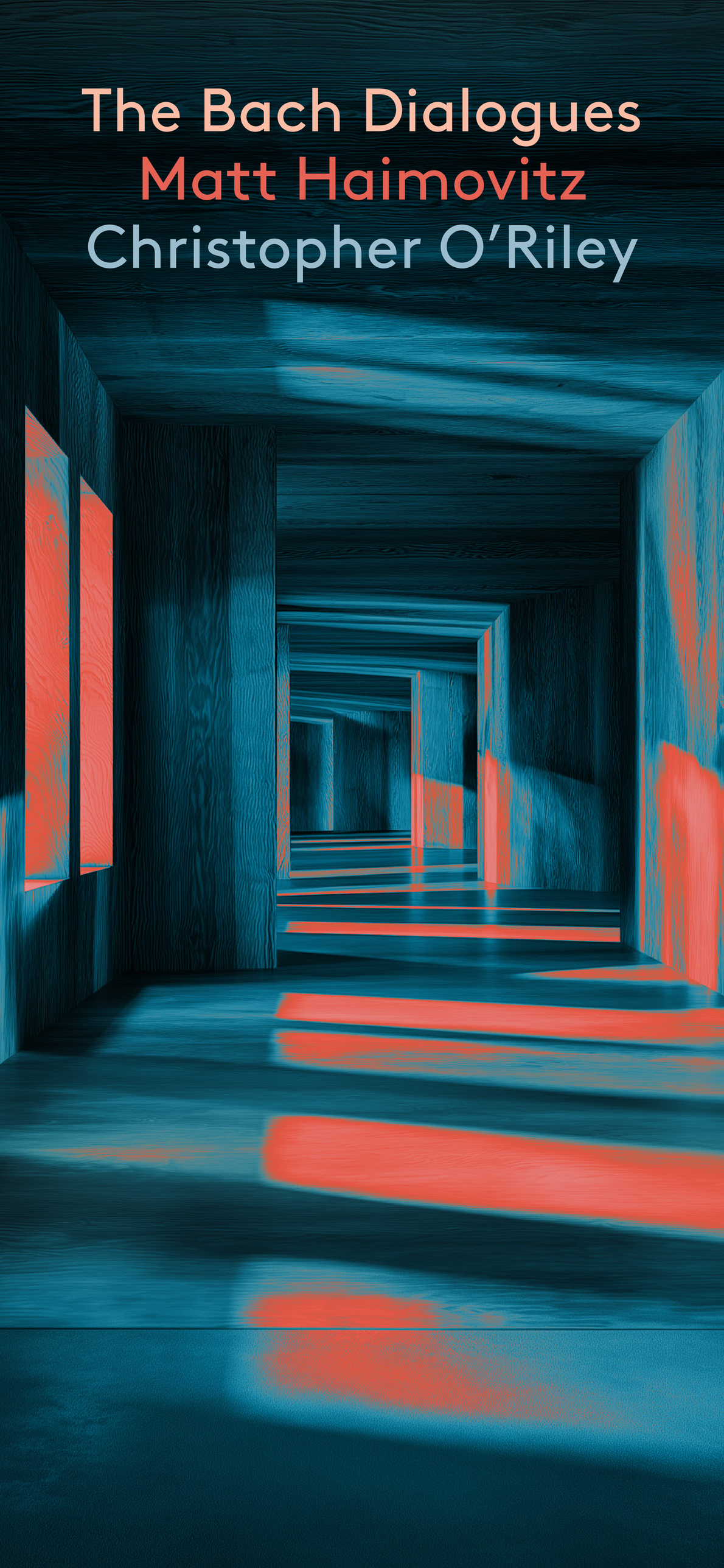
The Bach Dialogues

Matt Haimovitz

Christopher O'Riley



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clavichord

PENTATONE · PTC 5187 410

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Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

Trio Sonata No. 5, BWV 529

1	Allegro	4. 49
2	Largo	5. 50
3	Allegro	3. 17

Sonata No. 3 in G Minor, BWV 1029

4	Vivace	5. 08
5	Adagio	5. 09
6	Allegro	3. 53

Sonata No. 2 in D Major, BWV 1028

7	Adagio	1. 53
8	Allegro	3. 49
9	Andante	3. 54
10	Allegro	4. 16

Sonata No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1027

11	Adagio	3. 32
12	Allegro ma non tanto	3. 17
13	Andante	2. 15
14	Allegro moderato	2. 53
	Total playing time:	54. 03

Matt Haimovitz, cello piccolo
Christopher O'Riley, clavichord

In June 2024 over four days of sessions at Skywalker Sound in Marin County, California, Christopher O'Riley and Matt Haimovitz recorded J.S. Bach's Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Cembalo BWV 1027-1029 and the Trio Sonata No. 5 BWV 529 on a violoncello piccolo and clavichord. Nearly three centuries after these works were composed, the dream of bringing two of Bach's favorite instruments together transformed the recording studio into an acoustic laboratory. The following conversation unfolded at the conclusion of the sessions.

About the technological marvel...

MATT: We could only have realized this project, combining the cello piccolo and clavichord, in the recording studio.

CHRIS: It's a real technological marvel to be able to record with these instruments. The clavichord is not audible to Matt on his side of the room. We had to isolate me in a spaceship-like structure so the close mics could pick up my sound without Matt's cello piccolo overpowering the mix.

MATT: I would walk onto the sound stage and observe Chris playing like a lion at the clavichord, but I could not hear a peep a mere 20 feet away. We both needed headphones to be able to hear each other. We each experienced our own mix through the sessions, including our producer David Frost who had his own mix of the two instruments.

CHRIS: In this way we were able to fulfill Matt's dream of entering Bach's imagination, using two of his favorite mediums. The process we arrived at through the technological resources of recording here at Skywalker Sound made it possible to go back to the idea of what Bach may have intended.

About the violoncello piccolo and baroque bow...

MATT: In Suite 6 of the Solo Cello Suites, Bach asks for a five-string cello piccolo. That's what drew me to the five-string. Of course, I wanted my own piccolo. I owned a ¾ size cello, made in Leipzig around 1710. I made my debuts

with this small cello, with the Israel Philharmonic and New York Philharmonic.

I was ten and living in the Bay Area – close to where we are recording – when my parents bought it for me. It had belonged to legendary conductor Eugene Ormandy's brother, a cellist in the Philadelphia Orchestra. Back then it was a four-string cello. As I became taller, I outgrew this cello and began loaning it out to talented young cellists.

When I wanted to play Suite 6 on a five-string, I thought about turning my old cello into a piccolo. I reached out to an expert luthier in Minneapolis, Andrew Dipper. He took my cello and transformed it into this baroque setup, adding an E-string. And here it is, the cello piccolo, all strung up with gut. I recorded on a combination of sheep and cow gut. There's all kinds of animals that you can use.

CHRIS: No cats though, right?

MATT: No cats.

CHRIS: Okay, thank you.

MATT: No, and it was all done humanely.

CHRIS: Were you telling me…I'm not sure whether these are the strings from the string maker you were talking about in Europe who actually is in the business of raising the sheep that they use for their strings.

MATT: No, they don't raise them, but they work right next door to a slaughterhouse. They're in Italy, the Toro brothers. They're known for gut strings with richly warm overtones, but there is little consistency in these strings. It's very much a human process, not at all mass-produced.

CHRIS: So there's a lot of variety.

MATT: You never know what you're gonna get. It's really very much another instrument on an instrument that you're playing and reacting to.

And the bow that I'm using is a baroque replica, designed by David Hawthorne, a bowmaker working in Harvard Square in Cambridge. It's beautiful. I love playing on it, much lighter than the standard modern bow.

CHRIS: That tip looks very special. Looks like something from the Mercedes C-Series you've got there.

MATT: I think of it more like a Porsche which makes my modern bow a RAM pickup truck.

CHRIS: That tip could have been designed at Skywalker. It's very Star Wars, a rocket ship feel to it.

MATT: That's David's design. Also, you can see the convex shape of the bow. It requires a very different

way of playing. You don't want to sustain all the way to the tip when you use a bow like this and it's responsive to every gesture from the arm or fingers. It allows me to sculpt with a plethora of articulations.

So those are my tools that I'm using for our recording.

About the clavichord…

What about you, Chris?

CHRIS: Well, it was really your idea to do the Gamba Sonatas with the cello piccolo and clavichord. Since you've had this vision, the idea of the clavichord being Bach's favored keyboard instrument has gained quite a bit more contemporary traction.

The inventory of his estate upon his death lists five harpsichords in his collection. But I don't think we can historically depend on the undertakers of the 18th century to

be able to discern whether they were harpsichords or harpsichords and clavichords.

The very important characteristic with the harpsichord and organ in Bach's time is that they were both incapable of any dynamic contrast. The harpsichord had plectrums associated with each key that were poised, and would pluck the string. There was no way of soft plucking it or hard plucking it. One volume. The organ, of course, could engage in different dynamic contrasts by virtue of just adding pipes, adding an octave above or an octave below.

The clavichord was the only instrument of Bach's time that was capable of the same kind of dynamic shading that we came to know and love from the fortepiano, and then, the modern concert grand. With the latter we are able to strike the key, and the hammer strikes the string at whatever force we choose. And so, there's an

enormous dynamic contrast that's available to us.

The plectrum of the harpsichord plucks the string. The organ pipe note just opens a valve and it's all one speed, one volume. The clavichord creates its sound by what's called a tangent. It is a tiny little fork tine that meets the string at the halfway point. The vibration is only the meeting of the string. Because the tangent is making contact with the string, we can also elicit vibrato, like a voice or string player, by lightly bouncing up and down on the key.

If Bach appreciated its dynamic flexibility, he did it completely on

his own. It was not an instrument that could be used for public performance. It's a very quiet instrument, barely audible, just under the ear of the performer.

We've had the most wonderful tuner for the sessions, Larry Lobel, who does a lot of work here at Skywalker. He mostly tunes pianos, but he really pitched in here and made this clavichord come alive. He has his own insights into this very particular instrument, a remodel of a Swedish clavichord.

LARRY: This clavichord is a copy of a Swedish instrument that was originally made in 1806. Ours was made in 2010 by Andrew Lagerquist who I know personally. His intention was to build a clavichord that was capable of being used for any type of Baroque music. The original clavichords had a smaller keyboard compass and were much smaller than this instrument. They had a very feeble sound. This instrument was modeled on the Swedish

clavichords because they were the most powerful.

For me, it presents some difficulties with tuning because of its great length. It's almost seven feet long, with the keyboard on the left side, and the tuning pins way up on the right side. In order to tune it when I'm playing, especially if I'm tuning the bass notes, I have to stretch myself as far as I can go to reach the tuning pins. I worked out a way to do that.

CHRIS: Even with this mighty clavichord, there's a wide dynamic contrast, but in a very small range.

About the interpretive process…

MATT: There was more detective work beyond the choice of tools. And there were revelations made before and during the idyllic recording sessions.

CHRIS: Bach very, very, very rarely put actual dynamic indications in

his score.

MATT: In all 6 Cello Suites we have only four dynamic indications, and they're all at the beginning of Suite VI!

CHRIS: One of the discoveries we made together has to do with articulation marks. The ones we pay special attention to are the slurs. When you see slurs over a group of notes, usually pianists just say, "Oh, well just play those smoothly, legato." But in a Baroque setting, it's really a matter of the slur having a beginning and an end. The beginning of a slur has an impetus, but not necessarily an accent. And the end of a slur should have a release. In between the sound yields, weaker. Some would actually go so far as to say it connotes a decrescendo, actually getting softer. There are all kinds of those marks in Bach's score.

We find ourselves adding quite a lot more dynamic shaping and

shading to this music, with a variety of articulation that I think is unprecedented.

MATT: Unslurred separate notes can be brought to the fore momentarily. Even these, however, have a hierarchy, not all made equal. The downbows (nobile) often stronger and longer than the upbows (vilis) depending on the geometry of the lines.

CHRIS: And the more mellifluous slurs can coexist simultaneously with the separate articulations underscoring this implicit back and forth between the instruments.

A dialogue…

MATT: I should add that with the gut strings, although they're much quieter than the metal strings, I'm much more powerful with this instrument, easily overpowering the clavichord. It's a trippy mindset for a cellist who generally has to compete to be heard to suddenly

have to switch gears and allow the keyboard part to come through. Even with the assistance of technology, it's a whole different philosophy of playing.

These pieces were originally for viola da gamba. The cello would eventually take over because it was louder and could project more in the large concert hall. The gamba is all about resonance. I'm treating my cello piccolo very much like a gamba. I'm trying to resonate the instrument and create transparency for the clavichord.

CHRIS: It's a novel perspective to experience these works in this way. Matt has re-addressed the way he

plays the cello entirely for these pieces. He's really sounding like a player of Bach's own time, It's a real conversation.

MATT: A true conversation on various levels. It's ingenious what Bach achieves: the variety of relationships between the two instruments, even within one bar.

CHRIS: Yes.

MATT: There can be a give-and-take, handing off short motives, longer phrases, constructing larger forms. It's constant invention, game-playing, poetry. Just genius. It is life-affirming to have this kind of relationship where we are listening to each other, making room for each other, and taking over when called on. Bach invents worlds which are so kinetic and vibrant.

CHRIS: With these recordings, it's more than a dialogue between instruments. It's a

dialogue between technologies, between imaginations spanning the centuries. Technological pragmatism meets the organic ideal. The impossible becomes perfectly natural and inevitable.

Acknowledgements

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