



## Dazzling nineteenth-century sounds from Philharmonia Baroque

By [Stephen Smoliar](#), SF Classical Music Examiner

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In spite of its name, the focus of Philharmonia Baroque is not on a specific era of music history but on the proper performance on instruments appropriate to the period in which the music being presented was composed. As I mentioned in my [preview piece](#), the period for last night's concert at Herbst Theatre was a very specific one: the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The center of attention was a very specific instrument, the keyed trumpet, which played an important transitional role in the development of the instrument from the natural trumpet to the modern valved model. This instrument was played by Gabriele Cassone, who not only delivered a masterful performance of it's qualities but has also written *The Trumpet Book*, a richly illustrated historical account of this member of the brass family.

Cassone joined Philharmonia Baroque and conductor Nicholas McGegan to demonstrate his skills through the 1803 concerto in E major by Johann Nepomuk Hummel, composed specifically for keyed trumpet. As John Prescott observed in his pre-concert talk, we know it was composed for keyed trumpet, because natural trumpets cannot play E major. Prescott also observed that the keys allow the trumpet to shift easily from one key to another, thus expressing the same kinds of harmonic modulation available to most of the other instruments. As a student of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Hummel cultivated a strong "skill set" in modulation applied to both harmonic progression and unfolding melodic lines. Indeed, many aspects of his teacher's qualities are on display in this concerto, ranging from structural architecture, through the grammatical foundations of harmony and melody, all the way into the domain of some of the master's most effective rhetorical tropes. All this was executed at a fair clip in the sort of spirited execution we have come to expect from McGegan; and Cassone was clearly comfortable with that spirit, shaping his melodic lines through a stunning diversity of tone colors while always blending with the unique sonorities of the ensemble. He also took an encore of a D major adagio that Giuseppe Verdi composed for keyed trumpet, which demonstrated that Verdi could apply his talents in vocal writing just as effectively in an instrumental solo.

This concerto was flanked by two symphonies. The evening opened with Louis Spohr's Opus 49, his second symphony in D minor, and concluded with Felix Mendelssohn's C minor Opus 11, his first symphony for full orchestra. These two symphonies also framed the time period of the concert, since Spohr's was composed in 1802 and Mendelssohn's in 1824. Both symphonies are in a minor key, nicely contrasting with the E major of Hummel's concerto; but they are decidedly different in character. However, the unique character of each work was

excellently served by the sonorities of the Philharmonia Baroque period instruments.

The minor-key mood of Spohr's symphony is very much a reflection on the rise of Romanticism in the wake of the *Sturm und Drang* movement at the end of the eighteenth century. This was the shift from the objectivism of the Enlightenment to a celebration of subjectivity and the unbridled forces of nature; and "unbridled" may be the *bon mot* for characterizing Spohr's rhetoric. There is an impetuous quality to the flow of Spohr's movements that almost thumbs its nose at staid rationality (as Heinrich von Kleist would do about a decade later in his outrageous story "The Foundling"). McGegan did not try to smooth over Spohr's wilder nature, making this symphony an exciting, if not also a bit loopy, way to begin the evening.

Mendelssohn's symphony also abounded with exuberance; but the composer kept a firmer hand on the reins, even if there were occasions when one wondered how many different technical skills he would cram into this one work. McGegan elected to perform a later version of the symphony that Mendelssohn prepared for a performance in London, when he substituted the original scherzo with his own orchestration of the scherzo movement from his Opus 20 string octet in E-flat major. (This orchestrated version remains a favorite with Proms audiences in the Royal Albert Hall.) McGegan's energized interpretation maintained the overall high spirits of the evening, bringing this quarter-century journey to a lively conclusion.

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