innovations was the symphonic poem, a one-movement orchestral form inspired by a poem, play, painting, or other non-musical idea. He also wrote piano paraphrases of operas and transcribed, arranged, and created variations on other composers' works, including remarkable piano arrangements of Beethoven's nine symphonies. He extended harmonic language and developed techniques that foreshadowed the atonal music of the 20th century. Liszt's bold strokes and frequent dissonances were copied by younger composers everywhere.

What is the legacy of Franz Liszt? Although controversial in his time, much of the criticism may be attributed to jealousy of his brilliance and panache. Béla Bartók wrote, "The essence of these works…raise Liszt as a composer to the ranks of the great." Brahms and Wagner may have

surpassed Liszt as creative figures during the 19th century. “But,” says Harold Schonberg, “it may turn out that the prophetic Liszt had more to do with music as it actually developed than any single composer of his time. The full story of his majestic place in musical history has yet to be told.”

Schonberg goes on to write, “It was as a pianist that Liszt made his initial impact on Europe. Later he became everything—composer, conductor, critic, litterateur, Don Juan, abbé, teacher, symbol and at the end, The Grand Old Man of music.” He was born about the same time as the other great Romantics but outlived them all, dying in 1886—the year Vancouver was incorporated as a city. It was said, “Liszt has flung his spear far into the future.”

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, S. 124 – Franz Liszt

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, cymbals, triangle, strings, and solo piano

The first of Liszt’s two piano concertos had its premiere in 1855, with Liszt at the piano and his lifelong friend Hector Berlioz conducting. On the surface, it may appear to consist of disparate episodes linked by virtuosic piano passages, masquerading as a multi-movement piano concerto with the orchestra as accompanist. Dig deeper, however, and one discovers a remarkably tight and innovative construction.

Although the Concerto lasts only about 20 minutes, a tremendous amount is packed into it. That’s no surprise: Liszt took more than two decades to bring it to its final form. An earlier version was radically rewritten. Robert Schumann had once suggested, “It would be good to invent a new form that consists of one large movement…Perhaps this idea will inspire something that we would gladly see embodied in a peculiarly original composition.” Whether or not this directly influenced Liszt, the Concerto brilliantly realizes that concept. Perhaps its long gestation even parallels Liszt’s own maturation from virtuoso performer to influential composer.

The Concerto is divided into an opening fast section, a slow section, a scherzo, and a finale, rather like a symphony; but almost everything else about the work is unconventional. The sections are connected and share thematic material. The orchestra rarely has long uninterrupted passages, and there is little of the traditional alternation between orchestra and soloist. Other instruments—especially flute, clarinet, and viola—also emerge as solo voices.

Pay close attention to the opening motif. From it, everything blooms. Those first notes are transformed throughout the Concerto into different melodies, keys, rhythms, and characters. Let’s look at the four sections.

The first, ***Allegro maestoso***, presents the main theme in the orchestra, quickly followed by the piano with an energetic display of octaves spanning the keyboard. According to a famous story, Liszt and his son-in-law Hans von Bülow fitted the words *Das versteht ihr alle nicht, haha!* (“None of you understands this, ha-ha!”) to the opening two bars to mock Liszt’s critics. A beautifully peaceful passage includes an expressive duet between piano and clarinet. The main theme returns, followed by chromatic octaves—a Lisztian trademark—and a recollection of earlier material. The theme

reappears in the strings while the piano imitates a harp, and the section ends with the piano playing a quiet chromatic scale.

You may find the opening theme slightly disorienting because it is harmonically unstable and ambiguous. It feels as though we have entered in the middle of a piece rather than at its beginning—a characteristically Romantic effect. Calvin Dotsey wrote, "Assuming the role of a Byronic hero, the soloist continually breaks free from the orchestra's provocative (perhaps even menacing) main motto, launching into quasi-improvisatory flights of fancy that cycle through many different keys, untethered to the normal laws of harmony."

The second section, ***Quasi adagio***, begins with cellos and double basses, followed by the rest of the strings. The piano takes up their theme in a Romantic, nocturne-like style—think of Chopin—with flowing arpeggios in the left hand and an utterly beautiful melody in the right. The orchestra returns with the theme, followed by a dialogue between cellos and piano. Now it's the woodwinds' turn to introduce new material while the piano plays bird-like trills. A short passage for clarinet and piano brings the section to a close.

How can one resist the novelty of the triangle in what Liszt called a "mocking little motif" at the beginning of the third section, ***Allegretto vivace – Allegro animato***? You'll hear the triangle again near the end of the work. Its prominent use was highly criticized; percussion other than timpani was considered bizarrely modern. A new theme introduced by the strings is developed by the piano throughout the section. But listen closely for themes from the first two sections as they reappear. The music is humorous in character—the piano is marked *capriccioso scherzando*. After the scherzo, however, the mood darkens. In the *Allegro animato*, the piano moves into its lower register, leading to the return of the now-familiar opening theme and a fiery piano passage.

You are now primed for the fourth section, ***Allegro marziale animato***, which brings back themes heard earlier, reinforcing the unified, rhapsodic character of the whole work. Get set for a blisteringly fast and stunningly impressive conclusion. The pianist simultaneously negotiates sixteenth notes in the left hand and eighth-note triplets in the right. Then marvel at the chromatic octaves, with the hands racing in opposite directions at breakneck speed and maximum volume—classic Liszt. The main theme makes one final triumphant return.

The orchestra gets the last word—or more accurately—the last notes. It is Liszt's acknowledgement that, for all the pianist's spectacular virtuosity, this has been a partnership between soloist and orchestra.

HENRYK GÓRECKI (1933 to 2010)

Henryk Górecki (pronounced *Gore-et-skee*) may be the only 20th-century composer to have become a surprise international bestseller without changing a note of his music, seeking a popular audience, or apparently having the slightest idea why it happened. If he were a pop or rock musician, he might be called a "one-hit wonder."

For most of his career, Górecki was known mainly to specialists in contemporary music. In the world of classical music, he was hardly a household name. Then, in 1992, a recording of his *Symphony No. 3, Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, with soprano Dawn Upshaw and conductor David Zinman, became an astonishing commercial success. It sold more than a million copies and appeared on mainstream record charts alongside pop stars. Górecki, by then nearly 60, suddenly found himself famous—and rather bewildered. Robert Hurwitz, president of Nonesuch Records, which released the recording, tells how Górecki kept his first royalty cheque, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, in his wallet for so long without cashing it that the cheque had to be reissued. Hurwitz commented, "It may just have been such a shock to all of a sudden go from someone who had struggled to find recognition, to someone who was at that moment as famous as any modern composer in the world."

Nothing in his early life suggested such an outcome. He was born in a small village in southern Poland. His mother died when he was two, and his childhood was marked by illness and hardship. At 10, a serious hip injury led to complications, surgery, and months in hospital. He began formal musical studies relatively late in his teens, first training as a teacher and eventually studying composition at the conservatory in Katowice. His first mature piece was written at age 22. By 43, when he completed the Third Symphony, he had written more than 40 works in a wide variety of genres: solo piano pieces, songs, chamber music for various and often unusual combinations of instruments, large choral works, and two symphonies.

Compared with the Soviet Union's post-war crackdown on "formalism," Polish composers had much greater creative freedom. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Górecki became one of Poland's most uncompromising avant-garde composers. He experimented with various techniques and styles, including serialism based on Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone system. Those works are fierce, dissonant, and densely packed with unusual sounds. If his later music can seem like a slowly burning candle, the early Górecki sometimes sounds more like a blowtorch.

Then came a remarkable stylistic transformation. Górecki gradually stripped his music down. Dense complexity gave way to repeated chords, simple melodic fragments, Polish folk influences, religious texts, and long stretches of musical stillness. He became increasingly interested not in how many notes he could write, but in how much meaning a few notes could carry. This was harmonic minimalism, an approach that reached its fullest expression in his Third Symphony, written in 1976.

Górecki emerged during the extraordinary flowering of Polish composition that followed Stalin's death. Initially known for uncompromisingly modern music, by the 1970s he was stripping his musical language down. Melody and tonal harmony returned. Polish folk music and sacred traditions became increasingly important. Repetition replaced rapid development. This was not a return to 19th-century Romanticism. Górecki's radicalism now lay in simplicity. Instead of

overwhelming listeners with information, he would make us concentrate on a small amount of material for a very long time.

Listeners familiar with Philip Glass may recognize common techniques: repetition, slow harmonic change, limited musical material, and gradual accumulation. But Górecki uses repetition very differently from Glass. Glass frequently employs it to create continuous forward motion. Górecki often uses it to make time seem almost suspended. Glass seems to say: Keep moving. Górecki says: Remain here. Listen more deeply.

Despite its remarkable success, Górecki simply continued composing in his own stubbornly individual way. He resisted the temptation to compose another work in the style of the Third Symphony.

He was indeed stubborn, blunt, intensely private, and fiercely protective of his music. He sometimes withheld compositions for years, revising them obsessively before allowing performances. Górecki's Fourth Symphony, subtitled *Tansman Episodes*, took many years; his son completed the orchestration after Górecki's death. It was premiered in 2014.

During the last decade of his life, Górecki suffered from frequent illnesses. He died in late 2010 in his home city of Katowice. Music professor Adrian Thomas said, "The strength and startling originality of Górecki's character shone through his music ... Yet he was an intensely private man, sometimes impossible, with a strong belief in family, a great sense of humour, a physical courage in the face of unrelenting illness, and a capacity for firm friendship."

Górecki discovered something composers have known and forgotten many times over the centuries: musical power does not necessarily depend on complexity. A single melody, a repeated chord, or a gradual crescendo can sometimes carry more emotional weight than pages of elaborate counterpoint. His music asks us to listen patiently—and rewards the patience.

Symphony No. 3, Op. 36, *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* – Henryk Górecki (1976)

Orchestration: soprano solo; 4 flutes (2 doubling piccolo), 4 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 contrabassoons, 4 horns, 4 trombones, harp, piano, strings

Few works in classical music have travelled a more improbable path to fame than Henryk Górecki's Third Symphony. Composed in Poland in 1976 and premiered the following year, it attracted relatively little attention for more than a decade. Then, in 1992, a recording with soprano Dawn Upshaw, the London Sinfonietta, and conductor David Zinman became an international sensation. It climbed the popular-music charts and eventually sold more than a million copies—an astonishing achievement for a nearly hour-long contemporary symphony whose three movements are all slow and whose soprano soloist sings in Polish.

Nothing about the *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* seems designed for mass appeal. There are no dazzling orchestral effects, no memorable tunes in the conventional symphonic sense, and little of the dramatic conflict and resolution we associate with Beethoven or Brahms. Instead, Górecki created a profound meditation on the mother-child bond, separation and loss, grief and consolation. Its musical materials are remarkably simple, but its emotional effect can be

overwhelming. The fact that Górecki's mother died when he was only two gives particular resonance to a symphony centred on the relationship between mothers and children.

The Polish title *Symfonia pieśni żałosnych* can also be translated as "Symphony of Lamentations." Each of its three movements sets a Polish text concerning a mother and child. Górecki ingeniously reverses the perspective. In the first movement, a mother mourns her dying son. In the second, a daughter speaks to her mother. In the third, a mother searches for her missing son.

The Symphony is built around simple harmonies and medieval musical modes. Each movement is marked *Lento*, indicating a slow tempo. Strings dominate, and the music is rarely loud; in fact, the dynamics reach *fortissimo* in only a few bars. Notice the absence of oboes and trumpets.

The lengthy first movement—***Lento — Sostenuto tranquillo ma cantabile***—occupies nearly half the Symphony. Its text comes from a 15th-century Polish lament in which the Virgin Mary addresses Christ on the Cross: "My chosen and beloved Son, share your wounds with your mother." The religious context is unmistakable, but Górecki makes the experience universal: this is a mother watching her child suffer and discovering that love cannot save him.

Before we hear a single word, however, Górecki makes us wait. The Symphony begins almost inaudibly in the double basses with a slow modal melody derived from Polish sacred tradition. Gradually the cellos, violas, and then violins enter, building an enormous canon in which essentially the same melodic material appears successively in different voices.

The listener will not find a conventional melody. Listen instead to the growth from the very bottom of the orchestra. As layers are added, the texture thickens, the register rises, and the volume increases until Górecki has created an immense wall of string sound. The remarkable thing is how little new material has been introduced. Górecki creates architecture through repetition. Then the process reverses. The great orchestral mass recedes and the texture empties, leaving space for a single human voice. The soprano's entrance is a powerful moment. It is not theatrical. There is no scream or rage. The grief is contained within a restrained vocal line.

The movement itself forms an enormous arch: near-silence, accumulation, climax, withdrawal, human voice, withdrawal. During this immense journey, appreciate the trip; don't ask, "Are we there yet?"

If one looks under the proverbial hood, one learns that the movement opens with a 24-bar canon, which is repeated several times, each time adding an extra part until the canon is in eight parts. It is a complex construction and a sophisticated lesson in medieval modes, working its way through Aeolian, Phrygian, Locrian, Lydian, Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, and back to Aeolian. While this is fascinating to the musicologist, the listener can safely ignore the details.

The second movement—***Lento e largo — Tranquillissimo***—provides the remarkable historical story most closely associated with the Symphony. A young Polish girl imprisoned by the Gestapo scratched a short prayer on the wall of her cell: "No, Mother, do not weep. Most chaste Queen of Heaven, support me always." Below it she wrote her name and the words: "18 years old, imprisoned since 26 September 1944." Górecki discovered the inscription in a collection of writings from the German occupation. What affected him was its extraordinary simplicity. There was no accusation, hatred, or demand for vengeance. Just a thought of her mother and a request that she not cry.

The orchestra begins with quiet, slowly changing chords and unconventional harmonies. Then the soprano enters, again without drama. Instead of musical representations of soldiers, prison doors, or violence, the girl's words emerge from an atmosphere of extraordinary stillness. When the soprano sings "Mamo" ("Mother"), the relationship of the first movement has been reversed. There, a mother addressed her suffering son. Now the suffering child addresses her mother with words of comfort.

As the vocal line rises, the orchestra gradually becomes richer and more luminous. Górecki again creates intensity through accumulation rather than sudden dramatic events. The harmony brightens, the voice rises, the orchestra expands around it, and then everything subsides. Nothing has been resolved, but the movement appears to reach serenity. This distinction is crucial. The Symphony is not primarily about the horrors that produced these texts. It is about human responses to suffering.

The final movement—***Lento — Cantabile-semplice***—returns to the perspective of a mother. Its text is based on a folk song associated with the Silesian uprisings of the early 20th century. A mother searches for her missing son. She does not know whether he has been killed or lies in an unknown grave. She cannot even find his body. This is a different grief from that of the first movement. Mary knows where her son is; this mother does not. There can be no burial, farewell, or certainty.

Listen first to the orchestra's gently repeated, rocking figures. They can suggest a folk song, a procession, or even a lullaby—a mother rocking the child she will one day mourn. The melodic language is deliberately simple and song-like. But by this point Górecki has changed the way we listen. After 40 minutes of extremely slow music, tiny harmonic alterations have become significant events. A single new note matters. A shift from darkness toward brightness can feel enormous. Górecki has effectively recalibrated our sense of musical scale.

Then comes one of the Symphony's most extraordinary moments. The music moves toward a major tonality. After so much darkness, the effect can be startlingly luminous. Nothing in the story warrants happiness. The son has not returned. The dead have not been restored. The suffering of the previous movements has not disappeared. This is consolation rather than triumph. Górecki transforms our relationship to grief.

The 1977 world premiere received harshly dismissive reviews from Western critics who felt that Górecki had moved too far from the established avant-garde. Polish critics, however, deemed it a masterpiece. By the late 1980s, it had begun to receive more airplay on American and British classical radio stations, during the peak of the CD era. Interestingly, the success of this work did not result in similar interest in Górecki's other compositions. Several filmmakers in the 1990s and later used the Symphony to elicit a sense of pathos or sorrow. It can be heard, for example, in Season 2, Episode 7 of the Netflix series *The Crown*.

The Symphony's three movements each offer different perspectives on the same elemental bond. Notice that none of the people expresses hatred or demands vengeance. No one asks why suffering exists. Instead, each turns toward another human being. Perhaps, then, the Symphony's ultimate subject is not sorrow but love persisting in the presence of sorrow.

Górecki was as surprised as anyone by the recording's success, later speculating that "perhaps people find something they need in this piece of music.... Somehow I hit the right note, something they were missing. Something, somewhere had been lost to them. I feel that I instinctively knew what they needed."