

Seeking grand visions in stone

EXHIBITION

Gary Hume – Cave Paintings

White Cube, N1

★★★★☆

Nick Hackworth

THEY began as a commission for a collector's shower room.

A pleasingly domestic origin for a series of works in an age that treats art with too much reverence. After all, Brancussi's bronzes once sat on the desks of wealthy patrons, and Picasso's used to hang over sofas. Knowing that his paintings wouldn't take kindly to the latest power-shower technology, Gary Hume took his aggressively minimal style, which hovers between figuration and abstraction, into stone.

Inspired by Victorian funerary decorations, he has effectively collaged sections of differently coloured and finished marble to create wall-challengingly heavy "canvases" and formed lines by beating lead into grooves carved into the stone. Eight of these



large works, each taking the mother and child as their subject, hang in White Cube.

Over the years, Hume has become increasingly subtle and muted. His best-known works, using household gloss on aluminium, took popular figures such as Kate Moss and Tony Blackburn and flattened them into patches of colour, draining these icons of meaning. More recently, he has restricted his palette with greys and dark greens predominating, and has evidently fallen in love with the graphic line. In the best works, executed in the darkest

stones that conjure an air of sombre opulence, complex webs of flowing lines lead the eye into busy movements, breaking out to describe a child's face or maternal embrace.

In a few works, unfortunate choices of colour and finish — such as the use of bright blues and polished beiges — push the works over the edge into kitsch. Happily, these aberrations are outweighed by the understated power of Hume's new, grand and heavy tone.

● **Until 1 July. Information:** 020 7930 5373, www.whitecube.com.

Heavyweight: Gary Hume's *The Twins* in marble and lead

We are

Noisy peacocks, waterlogged organs and fights in the audience – nothing stops the show at Holland Park. We can't afford to, say the pair behind the best-loved opera festival of the season

FIONA MADDOCKS



WALK through Holland Park this week and you'll see a miraculous transformation. A corner of this green lung of west London has been converted into an 826-seat temporary theatre in readiness for the 10th Opera Holland Park season, which opens next week with Giordano's *Fedora*, the first of six productions in a nine-week season for 40,000 people.

Cool nerves and powerful muscles are required to oversee the construction, which involves an articulated lorry, two cranes, two fork-lift trucks, several 25-metre-high masts, a 1,200sq ft high-tensile PVC canopy, more than a kilometre of cable, a seating stand, eight carpenters and a platoon of electricians, as well as armies of carpet layers and generally available dogsbodies.

"We've got it pretty much down to a fine art," says Michael Volpe, general manager of Opera Holland Park and the chief energy behind this stealthily expanding enterprise. He looks determinedly calm. Disasters? He's known a few. "We've had every near miss you can think of. The noisiest was an RAF flyby to commemorate VE Day. For 10 minutes huge helicopters, about 400 ft from the ground, hovered overhead. The conductor just put his baton down, turned round, smiled and waited. The audience laughed and applauded."

On the hottest day of the year in 2003, baritone John Rawnsley fell ill with heat exhaustion on stage in Verdi's *Stiffelio*. The show had to stop until fellow singer Keel Watson finished the act, singing his own part as well as Rawnsley's. The next year, storms and hurricanes almost wrecked the canopy, and the organ, crucial for one scene, was found to be waterlogged.

"So with only 45 minutes to go, the conductor rewrote the part for clarinets and bassoons, finishing writing out the parts and shoving them on the music stands minutes before striking up the overture." That same season the soprano was taken ill an hour before curtain up. The distinguished mezzo Yvonne Howard happened to be in the audience. She sang it from the pit with a score while an actor walked the part.

"We do all we can not to cancel," Volpe says. "We could have gone ahead on 7/7 but Sir Ian Blair was telling people to stay at home, and our soprano, about to get on a motorbike from Canary Wharf, was stuck the other side of London. So we called it off, reluctantly."

Sometimes it's the audience who are disruptive. Once two men in their seventies famously picked up chairs and started spoiling for a fight over who had got to a table first. "And a couple who had a stand-up row about the soprano had to be removed," Volpe recalls.

In its early years it was a marginal event without clear identity; now, this festival is one of the key artistic fixtures



in London's summer calendar. This year's varied repertoire includes Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and Lehar's *Merry Widow*. With tickets priced between £21-£43, OHP is an opera-lover's bargain. Last season's successful free-ticket scheme for local nine- to 18-year-olds is being repeated this year. "We've got 24 free seats a night to give to young people who live or study in the royal borough. Under-16s can bring an adult with them for free."

Bulky in black suit and dark glasses, Volpe looks like a Sicilian mafioso and sounds, in his own words, "like a North

'No one else is touching this sort of repertoire. It pushes every button: tragedy, romance, glamour' and glorious emotional music'

End Road barrow boy". In fact, he's a bit of both and as far from the conventional, smooth-talking image of an opera fan as you can get. "Yeah, call me a wide boy if you like. But I do it because I love it, and after 17 years at this game I know a fair bit about it, too."

The youngest son of southern Italian immigrants who came to London in the 1950s, Volpe grew up listening to

Too few shades in the darkness

TWO haunting portrayals of the female psyche at its most fragile were never likely to make for a feel-good evening. But high art hardly comes more serious or worthwhile than this coupling of Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* with Schoenberg's monodrama *Erwartung*. Anyone willing to probe the darker psychologies of music from a crucial period of the early 20th century should regard this double bill as unmissable, especially with top-price tickets at only £50.

That said, Willy Decker's 2002 staging, with designs by John Macfarlane, has not yet found its feet musically or theatrically in this first revival. Bartók's magical examination of the hidden lives we all lead, exemplified by Judith and her obsessive determination to uncover her husband's dark past, here sounded just a touch too prosaic.

This is a tantalising score, flickering with Hungarian folk melodies buried

OPERA

Duke Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung

Covent Garden

★★★★☆

Fiona Maddocks

beneath strange harmonies and sinister orchestral colouring. Then suddenly, when the tension has become unbearable, the music blazes into cataclysmic C-major radiance before receding back into gloom.

It didn't quite happen like that on the first night. Under Russian conductor Kirill Petrenko, the contrast fell short and other key moments, as when Judith opens the door on to the lake of tears, didn't have their usual intensity. As Bluebeard, Albert Dohmen seemed ten-

tative and under-characterised, yet the possibilities of this role are limitless.

But Petra Lang's outstanding Judit is a tour de force and she alone conveyed this work's wrenching power.

Erwartung was immeasurably better. Schoenberg's subtle, shadowily glittering music is among his most atmospheric, here beguilingly played by the ROH orchestra, sounding happier than in the Bartók. A half-crazed woman fantasises about her lost lover, the moon and death.

German soprano Angela Denoke made a strong stab at the role but overdid physical gesture, as if not realising that the music itself was already externalising the internal. But these reservations are minor and should deter no one from sampling these two masterpieces of European music-theatre.

● **Tonight, 2, 10, 12, 13 and 17 June. Information:** 020 7212 9460.

A serenata on an operatic scale

THE term serenata may imply something modest in nature, but in Baroque times it often betokened an entertainment altogether grander. Serenatas were composed to honour nuptials and other notable events. They were accordingly conceived on an almost operatic scale.

Vivaldi's *La Senna Festeggiante* (The Seine Fête) was doubtless composed for such an event. It seems likely that it was intended for the ceremonial entry into Venice in 1726 of the French Ambassador Jacques-Vincent Languet. The text is, therefore, in the obligatory fulsome style, a eulogy of Paris and the French monarch, Louis XV.

This year's Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music came to a triumphant close with a concert performance of the extravaganza by the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra under Ivor Bolton. The three

CLASSICAL

Lufthansa Festival: Freiburg Baroque Orchestra/Bolton

St John's, Smith Square, SW1

★★★★☆

Barry Millington

soloists — here Roberta Invernizzi, Barbara Di Castri and Antonio Abete — take the allegorical roles of The Golden Age, Virtue and The River Seine respectively. The conceit is that The Golden Age and Virtue wander along the banks of the river, finding there a congenial home where peace and contentment reside.

The forthright, crisply rhythmic style of the Freiburgers under Bolton propelled

the work along invigoratingly. But there was also an idyllic evocation of the Golden Age in the duet *Lo qui provo*, where the vocalists' sweetness of tone was matched by that of the orchestra.

Light, fluttering bowstrokes and a cooing flute accompanied Di Castri in a delightful aria about flowers in the sunlight. Admirable as she was, Di Castri seemed reluctant to share her talents with the audience, singing mostly into her score. Invernizzi, by contrast, always sang out to the audience. There is a beguiling lift and animation in her delivery, too.

Abete fulfilled his role as a personification of the Seine, his music sometimes moving in unison with the strings, sometimes independently as he established his presence as a feature of the French capital.