The Arts

Much belief but little questioning

CLASSICAL

LPO/Masur

Festival Hall

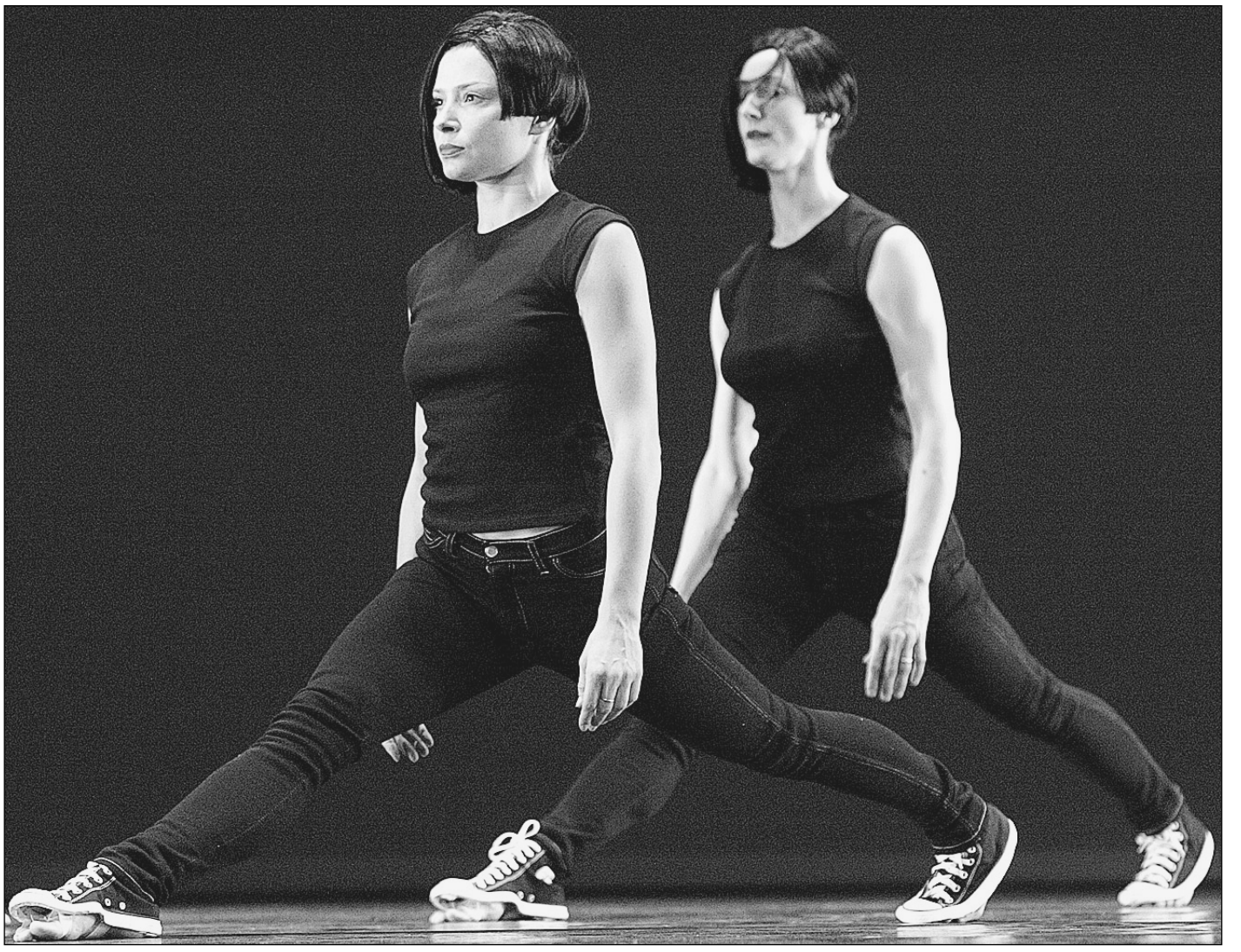
Stephen Pettitt

MANY will hold the view that to begin a new season with a three-concert cycle of Brahms, Brahms and more Brahms, as Kurt Masur is doing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, is to be bold. Just as many will think it rather tame. Brahms, after all, is standard repertoire, unlikely to alarm any of the LPO party faithful unless he's done with the radical, risky outlook of someone like Roger Norrington.

But alarming people — making them listen and think — is what concerts should be about. Masur caused no missed heartbeats among those who had heard the works before in his readings last night of the giant First and Second Symphonies, the one a dramatic-heroic piece with echoes of Beethoven's Eroica and Fifth Symphonies, the other renowned as Brahms's equivalent of that composer's Pastoral Symphony. And nobody should have expected him to, for he remains a conductor of the old Kappelmeister school, a traditionalist rather than a revolutionary, a believer and not a questioner.

Yet of their kind these readings were excellent. Each was given with a luxuriant, carefully blended (indeed over-blended) sound, with a real feeling for overall shape, and with a sense of absolute technical security rarely encountered in London's over-hastily prepared concerts. The First was also enhanced by some particularly wonderful solos, from the orchestra's new leader, Boris Garlitsky, and from principal oboe, horn and clarinet (chairs were swapped between symphonies, so naming names is hazardous). And conservative though he may be, Masur is not shy about making little helpful exaggerations here and there, as in the contrast of articulations, smooth versus jaunty, in the First Symphony's second movement. Even so, nothing he did served to remind us of Brahms's radicalism, nothing really made one sit up in sheer, goose-bumped wonder.

If Masur cannot find that in Brahms, maybe he should have found it in something else.



Alastair Muir

All change for Michael Clark: his new mixed bill, including Oh My Goddess, left, signalled less rudery and a lot more dancing

Not a dildo in sight

DANCE

Michael Clark

Sadler's Wells, EC1

Sarah Frater

IS Michael Clark going soft in his old age? Or if not soft exactly, a little less inclined to provoke for provocation's sake? It seems only yesterday that Clark equalled bare bottoms, dildos, what have you, even if he also equalled slight choreography. All change at Sadler's Wells last night where Clark's Oh My Goddess mixed bill was almost saturation dancing, with everyone modestly dressed and not a sex toy in sight.

"Shame," I hear you wail, and half of me wails with you, because rudery is a laugh, although for Clark less rudery now equals a renewed choreographic confidence, an enthusiasm and even joy for dancing. Clark's eight-strong troupe, plus the man himself, tore into the choreography, which was set to 1970s and 1980s favourites T Rex, The Human League, Sex Pistols, and prog-rock band CAN, plus Erik Satie and the very stylish PJ Harvey. (Setting classically inspired dance to rock music provides good contrast, but it's not sufficiently new to comment further.)

The mixed bill comprises six pieces, all appealing, two noteworthy. Can, Did to CAN's Oh Yeah saw the troupe in flesh-coloured underwear, a sort of teasing nakedness, against a vivid orange-lit backdrop. They moved speedily, with straight swooping arms, stable torsos and nimble feet, all nods to the Scottish dancing Clark excelled at as a child. Submishmash, to Submission by the Sex Pistols, was also good. Dressed in artful-dodger rags, checks and the occasional kilt, the troupe belted through the dancing, with their mood quickly rubbing off.

Also part of the bill was a solo for Clark wearing a Phil Oakley-esque black wig (asymmetrically cut, that is) as well as a group piece to the League's The Things That Dreams Are Made Of, with everyone wearing Phil wigs. Satie Studs, to Satie preludes and ogives, looked like a series of Greek friezes, while Oh My Goddess, to PJ Harvey, was more speedy dancing set to Polly Jean's caterwauling.

The Clark show, which opens this year's Dance Umbrella, was lively and upbeat, and without the anxiety of coasting talent you sometimes sense with Clark.

● *Until Saturday. Information: 020 7863 8000.*

From iconoclasm to mediocrity

EXHIBITION

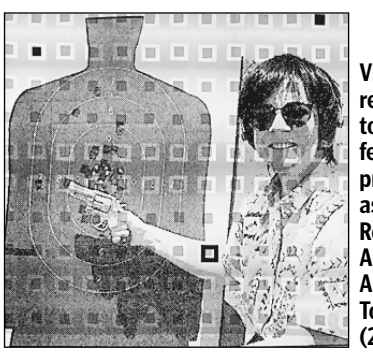
Sigmar Polke: History of Everything

Tate Modern, SE1

Nick Hackworth

AS Boy George once observed: "When you're famous they'll forgive you almost anything." High on the list of the acceptable sins of the celebrity is mediocrity. That is just as well for Sigmar Polke, for that is what this once-vigorous global art star has become.

Now 63, Polke first came to attention along with his fellow countryman Gerhard Richter. In the Sixties they fronted post-war Germany's Pop Art movement, Capitalist Realism, and played with the images and concepts of mass consumerism, though far more obliquely, subtly and humorously than their brash American counterparts. In the Seventies, Polke experimented with drugs, communal living, photography and film. In the Eighties, his strongest period, he returned to painting. The pop-art strategy of collage was his mainstay. Appropriated media images, odd materials, printed fabrics and passages of abstract and figurative painting often cohered in the same work, but sometimes formed the substance of pieces by themselves. He was the postmodern artist par excellence, shifting between artistic styles at will and playing with cultural symbols. Yet there was an odd aesthetic unity to the work and an underlying vibrancy.



Courtesy of Michael Werner

Visual references to America feature prominently as in I Don't Really Think About Anything Too Much (2002)

Since then, however, Polke has gone nowhere. The title of the exhibition, with its suggestion of a binding narrative or presiding intelligence, proves utterly disingenuous. Most of the generally massive works here, all done in the past six years, are, as before, visual collages, but they are curiously flat and empty. Visual references to America feature prominently, explicable since many of the works were made for this show's first stop at the Dallas Museum of Art. We see US Marines playing Risk, the world-domination board game, an image about the intelligence war against al Qaeda and lots of pictures of guns culled from Texan newspapers, including I Don't Really Think About Anything Too Much.

Polke has never been one for making direct political statements with his art and this selection of appropriated media images is not meant to be simple anti-Americanism. But there is little aesthetic joy in his handling of these and other images. Nor is his work now notable, as it once was, for its virtuoso passages of painting. Quickly read and easily forgotten, it has become almost indistinguishable from the mass culture from which it once stood out.

● *Until 4 January 2004. Information: 020 7887 8888.*