SLAV TO THE RHYTHM
And what's on the bill today? Freddie Mercury, Nazi condoms and a formal lecture on "the prism of the Gesamtkunstwerk".

LAIBACH
TATE MODERN TURBINE HALL, LONDON. SATURDAY, 14 APRIL, 2012

The history of Slovenian experimentalists Laibach doesn't lack local colour. In the early '80s, use of their name was banned for four years in the Yugoslavian state in which they formed - such was the government's disquiet at the band's quasi-fascist, pseudo-Stalinist imagery. Laibach's self-described "totalitarian" reworkings of Queen, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones have provoked both outrage and amused delight. Now Nazis-from-the-Moon film Iron Sky plays in cinemas, complete with Laibach soundtrack. Laibach's remarkable provocations extend to their merchandise stall.

As Laibach prepare to take the stage at London's Tate Modern gallery - playing in the vast space that once held the turbines of Bankside Power Station - the merchandise table offers condoms at 50p a pack. On one side of the packaging is the word "Antisemitism". On the other side there's a "rottenkopf" symbol, an emblem of Hitler's SS. Taken in isolation, the condoms seem horribly sinister. Before the show, Ivan Novak, Laibach's main spokesperson and, currently, their live visuals operative, sits over a bowl of soup. Q puts it to him that, even in the context of Laibach's history, the condoms seem a particularly grave item.

"Well, you know," he says. "These are, potentially, condoms for anti-Semites not to breed... Also, if you feel like that [like an anti-Semite], these are the perfect condoms. There is a humour and so on, but we are also trying to force people to read not only the words but also the content."

To Laibach, Queen's concerts represented the peak of totalitarian control in pop.

This is familiar Laibach methodology: Attention grabbed via controversial signifiers. Humour lurking, variously high camp or bleakly black.

This Laibach concert is accompanied by a day of lectures in an adjoining theatre. In interview Novak says Laibach recorded their remake of Queen's One Vision from frustration: "The grandiosity of Freddie Mercury was everything we wanted to be but couldn't get..." There's also a dispassionate aside about 2012 being the 30th anniversary of the suicide of original Laibach singer Tomaz Hosterl.

The concert begins with a 1972 Yugoslav propaganda film. Then the footage plays backwards, reflecting the band's mission to create a "Monumental Retro-Avant-Garde" - the past repurposed to illuminate our present. A huge stuffed stag's head looms from the stage. The first part of the show is a reconstruction of the band's austere musical origins - a challenging mix of machine clanks and clarinet. It has a certain penitential power, but a big cheer rises as Laibach move on to the...
Laibach Street Boys (And Girl): (clockwise from left) fetching headgear was optional; the crowd get ready to “robogoth boogie”; that’s one way to deter stage divers; Mina Spiler’s moment arrives.

“What is das Wobbly Bridge?” Laibach (with Ivan Novak, far left; Milan Fras, second left) outside the Tate Modern.

audacious cover versions they’re better known for. Across The Universe is a reminder of the time Laibach covered The Beatles’ Let It Be album in its entirety. Tonight the song is sung by keyboardist/vocalist Mina Spiler, her voice full of alpine allure and, with her neat military cap, suggesting some Tito-era tour guide conducting us all to a glorious socialist-realist hereafter. There’s film footage of one of Hitler’s V2 rockets – the Nazis really did get to the moon. Or, at least, their rocket scientist Wernher von Braun led NASA’s lunar programme. The majority of vocals come from Milan Fras, stentorian-voiced and leading the crowd’s robo-goth boogie through pummelling industrial techno such as Tanz Mit Laibach.

The encores sum up the twin peaks of Laibach’s subversive cover-version strategy. There’s the synth-medieval overhaul of Live Is Life, the 1985 Austrian beerhall-pop smash from Opus (the song was retitled Leben Heist Leben by Laibach). A giant image of a swastika spins on the big video-screen behind the band – but it’s a swastika variant created by the German anti-Nazi artist John Heartfield, with four axes bound together and dripping blood. Queen’s One Vision (now Geburt Einer Nation) follows – a strangely exultant blast, at once sombre and hilarious. To Laibach, Queen’s concerts represented the peak of totalitarian control in pop. As Laibach leave the stage it’s been a remarkable evening of quasi-militarist post-modernism. But are they fascists? Perhaps not.

Would Nazi supremacists really find perfection in Freddie, a gay drag fiend from Zanzibar? Laibach’s moments of Mein Kampf are only part of something much larger. It’s as if Mel Brooks’s Springtime For Hitler has been combined with the taboo-packed work of the German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer and then soundtracked with exhilarating electro-industrial sounds – one of the most profound, and profoundly entertaining, agendas in popular culture today.

ROY WILKINSON