

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with principal trumpet Michael Sachs

by Mike Telin



“It’s always wonderful when I get to stand up front,” Cleveland Orchestra principal trumpet Michael Sachs said during a telephone conversation. “I’m usually at the back, so I’m hearing all these wonderful sounds in front of me. But to have those sounds converging upon you is a completely different perspective that I’m always amazed and humbled by. I have a renewed respect for the people that I am lucky enough to work with.”

On Thursday, November 21 at 7:30 pm, Friday the 22nd at 7:00 pm, and Saturday the 23rd at 8:00 pm, [Michael Sachs](#) will return to the front of the Severance Hall stage playing Hummel’s *Concerto in E*. The program, under the direction of Nicholas McGegan, also includes Haydn’s *Symphony No. 104* (“London”) and selections from Schubert’s *Rosamunde*.

Friday’s performance is part of the Fridays@7 Series. The straight-through concert will be followed by a royal cocktail party in the Lotus Club with British-themed appetizers and cocktails, including bangers and mash, fish and chips, sticky toffee pudding, and a selection of English beers. Tickets are available [online](#).

Sachs, who joined the Orchestra in 1988, said that the concertos by Haydn and Hummel were written at a pivotal moment in the evolution of the trumpet. “Until the late 18th century, trumpets had no valves, so the only notes available were the ones in a certain harmonic series. You couldn’t play a diatonic or chromatic scale unless you played very high on the instruments, which is why a lot of Baroque music is up in the stratosphere.”

That changed when Anton Weidinger began experimenting with the instrument. “Weidinger was the top player in Vienna in the late 18th and early 19th century, and he created the keyed trumpet, which looks like a bugle lying on its side with saxophone keys. That allowed the instrument to play diatonic and chromatically. This is the instrument that Haydn wrote his concerto for in 1796. And it was revolutionary because it was the first time in history that a trumpet could play the first three notes of the concerto — E-flat, F, and G — in that range, and in that sequence.”

Hummel composed his concerto for the same instrument in 1803 and it was premiered by Anton Weidinger on New Year’s Eve. Sachs noted that while the Hummel shares many similarities with the Haydn, the Hummel pushes the instrument even further.

“For a long time the piece languished in a library in London which had a lot of Hummel’s manuscripts,” Sachs said. “It was found in the 1950s and brought to the U.S. by Armando Ghitalla, who was principal in Boston, and who made the first recording of the piece with Pierre Monteux.”

The concerto was originally written in E major but ended up being played in E-flat for many years. “Ghitalla took the piece to Robert King Music, until quite recently the biggest distributor of brass music. King thought that if he put it in E-flat, a band key, it could be played on a B-flat trumpet, which most people were using, and more people would buy it. From that point people played it in E-flat — in fact the last time I played it with the orchestra, I played it in E-flat.”

For this week’s performances, Sachs will be playing the concerto in its original key of E. “I went to an old friend of mine, Bob Malone, who is the head trumpet designer for Yamaha instruments, with the idea of making me an E trumpet. He ran with it and created a couple, and I chose the better of the two. This gives me the opportunity to play it in the original key.”

While Sachs does own a keyed trumpet, he said that the instrument’s fingering system is completely different from what he is used to. “Even though I don’t have the technical prowess to play a piece like this on the keyed trumpet, I still play around with it and get the sounds that probably would have been heard in Hummel’s time.”

Sachs is also part of the Hummel lineage. Hummel hired trumpeter Ernst Sachse to play in his orchestra. When Sachse retired, one of his students took over and taught the famous trumpet player Max Schlossberg, who taught James Stamp, one of Sachs’ teachers. “It’s a little loose but there is a bit of a family tree dating back to someone who played under Hummel.”

In addition to playing the Hummel in its original key, Sachs also looks forward to reuniting with conductor Nicholas McGegan. “Nic is lovely. Besides being so intelligent, thoughtful, and a great musician, he is just a lot of fun to work with. He’s historically informed but finds ways to apply that in a modern setting with modern instruments. I started playing this concerto when I was 15 or 16, but I’m sure I’m going to learn a lot doing it with Nic and gaining from his insight.”

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