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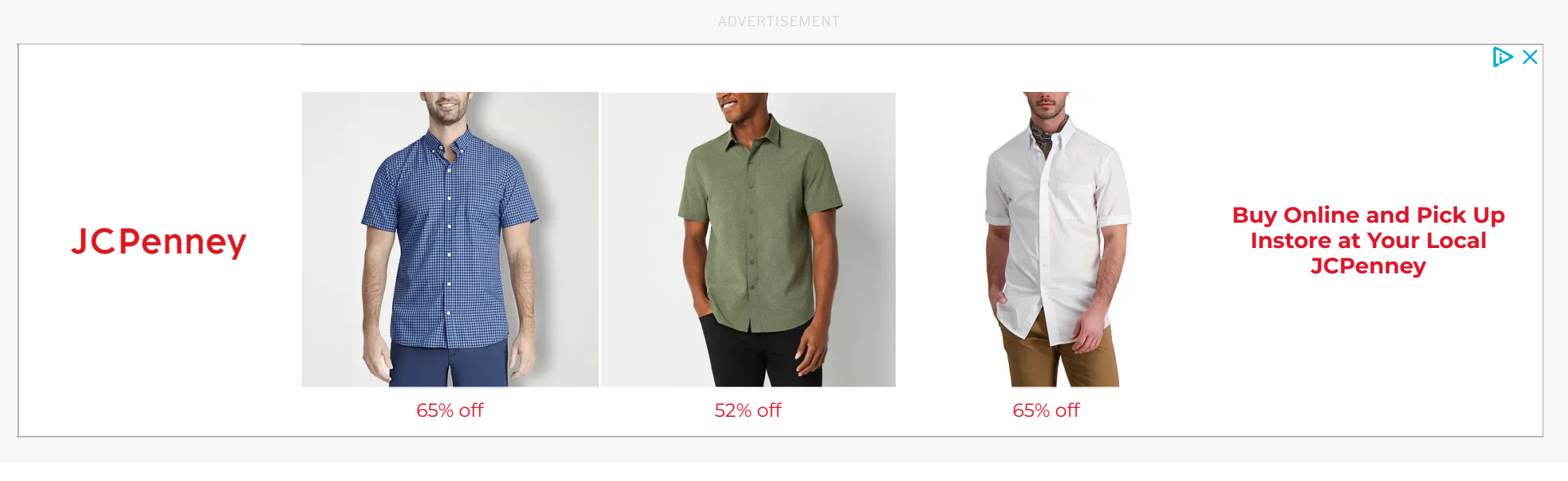

RECORDINGS VIEW; The Trouble With Classics: They Are Only Human

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By Richard Taruskin

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IT ISN'T FAIR. THE CLOSER WE get to old music, the more it seems to elude us. The more we strive to get it right, the more we seem to distort it. The very bent that impels us toward "authenticity" prevents our ever achieving it. As a new, very welcome, very disquieting recording of sacred music by the Renaissance composer Antoine Busnoys proves, the historical deck is simply stacked against us.

But that's the least of it. Our musical difficulties are but the prelude to a moral quagmire. A swift genealogy of musical morals will begin to suggest why. In the beginning, music was something you did (or that others did while you did something else), not something you gazed at or bought and sold. A lot of music (we call it "folk") is still like that. But some music has been objectified as "art." It happened in four stages.

Stage 1 was literacy, which in the West, for music, goes back only 1,000 years (1,200, tops -- scholars are still fighting this one out). In written form, music had some sort of physical reality independent of the people who made it up and repeated it. It could outlive those who remembered it. It could be silently reproduced and transmitted from composer to performer, thus distinguishing their roles.

Stage 2 was printing, which for Western music goes back almost exactly 500 years. Reproduction became easy and cheap. Music could take the form of books, for which there was a collectors' -- a gazers' and a traders' -- market. It could be all the more readily thought of as a thing (reified, as philosophers like to say). The durable music-thing could begin to seem more important than ephemeral music-makers. The idea of a classic was waiting to be born.

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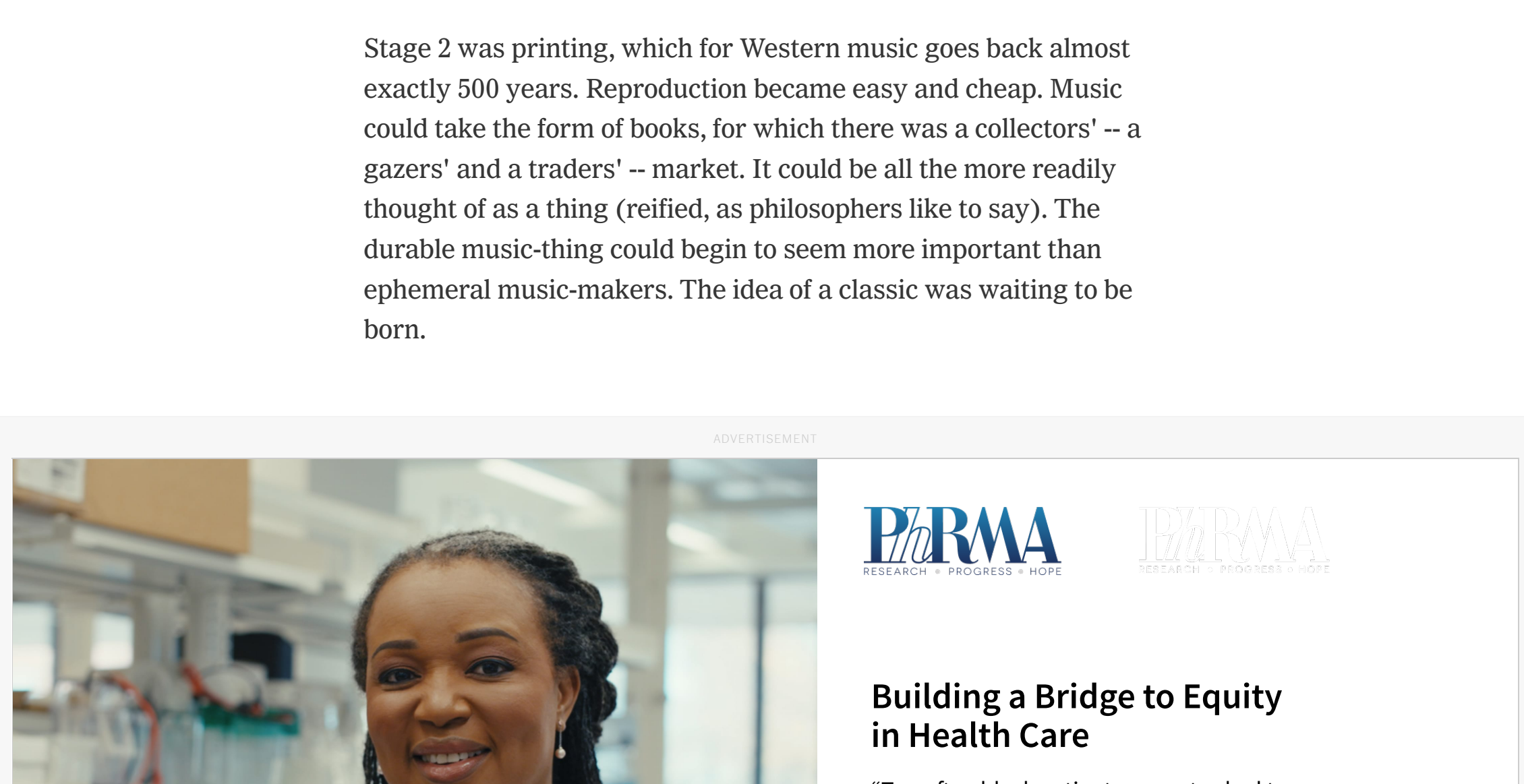

Its birth had to await Stage 3, which was a change not of means but of mind. With Romanticism came the idea of transcendent and autonomous art -- art that was primarily for gazing, not for doing, and for the ages, not for you or me. Makers of such art no longer functioned in real time, and were no longer thought of as inhabiting this world. They were not mere doers but creators, and became the object of the reverence that is an immortal's due.

The ultimate stage, of course, was recording. A whole new category of music-thing came into being, and with it came whole new categories of passive music-gazers who could consume music without any doers' skills whatever. Music could now be commercialized to an extent previously unimaginable, yet it could be more completely classicalized and sacralized than ever before, too.

The existence of permanent musical records made possible the idea of a definitive performance, fully tantamount to the work performed. Such a performance (we are persuaded) fully reifies the work, placing it tangibly in our hands in exchange for money. It achieves its aura -- its power of persuasion -- by claiming a total grasp of the creator's intentions and a total submission to the creator's will. Selflessness becomes the ultimate selling point. And that's what "authenticity" was all about.

But such a view of art is very recent. There is a vast conceptual distance separating our current musical attitudes from those that reigned when much of the music we now perform was new. When it comes to music that is more than 500 years old, there is virtually no congruence at all between our performing and listening habits, products of half a millennium of reification, and those of the era that produced the music.

SO WHAT? CRITICALLY speaking, what is inevitable is irrelevant. In itself, anachronism need never be a vice. Old music, whatever its creators' intentions or its original status as "art," richly rewards the modern gaze. What does it matter if, say, a piece of ancient service music is now approached "esthetically"?

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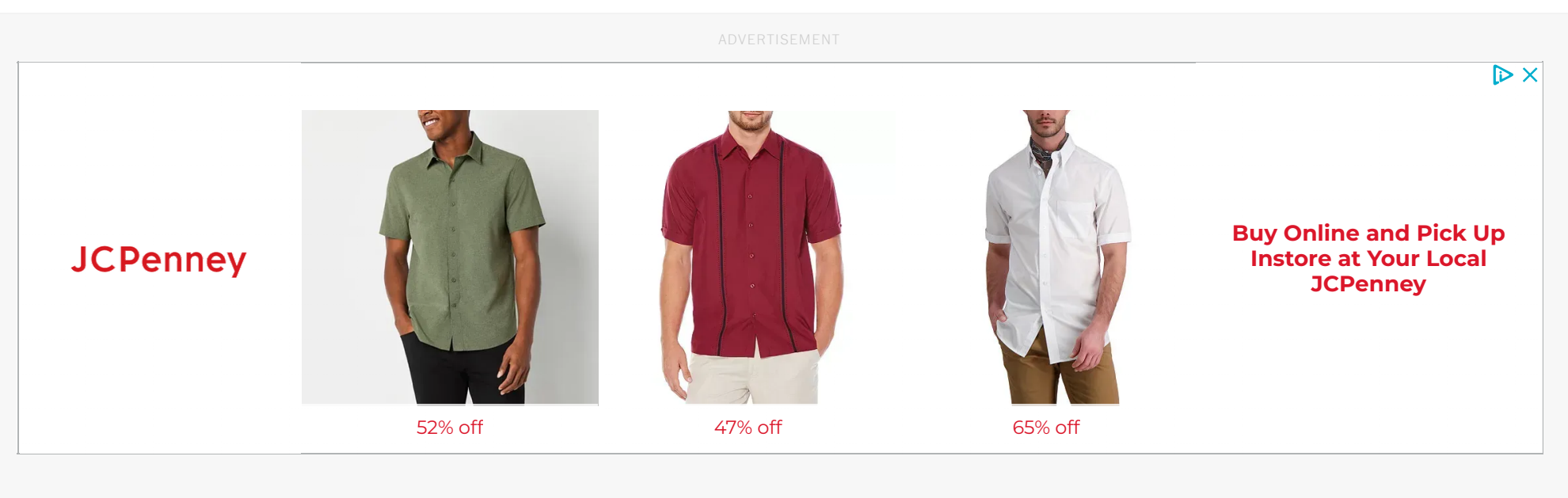

St. Augustine may have felt he had committed "a grievous sin" when he caught himself, in church, "finding the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys." But an objection made 1,600 years later by a mere secular music critic ought to have some musical, not just theological, justification. And it should point to something fixable.

Busnoys, who died just over 500 years ago, in 1492, was "first singer" at the court of Charles the Bold, the Duke of Burgundy. The recording that has prompted all these ruminations is a Dorian CD (DOR-90184) that offers a larger helping of his work (more than 72 minutes) than has ever before appeared on disk: four motets, three chansons and a complete Mass, all sung by Pomerium, a 13-voice mixed choir conducted by Alexander Blachly, who doubles, when needed, as priestly intoner.

They serve up the sounds Busnoys imagined most effectively. Tone and blend are crystal-clear. Intonation is exceptionally good. The most finnicky polyrhythms (including one so difficult that the composer saw fit to provide a simpler option) are rendered with precision. Diction is superb, and the Latin texts are given an attractively atmospheric Gallic accent. And the music? Suffice it to say that Andrew Porter, the distinguished former critic of The New Yorker, neither a specialist in the Renaissance repertory nor a special pleader for it, once pronounced a motet by Busnoys "one of the loveliest stretches of music ever written."

A Busnoys motet combines beautifully detailed textures with vaulting architectural designs. Two on this disk follow tradition by adopting old church melodies as their foundation tunes: the Easter anthem "Regina Coeli Laetare" ("Rejoice O Queen of Heaven") and the Easter sequence "Victimae Paschali Laudes" ("Praises to the Paschal Victim").

The other two are unique, playfully dazzling conceptions. "In Hydraulis" ("On the Water Organ") compares Busnoys's older contemporary Ockeghem with Pythagoras, the inventor of music. Its foundation is a three-note formula ("Ock-e-ghem") that is put through a gamut of Pythagorean speed- and pitch-proportions. "Anthoni Usque Limina," a prayer to Anthony the Abbot, the composer's patron saint, is built around a single periodically sustained tone ("Gonnnng! Gonnnng! Gonnnng!" as the Pomerium tenors delightfully vocalize it) representing a bell, one of St. Anthony's attributes.

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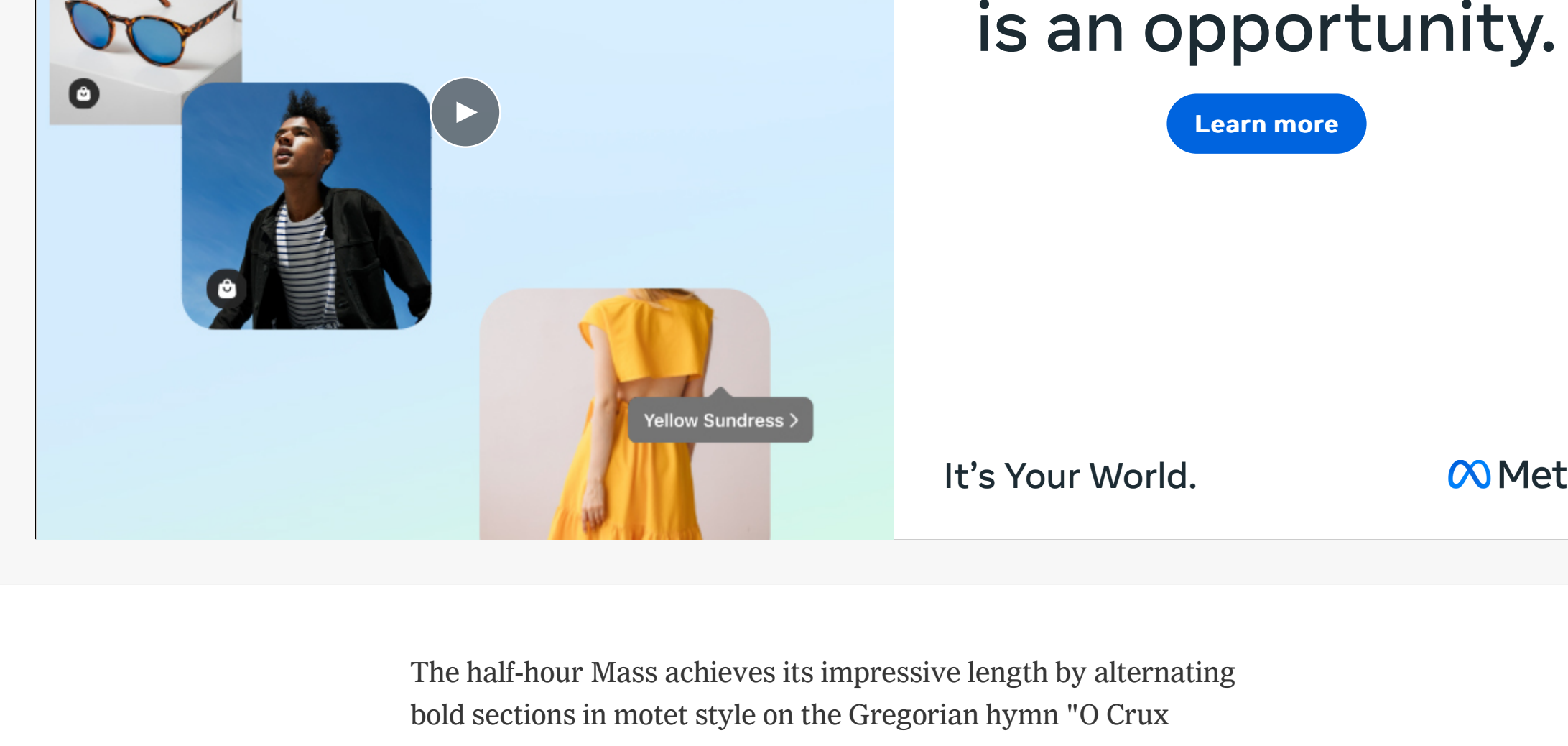

The half-hour Mass achieves its impressive length by alternating bold sections in motet style on the Gregorian hymn "O Crux Lignum Triumphale" ("Cross, O Wood Triumphant!") with limpid settings in the then new "imitative" (that is, fugal) style -- 16 settings in all, organized in five larger units corresponding to the five major parts of the standard Mass text. But here is where modern notions of music as thing come into direct collision with older concepts of music as act.

It is a cliche of music history to compare the Renaissance Mass setting, with its five "movements" and its status as top genre of its time, with the Classical symphony. The manuscript choirbooks that contain such works present the "movements" in direct sequence, like those of a symphony, and that is how they are usually performed today.

But Renaissance choirbooks are not at all like modern scores, really. They are service books that store music as economically as possible for active use. Each voice part is separately inscribed for the individual singer's convenience, rather than with all the parts space-wastingly aligned for a reader's perusal. Modern editions, both those published and those prepared by modern performers for concert use, "score" the works in accordance with modern practice, and make them look more like symphonies than ever.

So it is easy to forget that the "movements" of a Renaissance Mass, though grouped together in the service book, were actually spread out in performance over the whole length of the service. Only the first pair, the Kyrie and Gloria, were sung in immediate succession. The others were spaced as much as 15 or 20 minutes apart, with a great deal of liturgical activity, including other music, intervening.

For precisely this reason, the "movements" of a typical Renaissance Mass were deliberately made to resemble each other as much as possible. They all begin exactly alike, feature the same foundation melody and -- how unlike the movements of a symphony! -- follow similar or identical formal schemes. In this way the polyphonic Mass setting could adorn and integrate a festal occasion with periodic, inspiring returns to familiar, significant sounds. But take away the intervening liturgical activity, and the uplifting symbolic recurrences amount to mere redundancy. The music, even Busnoys's music, and even when sung as well as Pomerium sings it, inevitable palls.

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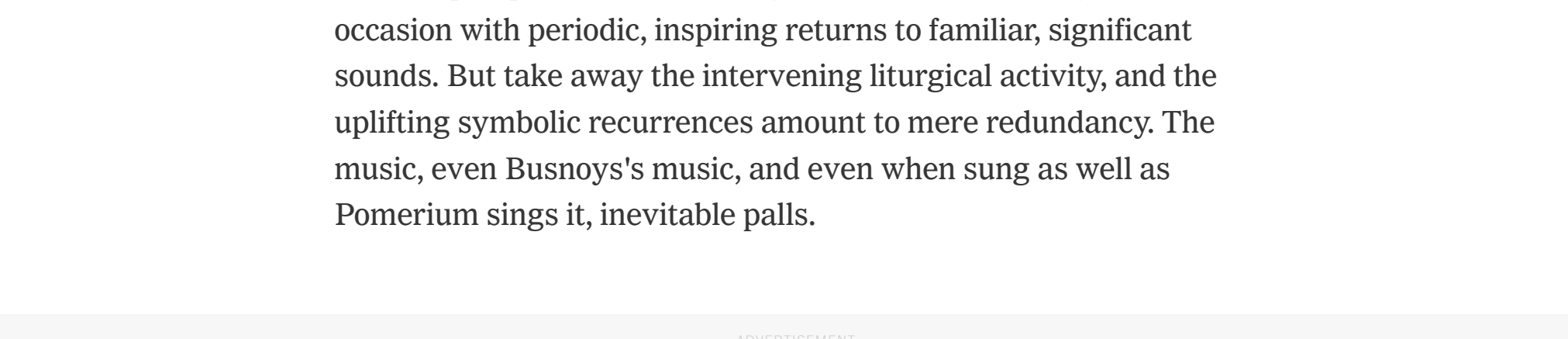

Pomerium would have presented Busnoys's "Missa O Crux Lignum Triumphale" in a manner at once more faithful to historical practice and more satisfying to the modern gaze if they had interspersed the four motets on their program between the five "movements" of the Mass, to stand in for the missing liturgical action. That way the Mass's built-in repetitions might have refreshed rather than wearied the ear. A scholar as well informed as Mr. Blachly is certainly familiar with the historical practice. And yet his loyalty, it seems, is to the Mass as an object, tangibly preserved in ink and vellum, rather than the Mass as an unfolding or an enactment. The anachronistic, reifying gaze has in this case prevented the display of Busnoys's work in the best light.

The same modern allegiance to text rather than act is responsible for the exaggerated restraint with which most early-music performers approach their task, a restraint that neither accords with what we know of historical practice nor necessarily serves the modern listener. Matters of taste and temperament may not be subject to dispute (as the saying goes); but this is not simply a matter of taste. It can be illustrated by a technical point.

As early-music aficionados know, medieval and Renaissance singers made many little pitch adjustments in the music they sang. They called the practice musica ficta (false music). We would now call it adding unwritten "accidentals," sharps or flats. Anyone who has studied the historical source material knows that actual Renaissance applications of musica ficta were far more pervasive and fanciful (even, some might be inclined to say, obtrusive) than most modern performers dare attempt. Modern performers, trained to feel a far greater, far more limiting sense of accountability to written notes than their predecessors felt, give performances that have far less variety in pitch content than contemporaneous performances had.

Yet as every scholar knows, "va rietas" was the highest of all virtues for Renaissance musical theorists. There are still those who think it is the spice of life. Yet by and large, our "classical" musicians are more comfortable with logical consistency than with capricious variety, and our performances are the poorer for it. When the practical sources of early music do show accidentals, moreover, modern performers feel not only licensed but bound to include them, however outlandish (and however dubious their pedigree). And so most modern performances of 15th-century music are basically gray with a few inexplicable splashes of shocking pink (like the weird chromaticism that comes out of nowhere about a minute before the end of Pomerium's reading of "Victimae Paschali").

There is something even more troubling, though, about modern reification and sacralization of texts. Pomerium's Busnoys CD poses the problem in the most pointed and pertinent, even painful, fashion. The sixth verse in the text of "Victimae Paschali," as set by Busnoys, reads as follows: "Credendum est magis soli Mariae veraci/ quam Judeorum turbe fallaci," which means, "More trust is to be put in honest Mary alone than in the lying crowd of Jews." Sensible to its nastiness, and aware of its bearing on a history of persecutions, Mr. Blachly writes: "This verse has long been abolished from the Catholic liturgy, but to excise it here would render the piece unperformable. Despite misgivings, we have left the text intact."

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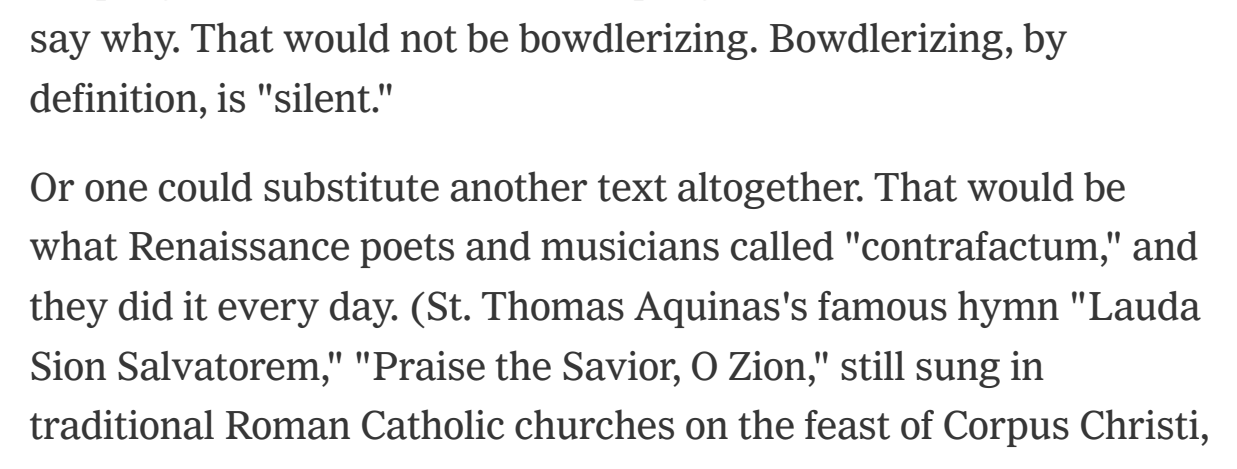

This is an equivocation. Excising the offensive verse from the text would certainly not have rendered Busnoys's motet unperformable. There are all kinds of things one can do. One can vocalize. One can bowdlerize. (How about "populorum" -- "of the people" -- instead of "Judeorum"?) One might even announce in the program notes that one has expurgated the text, show how, and say why. That would be no bowdlerizing. Bowdlerizing, by definition, is "silent."

Or one could substitute another text altogether. That would be what Renaissance poets and musicians called "contrafactum," and they did it every day. (St. Thomas Aquinas's famous hymn "Lauda Sion Salvatorem," "Praise the Savior, O Zion," still sung in traditional Roman Catholic churches on the feast of Corpus Christi, is a contrafactum of the hymn from which Busnoys took the cantus firmus for the very Mass Pomerium has recorded.) Mr. Blachly surely knows all about contrafactum. So why not do it? Because then the performance could not satisfy modern artistic and commercial criteria. It would no longer be "definitive."

Yet if the Catholic Church itself has seen fit to expurgate the "Victimae Paschali," removing from it the verse to which Mr. Blachly calls attention, what should prevent musicians from doing so? What artistic or scholarly scruple should outweigh doctrinal ones, to say nothing of mere humane concerns? Do we really need to be (in this case literally and somewhat farcically) more Catholic than the pope?

Those who say yes, I believe, have a misplaced sense of obligation, born of the platitudes that we take in with our modern educations. We are taught to think that masterpieces of art are more important than people, because people die but art endures. We are taught to think that an artist's primary relationship is not to other people but to something T. S. Eliot called "much more valuable," namely art itself and its history. Lincoln Kirstein, the venerable founder of the New York City Ballet, borrows his credo direct from St. Augustine: "I understand with complete certainty that what is subject to decay is inferior to that which is not, and without hesitation I placed that which cannot be harmed above that which can, and I saw that what remains constant is better than that which is changeable."

The trouble is that St. Augustine's subject was religion, and Mr. Kirstein's is only art. Religion gives its adherents a sense of defeating their mortality; putting art in that position is an idolatry that only defeats our humanity, leaving us defenseless against the inhumanity that may be embodied in the works we venerate. When I try to account for the persistence of anti-Semitism in our culture, even among the educated, I cannot shake the notion that one reason must be the reinforcement anti-Semitism receives in so much art that is a product of Christian doctrine, bearing traces of its darker as well as its radiant aspects. The list of musical "classics" that fall into this category is long, from Bach's "St. John Passion" to Stravinsky's "Cantata."

To regard such works as inviolable, not for their status as doctrine but merely for their status as art, is an antihumanitarian blasphemy. To sacralize works of art is to place them above the human plane -- and ourselves below. Artistic integrity is precious. It matters. But there are things that should matter more, even to artists.

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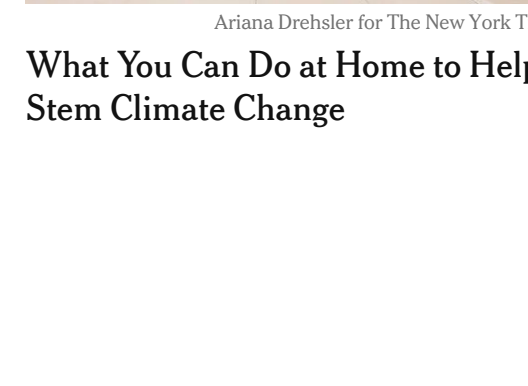

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