In 1720 Johann Sebastian Bach made a fair copy of six works he had composed for unaccompanied violin. This manuscript, in its beautiful, clear, thoughtful calligraphy reveals, more expressively than could any printed copy, the shape of the music. The title page states in a splendidly flamboyant hand: “Sei Solo - a violino senza Basso accompagnato - Libro Primo da Joh. Seb. Bach ao. 1720”, and the pages that follow are as carefully as possible spaced to avoid page turns. As J.N. Forkel in his 1802 biography of Bach writes of “the six solos for violin and the six others for the violoncello”, it is presumed by scholars that the Libro Secondo was Bach’s fair copy of the six ‘cello suites, alas lost.

Bach was thirty-five years old in 1720 and had been happily employed since 1717 as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen, described by Bach in later years as “one who loved and understood music, playing the violin, viola da gamba and harpsichord”. Prince Leopold belonged to a strict form of the Lutheran Church and Bach’s main work in Köthen was to compose and to perform chamber music for his patron, rather than to produce religious music.

250 years after Bach’s death it seems astonishing that these extraordinary works should have not been part of the common knowledge of European culture, but, though there is no record of their ever having been performed in Bach’s lifetime, copies were made and circulated among musicians in Germany from the 1720s onwards. In 1774 C.P.E. Bach, who was corresponding with Forkel about his father, wrote that “he understood perfectly what was possible on all stringed instruments and this is exemplified by his works for solo violin and solo violoncello. One of the greatest violinists has told me that he knows of nothing more perfect for learning to become a good violinist”.

The first printed edition of the set was published in 1802 in Bonn by Simrock, and is interesting for some of its mistakes that became perpetuated in later editions. It also completely leaves out bar 87 in the G minor fugue, something that must have puzzled the London musicians like Johann Peter Salomon and George Bridgetower who are known to have possessed printed copies of this first edition, unless they also had correct hand-written copies that had come to them from Salomon’s connection with C.P.E Bach. The complete set for violin remained relatively unknown until 1843, when Ferdinand David, who until recently was believed to have given the first public performances of some of the music, prepared an edition, without however being able to consult Bach’s fair copy, which was still in the possession of Johann Sebastian’s
granddaughter Louisa Bach, the daughter of his penultimate son, Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach.

It is now clear from the letters of Samuel Wesley that the great violinist George Bridgetower, even if he was not presenting the works in public concerts, was performing the works for his musician friends in London in the early years of the 19th century. In a number of surviving letters from Wesley to Bridgetower (who apparently spelt his name Bridgtower, as did Wesley when writing to him) and to friends like Vincent Novello, there are references to Bridgtower’s performances of the unaccompanied Bach works. To Bridgtower on 1st July 1814: “I beg leave to inform you that I shall be happy to know, when & where I am to make good my Promise to my Brother of hearing you execute the exquisite Solos of Bach.” In another letter to Novello on 28th January 1814 it is clear that Novello had failed to attend a performance by Bridgtower the night before of “the Ciacone & the Fugue in C from the Solos”, (the theme of which he then writes out in the letter) and continues: “All these pieces were admirably given by our host, & indeed the whole was the most classical Affair in the Crotchet & Quaver Line that I have witnessed for a long Period.”

As an aside, it is an interesting speculation that Bridgtower could have purchased his copy of the Simrock edition on his trip from England to the continent before he met Beethoven in Vienna and they gave the first performance of the op.47 sonata that Beethoven wrote for Bridgtower. Having grown up with Das Wohltemperierte Klavier, Beethoven was a great admirer of Bach’s music – could Bridgtower have played some of the Solos to Beethoven, and could that be why the op.47 sonata starts with an unaccompanied violin?

The six works were treated by the major violinists of the nineteenth century as a mine from which to quarry gems, with individual movements being slipped into recital programmes or performed as encores. Even Joseph Joachim, whose edition was very influential in spreading familiarity with the set, performed selected movements, and it has only been in the second half of the twentieth century that violinists have been performing complete Sonatas and Partitas with any frequency.

It seems extraordinary that any musician would set out to write a major set of works for unaccompanied violin, but there were precedents in the musical circles with which Bach was associated. As a young man, not yet eighteen, Bach appears in March 1703 on the records of the minor court of Weimar as a lackey and violinist. The most prominent musician associated with this court was Johann Paul Westhoff (1656-1705), a colourful character who performed his own suites for solo violin around Europe, and had in 1696 printed a volume
of six suites, each consisting of an Allemande, Corrente, Sarabande and Gigue, the only known copy of which was rediscovered in 1971 in the Somogyi Library in Hungary. We have no way of knowing for sure that Bach encountered Westhoff’s works, nor the Sonata for solo violin of 1716 by Vivaldi’s pupil Johann Georg Pisendel, with whom Bach had been acquainted since 1709, but whatever it was that sparked his imagination caused an explosion of ideas that lifted the Sonatas and Partitas into a realm that remains unequalled in the music for unaccompanied violin.

Bach did not simply wish to write music that was melodically or harmonically pleasing, like the later Fantasias for solo violin by his friend Telemann. He took what was generally considered a melody instrument and set himself the challenge of composing large-scale works which were harmonically self-sufficient, whether playing double-stopped polyphony or flowing monodic passages. That he wrote fugues for the violin is surprising, that he composed some of his most complex and lengthiest of fugues for it is astonishing. Johann Mattheson in 1737 wrote of the subject for the A minor fugue: “Who would believe that these eight notes could be so fruitful as to engender counterpoint for more than a single sheet of paper, without unusual extensions and completely naturally?” and yet, from these eight notes Bach created a majestic fugue of 289 bars which is much longer and far more elaborately worked out than the majority of his fugues in the 48 Preludes and Fugues of Das Wohltemperierte Klavier.

The three sonatas are modelled after the form that arose in Italy in the seventeenth century as the Sonata da Chiesa - the church sonata (as distinct from the Sonata da Camera - the chamber sonata) to be played during long services and break up the liturgy with periods of meditation. Pisendel is described as having played unaccompanied violin works during church services in Dresden, and many people would like to find evidence that he played Bach’s sonatas there. Bach used the Sonata da Chiesa form for most of his chamber music for more than one instrument, but it is extraordinary that he chose it as a structure for music for unaccompanied violin, while his only surviving keyboard work in this form is the arrangement in D minor of the A minor Sonata for solo violin.

The four-movement form has a slow introductory movement, which in the first two sonatas have wonderful examples of the style of richly melodic ornamentation that Bach himself would have improvised and probably varied with each performance. Most composers of Bach's time would not have written this out, expecting performers to bring their personal style of ornamentation to the interpretation and, until the wealth of research over the latter half of the twentieth century into eighteenth century performance practice, these movements were played at a tempo and with a serious stolidness that
removed their fluid, improvisational grace. Since contemporary eighteenth century ornamentations to the published works of composers such as Corelli, Vivaldi and Pisendel have become available for modern performers to study, it is easier for us to see that some of Bach's writing is of the "graces" and elaborate cadential trills that would generally have been left to the performer's whim.

The three fugues grow in size and complexity from the G minor to the C major. The G minor, a work existing in transcriptions both for solo Lute and for Organ, is a dense, single-subject fugue, with wonderfully changing harmonising of its subject. The A minor fugue is considerably longer and, as well as its main subject, has a further secondary subject, extracted from part of the opening statement's initial cadence. The C major fugue is enormous, not only the longest of the three, but among the longest of any of Bach's fugues. The subject, related to the Chorale "Komm Heilige Geist," is also the longest subject of the three fugues and, as in the A minor fugue, Bach uses a descending chromatic line to tie together the voices of the four-part fugue.

The third Sonata's fugue is in effect three fugues: an exposition fugue in C major, a stretto fugue with its cadence in E minor, a fugue al riverso in G major, and a recapitulation of the opening C major fugue, the four sections joined by single-line passage work, culminating twice in a powerful double-stopped statement of the theme over a pedal open string, before the G major riverso fugue and before the final Da Cape of the exposition fugue.

Each Sonata has its third movement in another key: the G minor's Siciliana in B flat major; the A minor's Andante in C major (giving a whole bar of tonal ambiguity; as it starts with just a C and an E, it feels as though it is perhaps still in A minor until the second bar, when the G and B define the key of C); and the C major's wonderfully calm and short F major Largo.

The fourth movement of each sonata returns to its tonic key for a fast movement in running semiquavers. Sometimes broken chords, sometimes scalaric figures make up the structure, but there is always audibly apparent bass and harmonic structure integrated into what looks on the page like a single-line movement.

The Partitas or Partias as Bach actually calls them in his manuscript, are three very different works that all purport to be in the French Suite style. Confusion abounds over the misleading naming of Bach's three great sets of keyboard music as English Suites, French Suites and Partitas; each of these sets of six works (and also the six suites for solo 'cello) is in fact in the form that Bach derived from the basic group of dances, standardised by the seventeenth century as the French Suite: Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue. While most composers of the day (for instance J.P. Westhoff) kept to this form, Bach was not content to stay within these constraints, and in all of these
works and in the *Partias* for solo violin, he varied their structure and added other dance movements to extend the set.
The E major *Partia*, which comes last in the manuscript as Partia no. 3, has no Allemande, no Courante and no Sarabande and becomes a collection of dances, starting with a Preludio that Bach reused in 1731 as the opening Sinfonia in his Town Council Inauguration Cantata no. 29, when he gave the violin’s line to the right hand of the organ, accompanying it with trumpets, oboes, strings and drums.

For the B minor *Partia* Bach used a form which in his surviving music is unique to this work. While staying with the conventional movements of Allemande, Corrente and Sarabande for the first three movements and substituting a Tempo di Borea (or Bourrée) for the Gigue, he follows each movement with a Double, a movement that takes the same harmonic progressions as its preceding movement but reshapes them into a new structural pattern. In his keyboard suites Bach sometimes places a Double after a movement, as for instance after the Sarabande of the sixth English Suite, but these are more usually ornamented versions of the movement, rather than this total restructuring, and in no other case does he append a Double to each movement of a suite.

With the D minor *Partia* he changes the proportions in another radically different way. After the conventional Allemande, Corrente, Sarabande and Giga he adds a Ciaconna (or Chaconne), a movement so extraordinary in its form, scale, architecture and imagination that it has been isolated from the rest of its body for much of its performance history, being played as a separate work, not just by violinists, but also by pianists, guitarists and symphony orchestras. At its most basic a Chaconne is a set of variations on a Sarabande-like theme, but with his genius, Bach transcends the sensation of variations, creating a tripartite minor-major-minor structure that both echoes elements of the preceding four movements and makes them appear to have been inevitably building towards it. At its simplest, the theme of the variations is just four descending notes: D - C - B flat - A (which in an ornamented form is also the backbone of the C major fugue theme), but as Bach takes this through elaborations flowing organically from one variation to the next, the artifice is concealed by the inspiration.

Legend has it that when Mendelssohn was reintroducing Bach’s music to the cognoscenti of the nineteenth century, he persuaded Ferdinand David to perform the Chaconne for the first documented time in public. Just before the performance, David decided that he was unable to play an unaccompanied work of such unprecedented length, so Mendelssohn improvised a piano accompaniment for him at the concert. Whether or not this is true, Mendelssohn did publish a piano part for it, setting off a whole series of unlikely couplings, with Schumann writing piano accompaniments for all six works.
Providing a defined bass, when Bach had gone to such trouble to avoid one, seems strange to us nowadays: Brahms’ piano arrangement of the *Chaconne* for left hand alone being much more in keeping with its spirit and its element of titanic struggle, which for violinists will always be one of its most fundamental aspects.

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