When Bach began to write for the oboe, the instrument was newer than the saxophone had been when first used in jazz. This at first necessitated some special compromises. These new French instruments were pitched one whole step lower than the strings and organ, so in order to use them the composer had to treat them as transposing instruments, much like a B-flat clarinet. Not until his tenure in Cöthen did Bach have the luxury of all the instruments playing at the same pitch. Nevertheless, beginning with his first cantata, Bach used the oboe as no other composer had before, treating it as an equal partner to the voice, and showering it with lyrically and technically demanding roles. Based on its prevalence in his sacred works, the oboe must have been one of Bach’s favorite instruments—receiving over 220 solos in about as many cantatas. The next contester would be the violin, coming in at a comparatively measly 84 solos. His affection for the oboe extended, in at least two cases, to the players themselves: Bach was godfather to the children of both his main Leipzig oboists, Gleditsch and Kornagel.

It has long been assumed by scholars that Bach wrote concertos for the oboe. All manuscripts for these are lost, but some have been reconstructed from surviving later versions for keyboard. In the nineteenth century Bach’s keyboard concertos were seen as the earliest masterpieces of the genre, precursors of every great piano concerto from Mozart to Tchaikovsky. As such it seemed unthinkable that they could actually be transcriptions rather than original compositions. It was the great philosopher and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer who suggested early in the Twentieth Century that the limited compass of Bach’s keyboard concertos would indicate that they were originally conceived for an instrument with a similarly constrained range. He proposed that the keyboard concerto in A major (BWV 1055) had been written for the oboe d’amore, an alto oboe (pitched a third below the oboe) for which Bach wrote dozens of solo arias. In this concerto, the right hand part of the solo encompasses the exact range of Bach’s oboe d’amore, and very little “reconstruction” is needed to recreate the original version of the work. This was a remarkable bit of intuition on Schweitzer’s part, however, as the oboe d’amore was at that point an instrument lost in the mists of time. The new reconstruction of the A-major concerto gave instrument makers the impetus to develop a new oboe d’amore, updated with all the key mechanisms of the modern oboe. Only later in the Twentieth Century, with advent of period instrument movement, were replicas of authentic oboe d’amore, such as the one used on this recording, available for performance of this concerto.

The concerto for two harpsichords in C minor (BWV 1059) has also been reconstructed for oboe in E-flat and for oboe d’amore in D. The first source is the harpsichord concerto in E major, BWV 1053, and other is a version for organ divided between two cantatas (BWV 49 and 169) that were first performed in close proximity to each other. It is supposed that the original version of this composition, for oboe and strings, was pressed into service by Bach to fulfill his obligations to provide music for religious services. Later yet, he adapted it for his own performance as a harpsichord concerto. The fact that all three reconstructions of this work, in their various keys, pass the empirical test of live performance extremely well surely speaks to an unmistakable oboistic quality in the solo lines. Even in the most technically demanding passages, the solo line retains the vocal quality we associate with Bach’s writing for oboe.

Scholars essentially agree that the harpsichord concerto in F minor (BWV 1056) is a reworking by Bach of earlier material. It is often heard performed in G minor as a violin concerto, yet the middle movement is taken directly from the opening Sinfonia of Cantata 156 (the famous Adagio for oboe and strings which is also used in BWV 1059R), and the demanding passagework of the outer movements seems more idiomatic to the oboe. In performance I often substitute a favorite soprano aria with basso continuo accompaniment for the middle movement, and save the famous Adagio for performance in the D minor oboe concerto. For the present recording we offer both, and I am happy to be able to include a recording of the aria “Hochster, mache deine Güte” from BWV 51 as the final track on the disc.

The concerto in D minor is the only oboe concerto on this disc that does not have a harpsichord concerto counterpart. The outer movements are found in sinfonias for organ and strings in one cantata (BWV 35), while the famous Adagio from BWV 156 is used unaltered as the middle movement. Some scholars today will refer to the work as BWV 1059R—a nod to the nine-bar concerto fragment for harpsichord oboe and strings (also from Cantata 35) that is labeled 1059 in the Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis. This concerto presents the most formidable technical challenges of any of the works included on this disc, and, while rarely performed, it is a work I had the pleasure of performing with Portland Baroque Orchestra early in my career.