The Bach Cello Suites occupy a distinctive place in the repertoire for unaccompanied instrumental works and Bach’s corpus, due to the nature of their genesis (there is no extant autograph in Bach’s hand) and the manner in which they have become exemplars of soloistic artistry and the interpretation of Baroque music, especially for cellists and violists.

As a foundational component of a string player’s development, the Suites are often found on recital programs (especially for higher education degrees) and audition lists for orchestral positions; this latter point is especially interesting, when one compares the individual interpretive nature of the Suites against the traditional value of accuracy and homogeneous performance emphasized by the modern orchestral establishment.

In other words, if the auditionee is being evaluated on their ability to play the first page of Don Juan “correctly”, why is the person’s interpretation of solo Bach also included in that process…or is there a “correct” way to play the Suites?

With at least 75 extant editions and around 50 recordings of the Suites known at the present time (and that is only pertaining to the cello), it’s difficult to say that answer is anything but “No.”

Indeed, the fact that Pablo Casals is directly responsible for the rise of the Suites’ popularity in the early 20th century (nearly 200 years after we think they were composed), and then there is both the development of sound recording technology as well as the post-war rise of the musical conservatory / pedagogy tradition to be considered…these factors only serve to strengthen the notion that the Suites as we know them are nothing if not subjective – and is probably their largest intrinsic value.

So then why, in the early 21st century still, do we see teachers presenting their students with “the right edition” of Bach suites to learn and perform? But more importantly: how do we change that mentality? What is “right” in this context?

This presentation will attempt to answer that question by considering the fragmented and shadowy nature of the Suites’ sources, explore in detail just the tip of the iceberg for the variety between printed editions, and consider some possible avenues of transforming how these inarguably outstanding compositions can be transferred from generation to generation of musicians, with the inextricable role of libraries at the center.

I. Sources

The Suites are generally thought to have been composed during Bach’s time in Cöthen (1717-23), where he was employed as Cappellmeister by the young Prince Leopold. As
the leader of the Prince’s chapel Orchestra (probably at the violin or maybe the viola, which CPE later wrote was his preferred place to do so), Bach was surrounded by instrumentalists, including the cellist Christian Bernhard Linike and the gambist Christian Ferdinand Abel — the Prince also played gamba, hence the three sonatas Bach composed there as well.

Watermarks on the manuscript paper for the violin Sonatas & Partitas date from 1720, so between these facts it is reasoned that the Suites come from Cöthen. However, it is not until 1727 that we have Anna Magdalena’s copy, which is dated due to the fact her handwriting & the watermark on her paper for the Suites match those of the Sonatas & Partitas, which were presented to the violinist Georg Heinrich Schwanberg in Leipzig — in fact, Schwanberg wrote “Pars I” on the violin pieces and “Pars II” on the Suites, so it has been assumed that Bach originally conceived of them as a larger set.

Anna Magdalena’s handwriting mimics Bach’s so closely that for many years he copy was thought of as an autograph. However, after comparing it to other sources & especially her version of the Sonatas & Partitas, her copies are rife with inconsistencies, particularly regarding articulation and even some wrong or missing notes.

The second source from Bach’s lifetime is that of Johann Peter Kellner: organist, composer, acquaintance, and possible student of Bach. Kellner’s copy is also full of inconsistencies (it can be used against Anna Magdalena’s to compare certain instances), it notates the C minor scordatura suite at pitch, and is also incomplete. Russel Stinson has speculated that Kellner intended his copy to be a reference for keyboard transcription.

Source C dates from shortly after Bach’s death and appears to have been part of the collection of the Hamburg organist Johann Christoph Westphal, although Ulrich Leisinger has recently stated this to be false. Of the four extant sources, its presentation of slurs is the clearest, although the two halves of the manuscript are in the hands of two different unidentified copyists.

Source D is even more mysterious, dating from closer to the end of the 18th century and presenting less clear articulation indications. C & D may provide an enlightening perspective on later bowing conventions, but they do little to concretely address practices during Bach’s lifetime. In preparing the Suites for the Neue Bach Ausgabe, Hans Eppstein suggested that C & D may come from the same source (now lost, G) and even went so far as to include two separate critical editions, one from Anna Magdalena / Kellner and the other from C / D.

The last extant manuscript source is Bach’s autograph transcription of the C minor suite for lute, on paper bearing the same watermark as Anna Magdalena’s copy, so presumably dating from the same time period.
Of course, articulation in this version is to be taken with a grain of salt (due to the difference between bowed and plucked string technique), however Bach does add some appoggiaturas and trills which could be extrapolated for ornamentation practice, and he indicates some delayed, then rhythmically accelerated up-beat figures in the Allemande, possibly indicating they should be interpreted later and shorter than previously thought.

In the end, this is what we have for “authority” in the sources for the Suites — inconsistency, suggestions of possible answers for SOME questions (but definitely not all), and yet evidence that these works, copied several times during and shortly after Bach’s life, meant something.

The Bach Revival of the 1830s in Germany and Austria (and slight earlier in England) focused initially on the large-scale vocal works and instrumental music, especially the keyboard compositions. The Cello Suites were generally regarded as somewhat unplayable etudes for the unlikely (at least for the concert hall) instrument of the cello, and the early editions did little to abate that, taking the lack of an autograph as license to be completely free with “altering the text without comment”, to paraphrase August Wenzinger.

Even Alfred Dörffel, preparing the Suites for the Bach-Gesellschaft edition in 1879, disregarded the importance of articulation by saying it was only a subsidiary matter to Bach — which is curious, since we do have other examples of Bach fastidiously revising compositions, changing both bowings and even sometimes notes.

In any event, by the turn of the 20th century the Suites had apparently faded into something of obscurity, too problematic or difficult for amateurs & not Brahms- or Dvorak-y enough for the concert hall. Then came Pablo Casals.

II. Casals

By 1890, Casals was already playing in the cafes of Barcelona to help pay for his education at the Municipal School of Music. The legend goes that the 13-year-old Casals was walking with his father one day, the day he acquired his first full-size cello (of course), and they were looking for music he could play. In a second-hand music shop, they happened upon “a tobacco-colored cover page with fanciful black lettering” — Friedrich Grützmacher’s edition of the Suites (possibly from 1866), published by Peters. Casals would “practice it every day for 12 years before mustering the courage to play it in public.”

Apocryphas aside, Casals is primarily responsible for bringing the Suites to the concert stage and recorded media, as he enamored the music-loving public and press in the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, the fact that we see an explosion of 35 editions between
his first public performances in 1901-02 and his death in 1973 is a testament to his influence.

But let’s actually consider some of these editions to variation they present, even in just the opening bars of the first suite’s Prelude; since time is of the essence, we’ll compare four.

III. Edition comparison

Norblin
Dotzauer
Grützmacher
Starker

Tempo
Articulation (bow direction / Baroque strong—weak)
Notes

And for a live demonstration, we turn to the viola (the only other instrument with the same strings) and the lovely Ashley Salinas.

Forbes
Katims
Primrose

Plus the difference in technique!

We begin to see they myriad complication that these works present, not counting all of the OTHER editions and versions for other instruments, including the guitar, bass, viola da gamba, and even marimba.

IV. Conclusion

So what do we make of this glorious mess? With four (or possibly two) extant sources to serve as “authorities” and a galaxy of available editions, not to mention recordings and our teachers’ opinions, how does the student approach these works?

Three views to consider:

1. We don’t have to produce yet another edition that essentially does the same thing as all the others. The publisher Alphonse Leduc presented a strophic edition, to give performers a fresh approach on phrasing from a dance and/or poetic perspective.
2. The Baroque cellist, gambist, and musicologist Christine Kyprianides has discussed how Bach was known during his life as a master improviser AND the foremost clavier instructor of his time — this latter role is often overlooked by our reverence for his compositions, but perhaps the Suites (along with the Well-Tempered Clavier, Musical Offering, Art of Fugue, and maybe even the B Minor Mass) were meant less as _practical _music and more as pedagogical tools, to challenge and require musicians to find new methods and hence raise their artistry.

3. In 1998, Laura Kramer wrote a dissertation at Cornell that posits: since we have Bach’s autograph and Anna Magdalena’s copy of the Sonatas and Partitas, in theory we have (along with other resources) the means to effectively address the inconsistencies in articulation and arrive at a more holistically authoritative model of the Suites. To date, no one has used this method to create an edition.

All of these approaches involve (to some extent) the same central idea: the individual musician interested in studying and performing these works must embrace the plurality of resources available to them and evaluate those to create an individual interpretation, instead of blindly following one edition.

And here is where libraries come into play: our collections are vital to enabling access to these materials, be they sources, editions, recordings, studies, analyses, etc.

These pieces in particular are an extremely important example of why our work as music librarians is very much still needed, and will be for a long time to come: if a student comes along wondering why Starker or Primrose used that bowing or dynamic, we should be ready to help them access this garden of scholarly delight.

My special thanks go to the UNT Music Library, who provided many of the editions and most of the recordings for this presentation, Ashley Salinas (obviously), and all of you!