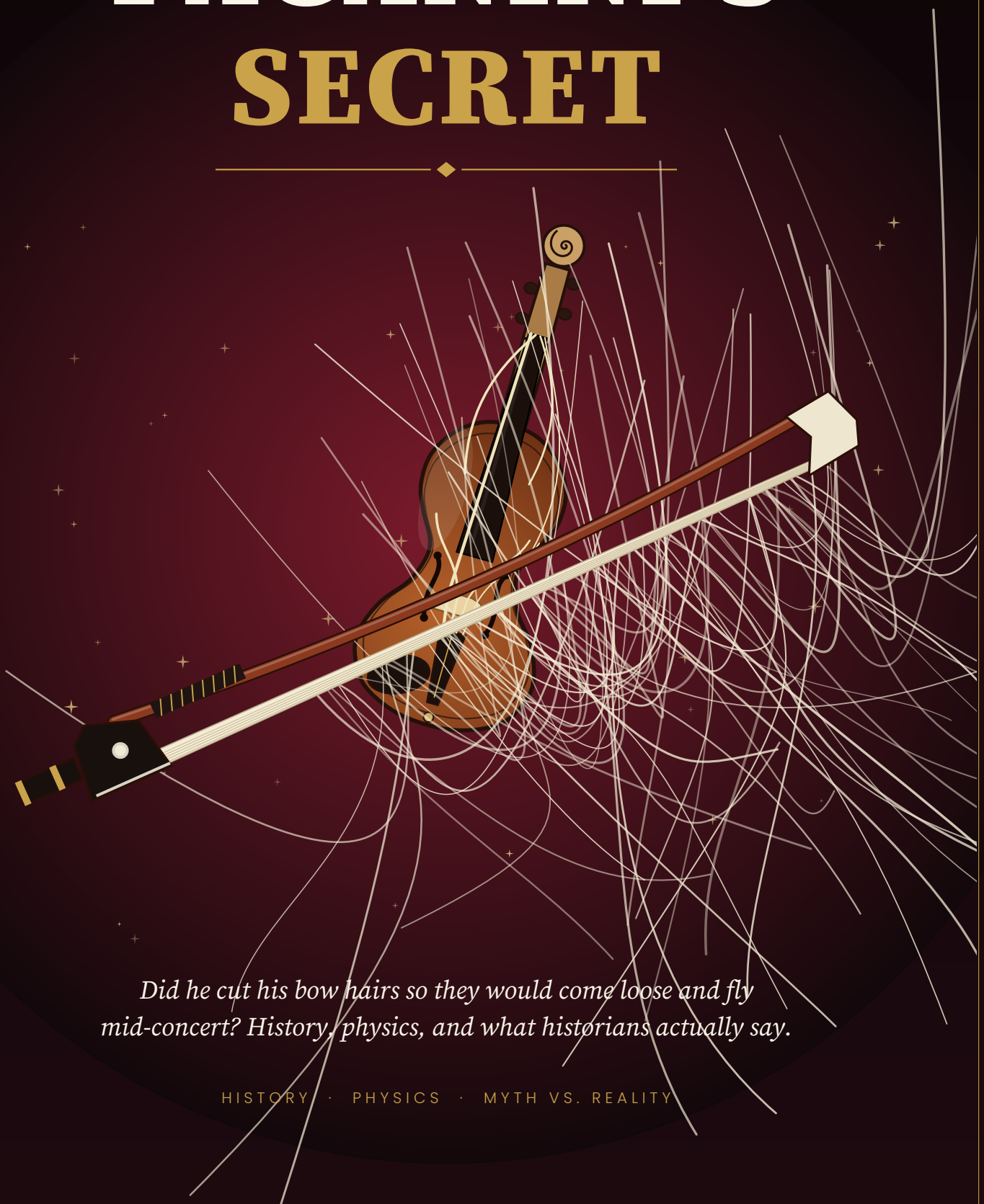
THE TRUTH BEHIND THE LEGEND

PAGANINI'S SECRET



Did he cut his bow hairs so they would come loose and fly mid-concert? History, physics, and what historians actually say.

HISTORY · PHYSICS · MYTH VS. REALITY

The Man Behind the Myth



Illustrated silhouette in the style of 19th-century cameos. No photograph of Paganini is known: he died in 1840, when photography was barely taking its first steps. We know him through portraits, lithographs and caricatures.

Niccolò Paganini was born in Genoa on October 27, 1782, and died in Nice on May 27, 1840. Slender, long-haired, with astonishingly agile hands and a laugh his contemporaries called convulsive, he did more than play the violin: he turned every concert into a spectacle. Audiences could no longer tell where genius ended and mystery began.

His technique was unknown to listeners of the day: harmonics, left-hand pizzicato, double stops, enormous leaps up the fingerboard, and altered tunings (*scordatura*). A bronze cast of his right hand shows a small palm with relatively long fingers. A physical advantage that, combined with practice, fed the rumor that his talent came from the devil.

TIMELINE

1743 — The luthier Guarneri del Gesù builds the violin Paganini would call “Il Cannone” (the Cannon) for its powerful sound.

1782 — Born in Genoa, Italy.

1827 — Pope Leo XII awards him the Order of the Golden Spur. The “devil’s violinist,” decorated by the Pope.

1828 — His Vienna concerts launch his international career for good.

1840 — Dies in Nice. The legend does not die with him: the rumors only grow more persistent.

Paganini was a real virtuoso. The myth began when audiences could not explain what they were hearing.



ACT I · THE LEGEND

What the Audience Said

In the 19th century nobody had seen a violinist like this. And when you cannot understand something, you explain it with magic. These are the three stories repeated most often:

1

THE PACT WITH THE DEVIL

It was said that Paganini, like Faust, had sold his soul in exchange for impossible powers. The effects he drew from the violin seemed to go beyond the human.

2

THE CUT BOW HAIRS

THE ONE WE INVESTIGATED

Before walking on stage, Paganini supposedly weakened or cut several bow hairs so they would come loose mid-piece and whip through the air around his face and the violin.

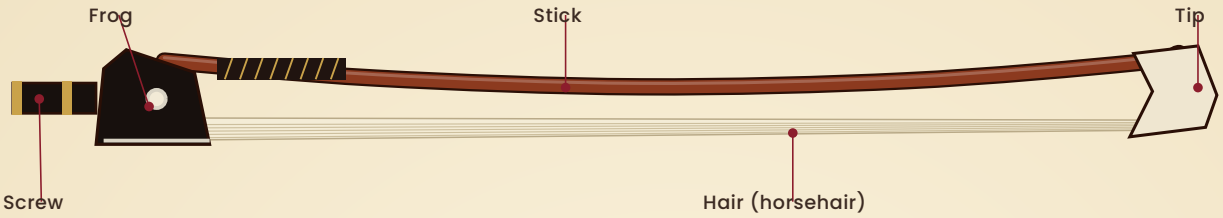
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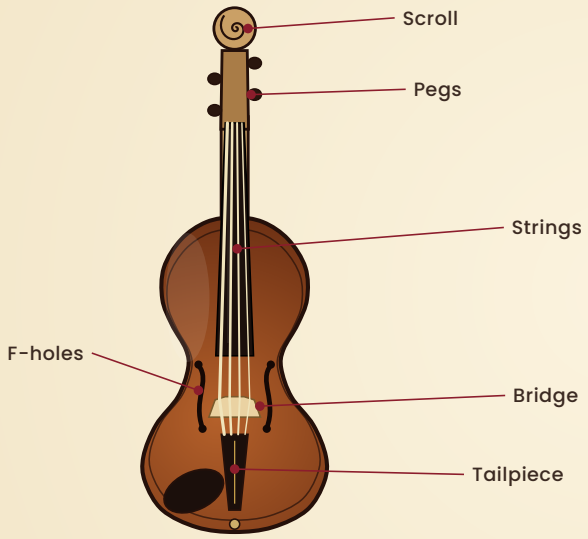
THE STRINGS THAT SNAPPED

One after another, the violin strings broke in the middle of a concert until only the lowest one remained. And he kept playing as if nothing had happened.

What Breaks… and What Doesn’t

To judge the myth you need to know what is what. The bow carries a ribbon of horsehair (about 150 to 200 hairs, depending on the bow) stretched between the tip and the frog. Rosin makes the hairs grip the string; without it, the violin barely makes a sound.



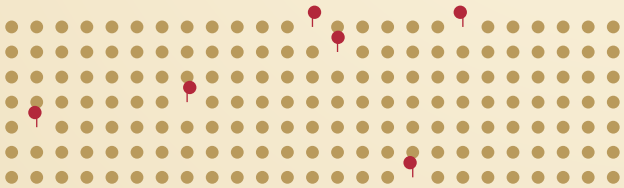


LOOSE HAIRS

It happens to every violinist who plays with energy: one hair comes loose, then another… and they get trimmed. A curtain of broken hairs would be a different story.

GUT STRINGS

In Paganini’s day strings were made of gut, far more fragile than today’s. The E, the thinnest and tightest, is the first to snap.



A bow with about 175 hairs. In red, 6 loose ones: under 4%. Approximate illustration.

Would you notice? A few loose hairs barely change how the bow sounds. For them to whip through the air you would need far more than a couple of strands.

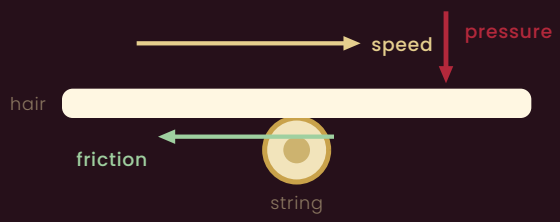
The Physics of a Brutal Attack

When the bow meets the string it does not glide smoothly: the string “sticks” to the hairs, stretches, snaps free and sticks again, thousands of times per second. That back-and-forth draws a sawtooth wave. More pressure and more speed mean more energy… and more wear on hair and strings.

THE STRING “STICKS AND SLIPS”



THE FORCES AT WORK



HOW PLAUSIBLE IS EACH STORY?



Partial verdict: a few hairs coming loose when you play with energy is normal. A planned trick, concert after concert, does not appear documented in the sources we consulted. What appears again and again are the **strings**.

What the Historians Say

1

MAIKO KAWABATA

Musicologist · Paganini: The "Demonic" Virtuoso (2013)

Shows that the "demonic" Paganini had many faces (Faust, magician, Satan, Gothic-novel libertine), related but not identical. Even watching him "lash" the violin with his bow fed the villain image. Her conclusion: the mythology ended up outgrowing the man.

2

ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA

Reference work

Describes him as a flamboyant showman who used trick effects, such as severing one or two strings and continuing on the rest.

3

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Whittall collection on Paganini

Prints and caricatures of his day show him with loose or dangling violin strings and a contorted body. The press was split between calling him a "modern Orpheus" and portraying him as a grotesque figure; some of the hostility may have come from his expensive tickets.

4

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Print collection

Holds a print showing him playing with three strings dangling from the scroll, illustrating a piece performed on the G string alone.

5

CRITICAL EDITION OF THE MOSES FANTASY

Keiser Southern Music · ed. S. Shipps

Presents breaking the three upper strings mid-concert and finishing on the G string as one of his most famous tricks. Fun fact: no manuscript of this work exists; Paganini did not want another virtuoso to steal it.

What we did not find: in the sources we reviewed, the documented trick always involves **strings**, not bow hairs.

Myth vs. Reality

THE MOST FAMOUS VERSION, STRING BY STRING



All four strings



The E snaps



The A snaps



Only the G is left

MYTH	**He made a pact with the devil**	It was born of astonishment: nobody had heard a technique like this, and Gothic culture did the rest. For Kawabata, the legend ended up outgrowing the man.
NO EVIDENCE	**He cut his bow hairs on purpose**	It does not appear supported in the sources we consulted. A few hairs coming loose when you play hard is normal; a planned trick is not documented.
DOCUMENTED	**He broke strings and kept playing on the rest**	Reference works describe it as a showman's device. There are accident versions and trick versions; both are plausible.
TRUE	**He played whole pieces on the G string**	The Moses Fantasy (on Rossini) is written for a single string, the G, tuned higher than normal.
TRUE	**He had extraordinary hands**	A bronze cast shows a small palm and long fingers. A physical advantage plus years of practice; not magic.

With tricks or without them, what was truly extraordinary was his technique.

EPILOGUE

The Real Secret

Paganini's secret was not in the bow hairs or in the devil: it was in understanding the audience. He mastered technique and stagecraft alike. He knew what people wanted to see and gave it to them, a blend of talent, study and theater that made him a rock star of the 19th century.

WHAT WE CAN SAY FOR SURE

- Paganini was a real virtuoso, with a technique and stage devices never seen before.
- Broken strings appear again and again as part of his show, although it is debated which breaks were accidents.
- The version of bow hairs cut on purpose does not appear supported in the sources we consulted. **Our hypothesis:** the legend blends two images, the strings dangling in period prints and the hairs that come loose when you play with force.

Which other violin myth should we put to the test?

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