

## The Arts

# Peroxide diva fails to shock

## POP

Macy Gray

Brixton Academy

Paul Clark

NINA Simone once famously emptied her bladder on the lap of a horrified journalist. Macy Gray is the natural successor to Simone's eccentric crown and, in light of this, her insistence on adopting a squatting position for much of last night's Brixton gig was an obvious cause for concern. Thankfully, the stage remained as dry as the show which, while baring all the hallmarks of a polished performance, rarely captured the imagination of the audience.

Gray arrived almost unrecognised on stage in a blonde wig for a rendition of her biggest hit, *I Try*, in the company of her guitarist. Her parched soul vocals, often compared to tragic jazz icon Billie Holiday, were caked in the earthy dust which has made her one of the most distinct voices in contemporary soul. Her band, foolishly competing in the kooky stakes, sported pink wigs as they launched into the storming funk-rock of *Relating to a Psychopath*. Calling themselves the

Macy Gray Connection and spouting Funkadelic rhetoric, the band literally let their hair down as the show progressed. Losing hairpieces and loosening limbs, they tried to inject some energy into Gray's ambiguous stage persona. She, meanwhile, lurched from one track to another with little or no introduction, frequently squatting or sitting. Her Afro-shock mop eventually sprang the peroxide guise only to be reconcealed beneath a black hat. When she did finally engage with the audience, it was to ask the names of the 3,000-strong crowd which inevitably turned into a group therapy-style yelling session.

While the warm, bluesy glow of Hammond organ and some propulsive drumming were impressive, it was Gray's DJ who provided the most interesting musical frame for her voice. His sparse electro-beat backdrop on *Sweet Baby* and a low-slung hip-hop break on *A Moment to Myself* added an intriguing acidic spike for Gray to impale her troubled soul upon.

During her encore, Gray first claimed to have arrived from Los Angeles on foot before trying to bribe the audience into removing their clothes but sadly she had left it a little late to add personality to performance.



Gray matters: Macy dons a peroxide wig and pinstripes to belt out her classic *I Try*

# Insider art from the Germans

## EXHIBITION

Marcus Vater

Wilma Gold, EC2

Nick Hackworth

ACHTUNG! Armed with a common, loose, fluid painting style and a relentless exhibition programme, a group of young German painters appear to be bent on art-world domination. Ten in number, with a hardcore who studied at the renowned art school in Düsseldorf, they exhibit together as the HoppypopMuseum collective and have shown in numerous venues across Europe as well as in London and New York.

Markus Vater is a founder member and is now having his first UK solo show at the East London gallery Wilma Gold.

Like Sophie von Hellermann, the best known of the group, who recently had a solo show at the Saatchi Gallery, Vater favours a painterly, cartoony expressionism. Here he presents nine large, acrylic paintings and a video compilation of assorted animations. The subject matter is varied and random so that the show gives the impression, greatly exacerbated by the relaxed figurative style, of being a serendipitous stroll through Vater's mind. Two semi-abstract paintings are "internal portraits", part of a series in which Vater has tried to imagine "how it would be like inside someone". Inside George Bush there is only a hollow grey vacuum, while Inside Pamela Anderson, apparently, there is a haze of washed-out orange silicon implants that resemble two fried egg shapes and a bad case of what Freud termed "vagina dentata", or in more vulgar terms, a fear-of-castration-inducing sprouting of teeth in the vagina.

Bad dreams also infect Vater's other work. In the enormous *Bedroom Painting*, a multitude of eyes float in a collaged dreamscape that occasionally has the intensity of oil paint due to the pure acrylic pigment that Vater uses to mix his own paints. In his animations, infused with a deadpan fatalism and executed in a faux-naïve manner, domestic disasters lurk around every corner.

Pets metamorphose into their owners and vice versa. People sitting in armchairs suddenly shrink so that the carpet becomes a fatal jungle, all of which exhibits the famous German sense of humour.

● Until 30 June. Information: 020 7613 1609. [www.markusvater.com](http://www.markusvater.com)

# Resurrecting calm to a glorious conclusion

## CLASSICAL

Philharmonia/Ashkenazy

Festival Hall

Brian Hunt

AS distracting happenings in the auditorium go, I am not sure how highly a screaming fit rates: some way below the suicide-bid leap from the balcony that has been known in Helsinki, and probably not quite as high as the fireworks let off during a Festival Hall Toscanini performance in the Fifties (supposedly the work of a journalist hoping to stimulate the maestro's rage and thus a story). But all respect to the Philharmonia and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy for coping with an audience member's abductions and keeping Mahler's Resurrection Symphony on course to a glorious conclusion. That final movement — a gigantic representation of Judgement Day, Last Trump and all — was played with magnetic concentration and a fine sense of drama. The Philharmonia Chorus

sang with dedication, as did the richly burnished soprano Inger Dam-Jensen and gentle-toned but well-projected mezzo Birgit Remmert. Some less-satisfactory things happened on the way to the blazing apotheosis, however.

Even before the audience problem, the first movement's ensemble was worryingly fibrous, string tone was scrawny and brass sounded tinny. Ashkenazy directed in a generalised, louder-equals-faster way; he doesn't always breathe with the music, so phrases are jostled into position rather than brought to life. The second movement began much better, the strings recovering their silkiness as they swooned the Ländler melody. But by the pizzicato reprise they were once again failing to pick up a firm pulse from their conductor.

Earlier in the hall, Martyn Brabbins conducted *Nightshade* and *Corpus cum Figuris* by Danish composer Poul Ruders as part of the Philharmonia's admirable free concert series, *Music of Today*. Ruders's music has abundant atmosphere, strength of purpose and clarity of thought. But one doesn't sense the hidden layers of meaning through which a composer invites or demands repeated listening. Or perhaps the repeated listening has to come first.



Louder equals faster: conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy

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