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The Gospel of New Music, According to the Violinist Midori

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By Meline Toumani

April 23, 2006

Correction Appended

SAN FRANCISCO - PEOPLE who don't listen to classical music tend to share that fact as an apology, as if they were confessing that they didn't floss regularly or didn't send Christmas cards last year. But among classical music enthusiasts, there is an equally predictable yet more defiant tendency: a distaste for contemporary music and a sense of irritation, not remorse, that anyone should feel pressure to like it.

So it was surprising to see 150 people gathered in a hall here last weekend, at 10 a.m. on Saturday, to spend an entire day exploring two questions: "How did it happen?" and "Why did it happen?"

The "it" was the 20th-century trend toward music that was atonal, rhythmically unpredictable, melodically hard to remember and altogether strange sounding: music that was not "classical" in a Mozartean or Beethovenian sense yet was still, broadly speaking, part of the classical music world.

The event was a symposium on contemporary music, initiated and directed by the violinist Midori and presented by San Francisco Performances. Midori is touring seven American cities this month with a program of works written from 1979 to 2000, the years she considers the blossoming of her musical consciousness, and the symposium was designed as a primer for the concert she will be giving here at the Herbst Theater on Thursday (after performing the program at Zankel Hall in New York on Tuesday).

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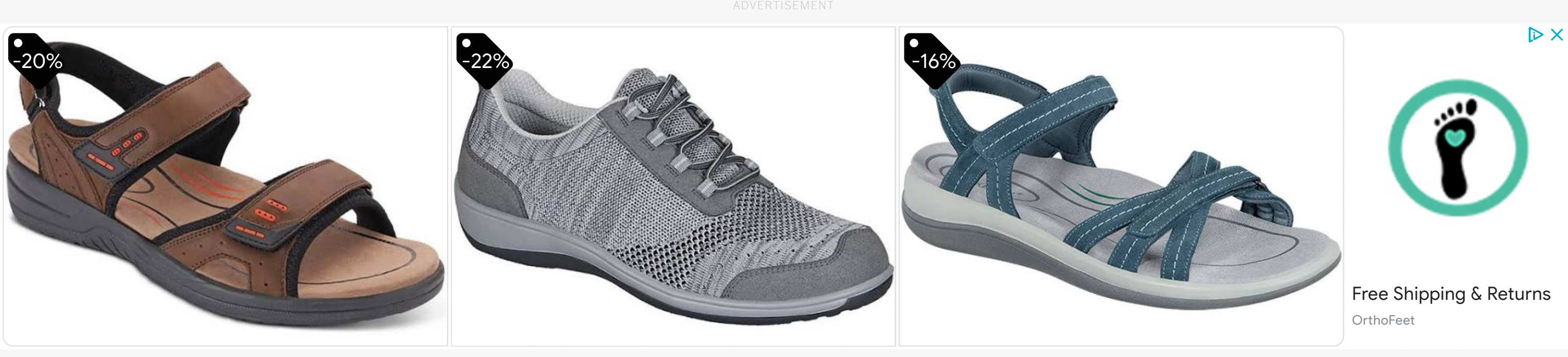

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Ticket buyers were encouraged to sign up for a sort of new-music boot camp -- a day filled with lectures, discussions, demonstrations and master classes -- so that when they arrive at the concert, they will have some idea what to make of the music of Judith Weir, Isang Yun, Alexander Goehr, Gyorgy Kurtag and Witold Lutoslawski.

The symposium in San Francisco was part of a major effort to advocate for contemporary music, an undertaking through which Midori is redefining not only her own career but -- she hopes -- the entire modern listening experience and, ultimately, the quality of contemporary music itself.

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If this sounds ambitious, it may help to recall that this is the same Midori who in 1986, as a 14-year-old, became an instant legend when she took the stage at Tanglewood to perform Leonard Bernstein's "Serenade" under his baton and soldiered through two broken strings to a stunning finale.

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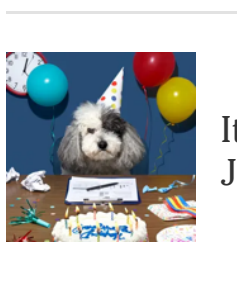
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But for all the celebrity that has surrounded her in the two decades since, her focus as a mature musician has been not on promoting herself but on reaching out to others. At 20, she created Midori and Friends, a music education organization that has become a cornerstone of music instruction for students throughout New York City. More recently, she developed Partners in Performance, a concert network bringing world-class shows to small towns throughout the United States. And she has taught, dividing her time between the Manhattan School of Music and the University of Southern California.

This fall, she will settle full-time in Los Angeles to direct the university's new Midori Center for Community Engagement, a clearinghouse for musical outreach activities, ideas and training.

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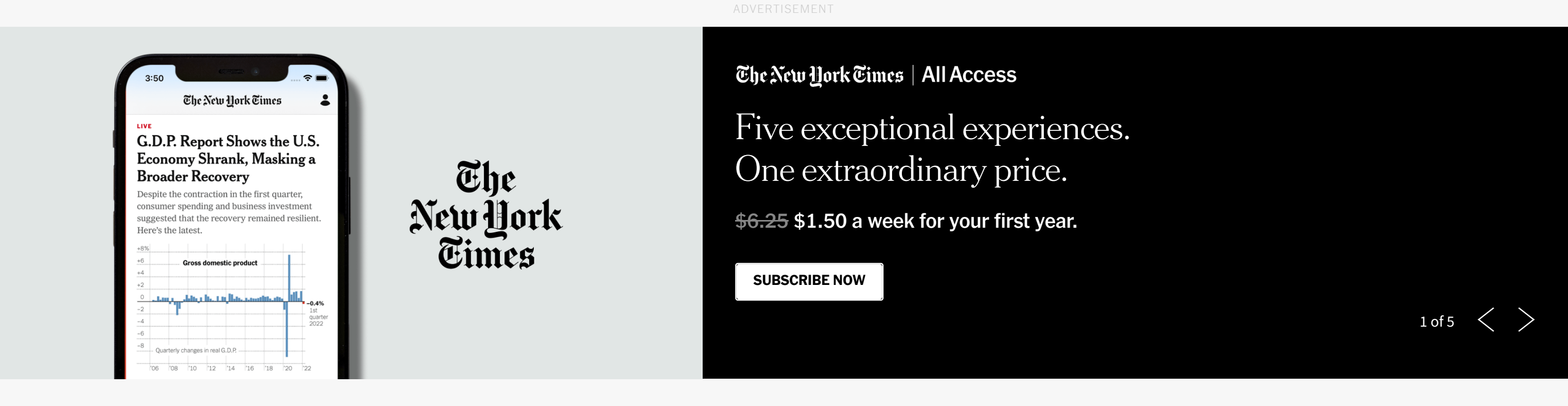
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Now, at 34, Midori has begun commissioning new music in a joint initiative with the violinist Vadim Repin. She has also decided that as a musician and teacher, she has to do more than simply perform contemporary music. She has to persuade everyone, from reluctant arts administrators to confused audience members, that there is a good reason to listen.

Recently, over breakfast at a Greek diner on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where she has conducted countless meetings and interviews over the years, Midori explained her passion.

"It excites me that I live in the same world as these composers," she said. "We're breathing the same air. The things I'm experiencing are things they're expressing through their music."

Midori requires her students at the Manhattan School to play contemporary compositions. "They've heard Bach and Beethoven so many times that even if they've never heard a particular piece before, they already know what it should sound like -- or they think they know. But when they play new music, they have to figure it out themselves. It teaches them to listen and to think about what they are trying to say. Everything is more deliberate."

But the first problem, she says, is getting arts organizations to take risks -- not just creative risks but financial ones.

"There are three questions a concert organizer will ask when you want to perform a contemporary music composition," she said. "First, how long is it? Second, does it have a tune? And third, what else can we put in the program to compensate?"

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Ruth Felt, the president of San Francisco Performances, appreciates the importance of new music, but she acknowledged that Midori's celebrity makes all the difference.

"Midori is a star," Ms. Felt said, "and that brings people in who would otherwise not take a chance on this music." Ms. Felt said that Midori offered her all-contemporary program with a 50 percent discount on her performing fee. "This music doesn't sell tickets," Ms. Felt said, "and she knows that. But she believes in it."

Midori first tried a large-scale new-music education program last year in Japan. She held an all-day symposium in Tokyo, mailed DVD's to ticket buyers in advance of the concert, provided scores for review and distributed tickets by lottery to 160 of the 600 people who applied to attend the day of lectures and demonstrations.

She has also filled her Web site, www.gotomidori.com, with essays about contemporary music, interviews with composers on her program and an offer to answer e-mails from curious listeners.

But in San Francisco, Midori has a secret weapon: Robert Greenberg, the music historian in residence of San Francisco Performances who is perhaps best known as the teacher behind the popular mail-order course "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music," available from the Teaching Company. Mr. Greenberg's manner onstage is a sort of cross between Crazy Eddie and your favorite college professor. He has a local fan club, which numbers close to 900 people, who gather for his Saturday Morning Talks about classical music, presented by San Francisco Performances.

But even for Mr. Greenberg, who usually lectures about more traditional fare, the symposium was an experiment. He began with a warning and a promise: "Strap yourselves in," he said from the stage. "When we leave this room today, we will be equipped, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, to deal with Midori's concert program."

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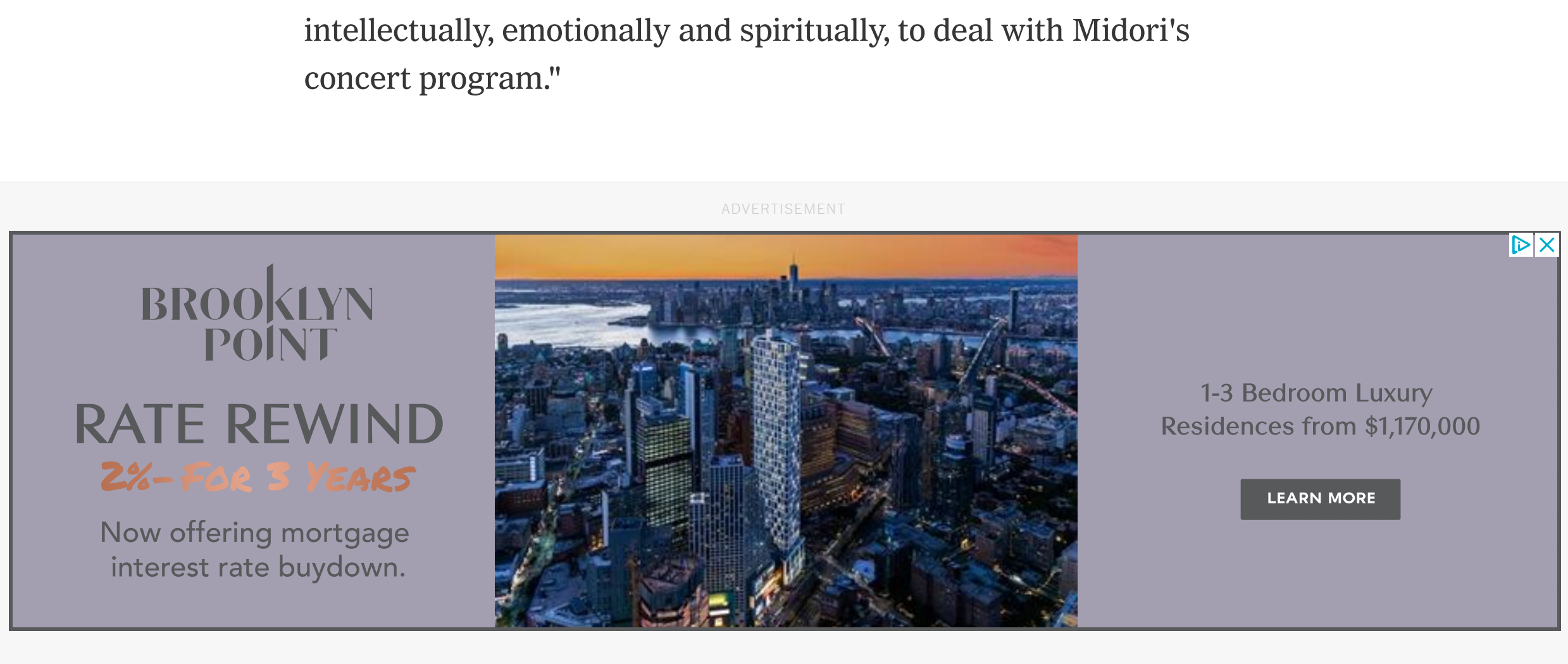

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Then he played a clip from Verdi's 1871 opera "Aida," followed by a segment from Peter Maxwell Davies's 1969 composition "Eight Songs for a Mad King."

"How did we get from a conception of the human voice as the ultimate vehicle for lyric beauty," he asked, "to one where vocal textures are used to reflect extreme psychotic states?"

As Mr. Greenberg summarizes it, composers from about 1550 to 1910 spoke a common music language. Music relied on consistent patterns of rest, departure and return: the progression from the root of the musical key to the dominant chord of that key, through any number of modulations and eventually back to the root. The ears of even the most casual Western listeners are attuned to this grammar, whether they know it or not.

But it was inevitable, Mr. Greenberg told the audience, that composers would eventually have to test altogether new languages. Hence Arnold Schoenberg's experiments with a structure in which each tone had equal importance, leading later composers to develop their own "self-referential languages," resulting in a kind of musical tower of Babel.

"It would be foolhardy to think that mere familiarity will make this music 'entertaining,' " Mr. Greenberg said. "But this is our music, the music of our time. Maybe we should even be a little proud."

Midori joined him onstage to play samples of the work as he described it. But unlike Mr. Greenberg's manner of connecting with students, validating their confusion with jokes about the strange sounds they were hearing, Midori's tremendous enthusiasm seemed at times a bit too air-tight to allow for the frustration of the hapless listener. Her most persuasive strategy, not surprisingly, was her exquisite rendering of the music itself.

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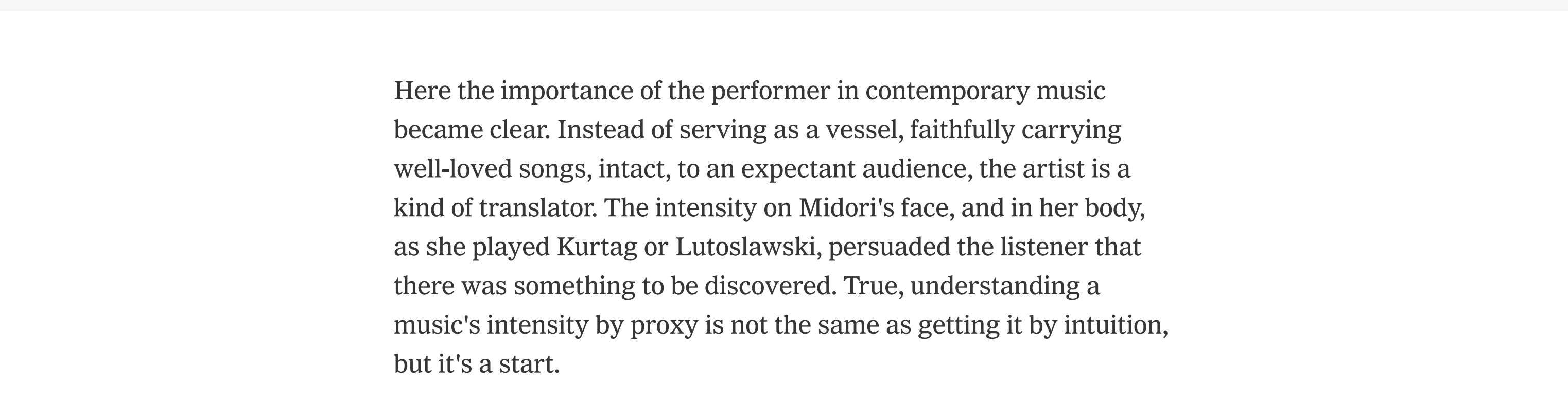
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Here the importance of the performer in contemporary music became clear. Instead of serving as a vessel, faithfully carrying well-loved songs, intact, to an expectant audience, the artist is a kind of translator. The intensity on Midori's face, and in her body, as she played Kurtag or Lutoslawski, persuaded the listener that there was something to be discovered. True, understanding a music's intensity by proxy is not the same as getting it by intuition, but it's a start.

MUSIC Correction: April 30, 2006, Sunday The photo accompanying an article last Sunday about the violinist Midori was published in error. It showed the violinist Midori Seiler, not Midori.

A version of this article appears in print on April 23, 2006, Section 2, Page 25 of the National edition with the headline: MUSIC; The Gospel of New Music, According to Midori. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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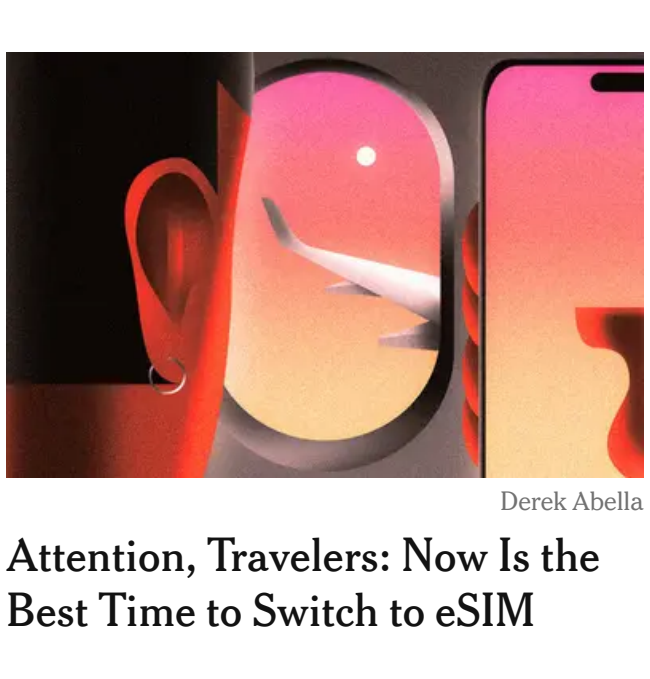
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