

Reviews

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So much for authenticity

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA ★

Royal Festival Hall

Rick Jones

UNREASONABLE authenticity never occurred to 19th-century musicians. Mahler transcribed movements from Bach's orchestral suites for full-scale Romantic orchestra with creamy trumpets and a concert grand in for the harpsichord, as we heard last night. Sadly, Sir Roger Norrington conducted for the earlier date, which did not suit the piece. Back desks were out with the front, firsts with the seconds and the fine rococo edges were blurred.

Michael Collins played Mozart's Clarinet Concerto on a sleek, modern copy of the basset horn, for which it was written in 1791. At least we can thank scholarly authenticists for discovering that. One would never wish to hear the work on anything else nowadays. It burbled in the bass like a velvet saxophone. Collins's astonishingly clear, blemishless line in the adagio hypnotised the hall, which was full partly because the Barbican is empty.

Mahler's Symphony No4 enjoyed a spirited outing. Christopher Warren-Green's solo violin danced manically and the wind in the scherzo blew with unabashed colour.



Soprano Emma Kirkby

Soprano Emma Kirkby engaged her beautiful, straight early-music tone for the finale's wisdom.

Some things were better once. Bring back the house manager's personal welcome. Orchestras now continue tuning up over the Orwellian recorded mobile phone announcement. That is authentic 1984.

● *Sir Roger Norrington conducts the Philharmonia in works by Berlioz, Beethoven, Dvorak and Sarasate with soloist Sarah Chang on Tuesday, 19 June at the Royal Festival Hall. Box office: 020 7960 4242.*



Kazuko Hohki: idiosyncratic and gently innovative as Japanese humour meets stiff upper lips

Lord, love a duck

MY HUSBAND IS A
SPACEMAN ★★

BAC, Battersea

Rachel Halliburton

THOSE who practise rhyming slang may have cynical comments to make about a woman who fancies a duck, but an altogether more subtle humour is on offer in this beguiling show. Kazuko Hohki, founder of Japanese band the Frank Chickens, uses her surreal love story to point up some of the absurd clichés dogging the way in which the British and the Japanese view each other.

Hohki's curious blend of storytelling and tongue-in-cheek techno-trickery has long been a favoured dish on the BAC's menu. Last year, she presented an eclectic, electronically-aided meditation on her mother's death; now, she takes the audience on a mysteriously magical tour through icons of stiff-upper-lip Britishness, ranging from Brief Encounter to a cup of tea.

A violinist sits to one side of the performing area, while on the other side a large screen displays filmed animated sequences. As a rocket takes off on the screen, accompanied by an upward glissando on the violin, Hohki steps centre-stage in her designer black suit and starts to tell a traditional Japanese tale about a man who falls in love with a crane (the bird, please note, not the construction-site mechanism).

The ensuing narrative is spiced up by Hohki's deliciously ironic humour. She herself poses as a naive Japanese office-girl who

dreams of an English lifestyle constituting endless cups of tea and discussions about Shakespeare. Shortly after, she develops unrequited desires for a duck and an English anthropologist who comes to her doorstep, and an encounter that starts with a questionnaire leads to a marriage proposal.

Hohki uses Japanese paper theatre techniques, and other faux-naïve animations for this understated performance interspersed with songs about love, clothes, and space creatures. Idiosyncratic, and gently innovative, this is a delightful trip to an imaginative universe where — among other attributes — one hour feels like a mere five minutes.

● *Until 1 July. Box office: 0207 223 2223.*

In need of Viagra

GILBERT AND GEORGE
NEW HORNY PICTURES ○
White Cube²

NICK HACKWORTH

ERECTILE dysfunction is the only plausible response to this particular set of horny pictures. Initially, however, it looks as if Gilbert and George, ever the dapper duo, will succeed in having their wicked way with you. The large, high, well-lit main gallery is filled with a blaze of red and yellow that emanates from massive works that stretch the length of the gallery and fill the far wall. Only the most frigid viewer would fail to be immediately impressed. But try as they might to seduce you with the size and colour of their pieces, G&G fail, principally because they ignore the most basic dictum of the glossy lifestyle rags, that it's not the size of what you've got that matters, but what you do with it.

As it is, G&G use one format throughout. In each work they superimpose a black grid on a bright yellow or red background, creating a series of boxes of

equal size. A black-and-white rent-boy advertisement sits in each box, sometimes framed by a thick, black circle. Each ad is in the same *sans serif* type. And, in every piece, the photographic images of G&G preside, their impassive faces staring out from a sea of corruption.

Each piece is based on the grouping of the ads around a common feature. Named, a huge piece more than three metres high and 15 metres long, displays 90 ads, each beginning with a name. I Am, the other massive work, contains ads that begin descriptively, such as "Blond", "Horny" or "From Hong Kong". Different groupings make up different pieces.

There is, then, an overwhelming sense of uniformity, both within each piece and through the body of work as a whole, and it is this uniformity that proves the biggest turn-off. Every piece makes the same point, induces the same throwaway feeling of the dark, sexual underbelly of the city being glibly exposed for our titillation.

Yet, of course, it is also from such repetition and uniformity that these pieces derive what power they have. In Named, every one of the 90 ads is numbered, and in their regimented order there is a far-off echo of the endless fields of crosses from the cemeteries of the First World War, a sense of shards of humanity trapped behind crass descriptions, be they Black Stallions from Peckham or Sergeants of the Grenadier Guards.

● *Until 15 July; White Cube², 48 Hoxton Square, N1; 020 7930 5373.*

Hardly a class act

ROMEO AND JULIET
English National Ballet

★

Royal Albert Hall

Luke Jennings

IN his second "in the round" production at the Albert Hall, Derek Deane has squeezed the balletic form until the pips squeak. We get the best first, as the stage fills with a whirling assembly of whores, monks, market traders, adolescent girl posses and rapier-wielding young blades. The Montagues, a raffish lot, dress in the natural, sun-bleached colours of the region: lemon, apricot, brickdust and baked clay. The Capulets, by contrast, are gorgeous in crimson and red, colours then requiring complex and expensive dyeing processes. In tilting after Juliet, this production suggests, Romeo is defying the laws of class as well as those of vendetta.

Her people are not slow to react. As the guardian of Capulet honour — most pertinently embodied in his 14-year-old sister — Shi-Ning Liu is a proud and fiery Tybalt. You can't imagine him hanging out with whores like those Montague boys, and when he discovers Romeo sniffing round Juliet, he reacts with a drawn sword.

All of this is attractively established. It is when the numbers thin out that the illusion starts to waver. Sightlines dictate that there can be no scenery in the dancing area, and the emptiness becomes very insistent. In the balcony scene, and later in Act Three, the lovers struggle to project through the 300-odd degrees of unbounded space around them. Patrick Armand is an assured, if jaded, Romeo — there have been other girls, you suspect, on other balconies — while Erina Takahashi is a sweet and maidenly Juliet, but it would take Nureyev and Fonteyn to prevail in those circumstances.

Deane's choreography will not trouble the shades of MacMillan and Lavrovsky, but then he is not after their audience. School-agers with a taste for sword-play, among others, will see the point of this production straight away.

● *Until 23 June. Box office: 020 7589 8212.*

Ratings: ○ adequate,
★ good, ★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding,
X poor

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