

# *The Violin Conspiracy*

by Brendan Slocumb



*All Pueblo  
Reads  
2025*

*Thank you  
sponsors!*



All-Phase Environmental Consultants, Inc. Bank of the San Juans City of Pueblo Ken & Gala White Family Foundation  
Pueblo Community College Pueblo Community College Foundation Bechtel Pueblo Team Stifel Benefits Broker  
Collins Cole Winn Ulmer Ent Credit Union Fieldman Financial Services, LLC Goal High School Pueblo Community Health Center  
Adams Electric Inc. IBEW Local 12 InBank Pueblo Kiwanis Foundation Pueblo Toyota  
Southern Colorado Clinic - Pediatrics SunWest Credit Union Royal Electrical Services, Inc.

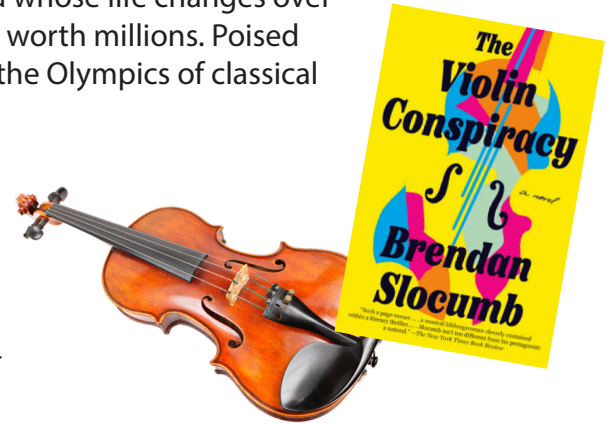
# A Summary of *The Violin Conspiracy*

## Overview

Ray McMillian is a gifted young Black violinist from rural North Carolina whose life changes overnight when he learns his battered family fiddle is, in fact, a Stradivarius worth millions. Poised to compete in the prestigious Tchaikovsky Competition—often called the Olympics of classical music—Ray’s hopes skyrocket until the instrument is stolen.

## Ray’s Background and Motivations

Raised by a hardworking single mother and guided by his grandmother’s unwavering belief, Ray practices in barns and church basements, often at odds with adults who dismiss his ambition as noise. His journey illustrates the tension between parental expectations, economic hardship, and the drive to transcend limitations through talent.



## Discovering the Stradivarius

When Ray uncovers a decades-old appraisal tucked inside his fiddle’s case, he realizes that the heirloom violin is one of the few surviving Stradivari instruments. This revelation shifts his identity overnight—from unknown student to international sensation—spotlighting how status and opportunity often hinge on access to elite resources.

## Confronting Racism and Elitism

As Ray’s star rises, he encounters microaggressions and outright exclusion within the world of classical music: whispered doubts about his skill, token invitations to masterclasses, and the assumption that a Black musician cannot truly “deserve” a Stradivarius. These experiences offer a springboard for classroom discussions on systemic bias and representation in the arts.

## The Theft and the Quest

On the eve of the competition, Ray wakes to find his violin gone and a ransom note demanding five million dollars. Stripped of his most precious tool, he embarks on a desperate search through back alleys, auction houses, and digital black markets. This quest becomes a metaphor for reclaiming both instrument and self-worth, inviting students to explore themes of loss, identity, and moral courage.

## Climax and Self-Realization

Amid high-stakes negotiations and personal risk, Ray ultimately learns that the essence of his musicianship isn’t bound to any single object. Whether he competes with the Stradivarius or another instrument, his skill, passion, and authenticity remain intact. This resolution opens rich territory for reflection on intrinsic versus extrinsic validation in talent and success.

## Classroom Connections

Teachers can leverage Ray’s story to spark cross-curricular projects:

History: Trace African American contributions to classical music and the impact of segregation on the arts.

English: Analyze Slocumb’s narrative voice and use of symbolism in writing.

Social Studies: Debate the ethics of cultural property, inheritance, and restitution.

Music: Compare performance techniques on period instruments versus modern violins.

By framing Ray’s triumph as both individual and collective, educators can guide students to consider how personal dreams intersect with broader social forces—and how resilience, community support, and self-belief shape the path to greatness.

# About the Author: Brendan Slocumb

Brendan Slocumb grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and holds a degree in music education (violin and viola) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His own journey—from a nine-year-old in a public school orchestra to award-winning educator and performer—mirrors the power of music to reshape a young person's path.

Over the past two decades, Brendan has taught general music, orchestra, and guitar in both public and private schools, guiding students from kindergarten through grade twelve. His ensembles and individual students frequently earned spots in district and regional orchestras. In 2005, he was named Teacher of the Year at Robert E. Lee High School and later recognized as a Nobel Teacher of Distinction and a member of the Who's Who Among America's Teachers.



As an educational consultant for the Kennedy Center, Brendan collaborates on programs that bring expert-level music training into classrooms nationwide. He maintains a private studio teaching violin, guitar, and piano, and he believes every student can learn to connect, communicate, and find community through music. An accomplished performer, Brendan has appeared with the Washington Metropolitan Symphony, McLean Symphony, Prince George's Philharmonic, and Alexandria Symphony. He's served as concertmaster for the NOVA-Annan-dale Symphony Orchestra and regularly performs chamber music with the Alexandria Chamber Music Society. The Violin Conspiracy (2022) is Brendan Slocumb's debut novel. His story—rooted in resilience, mentorship, and the belief that a single instrument can unlock opportunity—offers a compelling example for students of how passion and perseverance can transform both individual lives and entire communities.

## Other Books Published by Brendan Slocumb

- The Violin Conspiracy (2022)
- Symphony of Secrets (2023)
- The Dark Maestro (2025)

## Similar Reads

- *The Bridgetower Sonata: Sonata Mulattica* by Emmanuel Boundzéki Dongala
- *The Final Revival of Opal and Nev* by Dawnie Walton
- *The Ensemble* by Aja Gabel
- *Hell of a Book* by Jason Mott
- *The Weight* by Jeff Boyd

## Relevant Websites

**Brendan Slocumb author site:**

<https://www.brendanslocumb.com/>

**The Violin Conspiracy Spotify Music Playlist:**

<https://www.brendanslocumb.com/my-playlist/>

**The International Tchaikovsky Competition website:**

<https://tchaikovskycompetition.com/en/>

**Smithsonian Online Exhibit for Stradivarius Violins:**

<http://bit.ly/3A6yA6S>

**Classic FM Article: 25 Black Musicians Who Have Shaped the Classical Music World (some of the musicians and composers Ray mentioned in the book can be found here):** <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/black-musicians-pioneering-classical-music/>

**Indiana University's Archives of African American Music and Culture:**

<https://aaamc.indiana.edu/Collections>

**NPR Why is American Classical Music So White?**

**article:** <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2019/09/20/762514169/why-is-american-classical-music-so-white>

# Activity Prompts for *The Violin Conspiracy* Assignments

Listed are six student-facing prompts—one for each theme-based assignment. Each prompt lays out clear goals, required deliverables, length or format guidelines, and necessary criteria.

---

## **Artifact Narrative & Visual Collage: Family Legacy and Personal Identity**

### **\*All Pueblo Reads Contest\***

Choose an object—real or symbolic—that represents your own family legacy or personal identity. Write a narrative and create a collage to explore its story.

- Select one object with personal, cultural, or historical meaning.
- Write a 500-word first-person narrative explaining:
  - The object's origins in your family or community
  - How it shaped your sense of self
  - Parallels to Ray McMillian's connection to his violin
- Produce a visual collage (digital or physical) that includes:
  - Photographs or drawings of the object
  - Symbols or color schemes that reflect its significance
  - A caption quoting one line from *The Violin Conspiracy* that resonates with your narrative
- Present both components together in a single PDF or on poster board for in-class display.

## **Research & Infographic: Racial Bias and Access in Classical Music**

Investigate the historical and contemporary barriers that Black musicians face in the world of classical music. Then design an eye-catching infographic to teach your peers what you've learned.

- Identify at least five landmark events, figures, or court decisions that influenced access for Black classical musicians.
- Gather relevant statistics (e.g., representation in major orchestras over time).
- Cite a minimum of four credible sources (books, scholarly articles, reputable websites).
- Your infographic must include:
  - A vertical or horizontal timeline
  - Icons or images illustrating each event or figure
  - A short (300–400 word) narrative summary explaining why these barriers emerged and how they have evolved.
- Save and submit your work as a PDF or high-res image file.

## **Comparative Profile Presentation: Resilience and Perseverance**

Research a real-life musician or public figure who overcame obstacles similar to Ray's. Compare their journey in a mini "TED Talk."

- Select one individual (e.g., Itzhak Perlman, Maya Angelou, Wynton Marsalis).
- Write a 600-word comparative essay that addresses:
  - The challenges each person faced
  - Strategies they used to persist
  - How their story echoes Ray's quest to reclaim his violin
- Develop a 5-slide slide deck (PowerPoint, Google Slides, or similar) summarizing your findings.
- Deliver a 5-minute in-class presentation, using your slides as visual support.
- Include a one-page handout with three "takeaway" quotes or lessons for your classmates.

## **Mock Town Hall Debate: Justice, Ownership, and Restitution**

Role-play a town hall debate on who has legal and moral claim to Ray's Stradivarius. Work in stakeholder teams and support your arguments with evidence.

- Form four teams: Ray's family, the Marks family, museum curators, and legal experts.
- Research each group's perspective using at least three primary or secondary sources.
- Prepare:
  - A 2-minute opening statement
  - Two pieces of legal or historical evidence to support your claim
  - One anticipated counterargument and your rebuttal
- Conduct the debate (one speaker per team in rotation) under teacher moderation.
- Afterward, write a 300-word reflective journal entry describing which arguments you found most compelling and why.

## **Role-Play Interview & Reflection: Mentorship and Intergenerational Bonds**

Explore the mentor-mentee relationship in the novel by conducting a scripted interview between Ray and his guide.

- Pair up and assign roles: Ray McMillian and Grandma Nora (or Maestro Szpilman).
- Co-write a list of ten open-ended questions that probe topics such as:
  - Expectations and emotional stakes of performing
  - Advice on handling prejudice and pressure
  - Hopes for the future of music and legacy
- Perform and record a 5-minute interview (audio or video).
- Transcribe a 300-word excerpt of the most revealing exchange.
- Conclude with a 300-word reflection on how mentoring relationships affect artistic growth.

## **Creative Composition & Artist Statement: Art as Resistance and Cultural Expression**

Channel Ray's use of music as protest by producing an original creative work and explaining its symbolism.

- Choose a medium: poem, short musical piece (audio file), spoken-word recording, or visual art.
- Your work must address a social injustice or form of resistance, inspired by themes in *The Violin Conspiracy*.
- Submit the creative piece along with a one-page artist statement that covers:
  - Your chosen issue and its connection to the novel
  - The symbols, techniques, or motifs you employed
  - How your work expresses resilience or cultural pride
- If you create audio or video, post it to the class's shared drive and provide the link in your write-up.



# Glossary of Themes

**Music:** Vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion. Also, music can be defined as the art or science of composing and performing the written or printed signs representing vocal or instrumental sound.

**Family:** A group of people related to one another by blood or marriage or all the descendants of a common ancestor.

**Racism:** Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism by an individual, community, or institution against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

**Perseverance:** Persistence in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success.

# Glossary of Terms

**Concertmaster:** The first chair violinist of an orchestra is a vital musical leader with wide ranging responsibilities, from tuning the orchestra, to working on bowings in the string section, to working closely with the conductor. Also referred to as the first chair violin, first violinist, and concertmistress.

**Concerto:** A piece of instrumental music that contrasts a solo instrument or a small group of solo instruments with the main body of the orchestra.

**Double stops/triple stops:** The technique of playing two or three notes simultaneously on a stringed instrument such as a violin, a viola, a cello, or a double bass.

**Harmonics:** Violin techniques that involve producing high-pitched, airy overtone notes by lightly touching specific points on a violin string using the left-hand fingers while bowing with the right hand. By not pushing the string down to the fingerboard, the string actually vibrates on both sides of the finger.

**Interval:** In music an interval is the distance in pitch between two notes, counted from the lower note upwards, with the lower note as the first of the interval. The violin, for example, is tuned in intervals of a fifth, G to D, D to A and A to E, the double bass in fourths, from E to A, A to D and D to G.

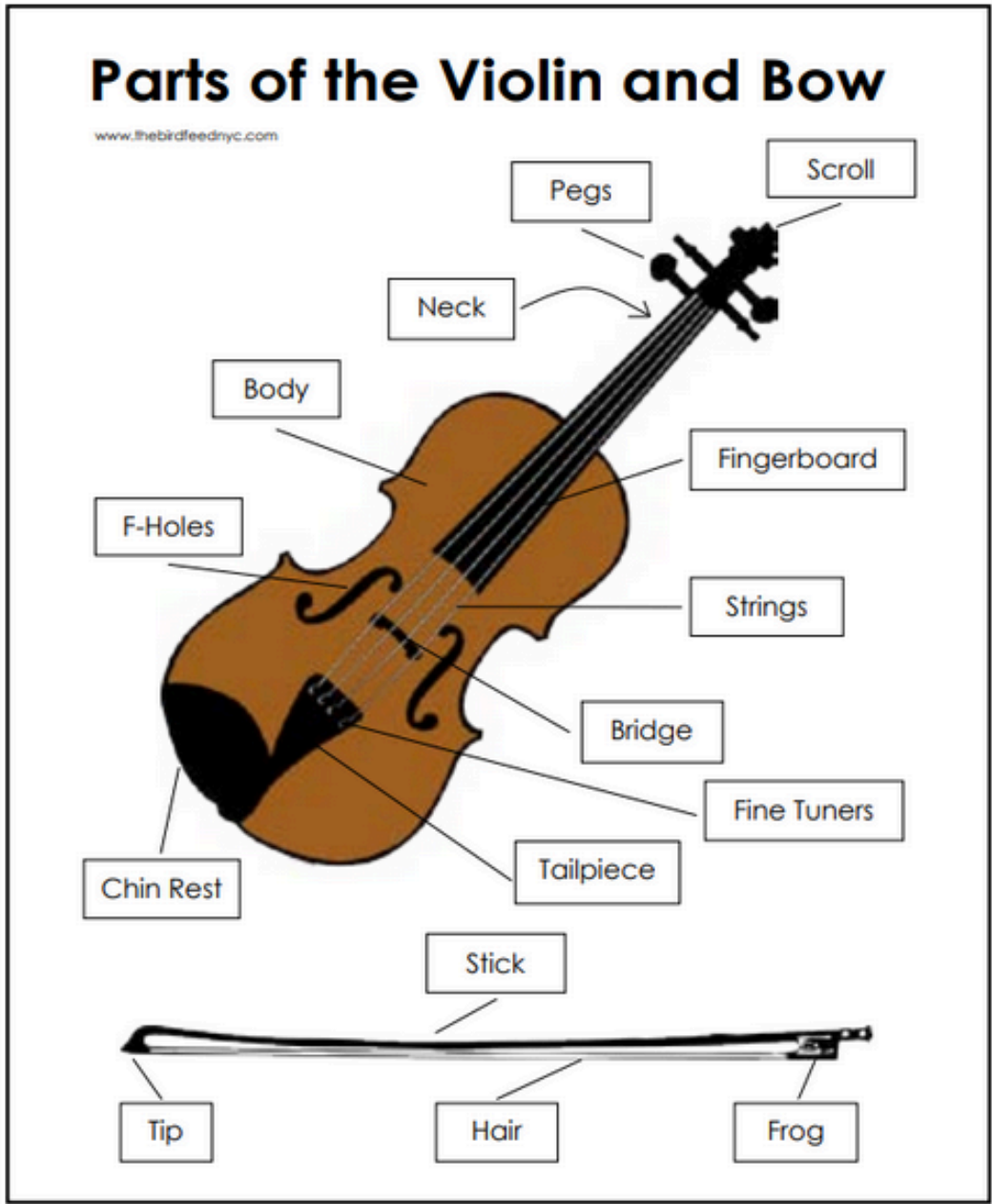
**Pizzicato:** Pizzicato (Italian: plucked) is a direction to performers on string instruments to pluck the strings. Positions on violin: Specific locations where a violinist's hand should hover in order to sound accurate pitches. Most violin music can be played using three positions: first position, second position, and third position. For example, third position is when the first finger is placed where the third finger would be in first position.

**Rosin:** A translucent amber-colored to almost black brittle friable resin that is obtained from the oleoresin or dead-wood of pine trees. Rosin is applied to the bow in order to grip and create friction between the instrument strings.

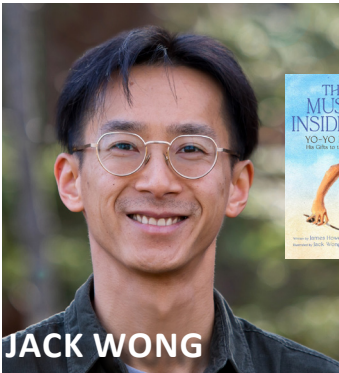
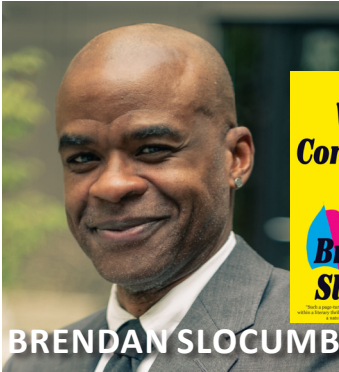
**Sonata:** A composition for an instrumental soloist, often with piano accompaniment, typically in several movements.

**Symphony:** An elaborate instrumental composition in three or more movements, similar in form to a sonata but written for an orchestra and usually of far grander proportions and more varied elements.

**Vibrato:** Vibrato is a slight fluctuation in pitch that's used to create a warmth or richness of tone. On the violin, it is a left-hand technique; the effect is produced by rocking the finger from the wrist or arm.



## 2025 ALL PUEBLO READS CONTEST



[www.pueblolibrary.org/allpuebloreads](http://www.pueblolibrary.org/allpuebloreads)



### EXPRESS YOURSELF

Grades 9 - Adults

Deadline: October 24, 2025

#### CONTEST RULES

1. Only one entry per person is accepted.
2. Participants must be Pueblo County residents.
3. Choose an object—real or symbolic—that represents your own family legacy or personal identity. Write a narrative and create a collage to explore its story.
4. All entries must have the entry form attached to the top of your entry.

#### Submit entries to any library location or mail to:

Rawlings Library  
Attn: Community Relations  
100 E. Abriendo Ave., Pueblo, CO 81004  
Questions? Call (719) 562-5600

#### AWARDS CEREMONY

Three winners will be selected from each grade and will receive their awards by mail. Each winner will receive a certificate of achievement, a gift certificate to Books Again used bookstore, and a custom PCCLD journal and pencil.

#### QUESTIONS

Call (719) 553-0202 or email [amanda.dalie@pueblolibrary.org](mailto:amanda.dalie@pueblolibrary.org)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher email \_\_\_\_\_

Home address \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone number \_\_\_\_\_





