

Budding romance: Ailyn Pérez and Piotr Beczala as Violetta and Alfred in *La Traviata* at the Royal Opera House, London.
Photo by Catherine Ashmore

Love Story

As Valentine's Day looms, **Adrian Mourby** goes in search of the perfect opera for a first date, with a warning of ones to avoid.

If we believe what Hollywood tells us, then the opera house is where all lovers should head on 14 February. Despite the fact that many operas end with either the hero or heroine dead and very little happy-ever-after, opera's primary appeal in the public imagination remains romantic. It's very rare that someone down there on the stage (usually a tenor) doesn't love somebody else (usually a soprano) and is more than willing to interrupt the narrative for several minutes, and even more encores, to tell us all about it.

But which opera to choose? I presume you're buying those tickets in the hope of getting your companion to fall in love – or fall in love again – with you. Or maybe you yourself need the emotional push over the edge that only opera can give and you hope that a dash of Puccini behind each ear will do the trick.

Well, Puccini does do falling in love wonderfully and when the soprano dies it's always beautifully, for the noblest reasons, and set to stirringly romantic music. Even foolish *Butterfly* remains true to the very end despite the fact that Lt Pinkerton has spent three acts proving what a GI Louse he is. Meanwhile, Verdi tends to be more interested in the relationship between daughters and fathers than in lovers, but *Traviata* is his great weepy. In fact the 'La La twins' – *Bohème* and *Traviata* – are such seduction favourites that making a pass at your companion some time that evening is pretty much de rigueur. Remember Julia Roberts oozing over Richard Gere after *Traviata* in *Pretty Woman*? Or Cher and Nicholas Cage spending a night of *Bohème*-inspired passion in *Moonstruck*? Nothing says 'love' more explicitly than two top-priced tickets to one of these two favourites on Valentine's Day.

Bohème and *Traviata* work because they are about love affairs that go wrong in the best possible way – with a heartfelt reconciliation right at the end, when it's all too late. Going wrong well is important. So for all its passion, *Carmen* is a bit of a bummer: it goes wrong in a mean and sordid way; so does *Tosca* for that matter. Even if the tenor heroes, Don José and Cavaradossi, pledge themselves beautifully, it's to the wrong woman – one who eventually destroys them. These operas are first rate, not first date.

Mozart's *Così fan tutte* is worse. It will only produce arguments about sexual infidelity or at best, a debate on gender politics. Mozart is better on marital difficulties and conflict resolution rather than falling in love. When Guglielmo and Ferrando pretend to in *Così*, it's for comic effect. As for *Magic Flute*, it will only add to your evening a sense of confusion that's far from romantic. You don't want to spend the interval with your nose in the programme reading up on Masonic ritual or Zoroastrianism. *La clemenza di Tito* is all about renouncing love and *Il re pastore* is just silly. No, Mozart is definitely not a Valentine composer.

Tchaikovsky has his uses. Certainly *Eugene Onegin* has that great letter scene which captures with disturbing impetuosity the feeling of first falling in love; and there is retribution on *Onegin* at the end for being such a cold fish. That's definitely one for the list. *Queen of Spades* doesn't leave a very nice taste in the mouth if you're going for romantic effect. Who wants a boyfriend who drives his beloved to suicide and then assaults her grandmother?

Beware of Wagner on a romantic night out. Most of the operas are too long and even if they aren't, a sadistic director is liable to stick all three acts together to test your bladder. Either way you'll just want to catch up on sleep afterwards. If you're in the right mood, *Tristan und Isolde* can work a compulsive and seductive magic. The composer Virgil Thompson once sat down and counted the number of what he termed 'simultaneous orgasms' in the score. There are plenty. *Siegfried* on the other hand is possibly the most unromantic opera ever written: a fat lout who shouts and kills a lot

‘I love two things. I love you, and I love the opera. If I can have the two things that I love together for one night, I will be satisfied to give up, oh God, the rest of my life.’

blunders upon his equally voluminous aunt sleeping on a rock and insists on sex. (Why Wagner named his son after the hero of that opera says something very skewed about Uncle Richard's worldview.)

Operas that appeal too much to the mind are no good, unless intellectual bonding is all that you're aiming for by the end of your evening out: Benjamin Britten is masterly at creating strong, believable characters and atmospheric music, but what passion there is tends to be deeply repressed. Most modern operas are pretty unromantic, even ones with suggestive titles such as *Love and Other Demons*, and *L'amour de loin* – how can you have Romance when there are no tunes? Baroque operas tend to be too cerebral and/or bloodthirsty – and these days they receive some very odd productions that will get you and your sweetheart talking a lot during the interval, but not about the right things. That said, Handel's *Semele*, a tale of divine lust and human vanity, can have an erotic frisson in the hands of the right director. Meanwhile, *Giulio Cesare* deals with one of history's great love affairs – between Caesar and Cleopatra, so that's another Handel to consider.

Richard Strauss certainly has a swooning romantic streak, though he can also be too clever for his own good. *Rosenkavalier* has a lovely finale with three female voices entwining themselves into a seductive triangle of eroticism and renunciation. Strauss claimed the rambunctious overture depicted Octavian and the Marschallin making love, which makes you very sorry for whoever was underneath....

You should also beware of operas that are known for just one song. Yes, Bizet's *Pearl Fishers* has that famous duet (for two men, note), but then you'll have to sit through two preposterous acts that will really cast a shadow over the rest of the evening. The Flower Duet in *Lakmé* (for a pair of ladies) may have sold lots of seats on British Airways but once again it comes early in the opera and you then have a lot of orientalist nonsense to endure across the next two acts.

But the good news is that even by just suggesting a night at the opera you are suddenly revealing yourself as sensitive, intuitive and romantic. As Nicholas Cage tells Cher in *Moonstruck*. 'I love two things. I love you, and I love the opera. If I can have the two things that I love together for one night, I will be satisfied to give up, oh God, the rest of my life.'

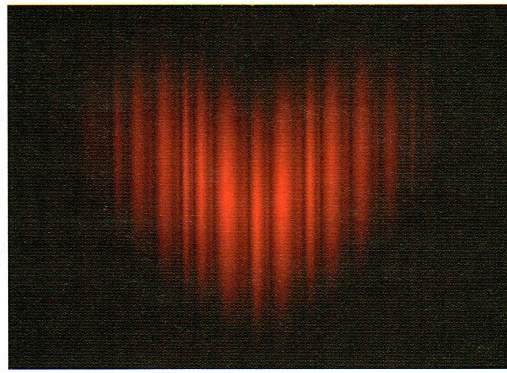
Substitute the name of any other recreational activity and you'd be laughed out of the room. Only opera can complete that sentence.

TOP THREE OPERAS FOR A NIGHT OF ROMANCE

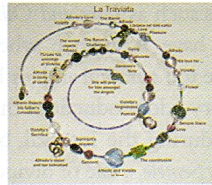
La Bohème Puccini Love to die for
La Traviata Verdi A Parisian tart's romantic heart
Elisir d'Amore Donizetti Passion potion

FIRST RATE, BUT NOT FIRST DATE

Così fan tutte Mozart Men behaving badly
Salome Strauss It's the kiss of death
Parsifal Wagner The search for the Holy Grail goes on long after the restaurants close



Stylish, passionate opera lover Isabella del Estefan plans her perfect Valentine's week at the opera.



*'I dress to impress when
I go to the opera.'*

I put a lot of thought into what to wear, but it's my accessories that really put me in the right mood. I love my collection of **Opera Bracelets** by the American jewelry designer **Cindy Battisti**. Cindy is a great opera aficionado, and each of her gorgeous Opera Bracelets is inspired by the story of the opera they represent. All the main characters, every plot detail and change of atmosphere is reflected in an array of polished glass, colourful beads, tiny charms and figurines that make up each bracelet. The result is not only a thing of beauty, but also a memento of a wonderful evening at the opera. For Valentine's night, I'm wearing

Cindy's Traviata bracelet – it tells a tragic story, I know, but the romantic elements are sublime and it reminds me of Violetta's noble sacrifice for the sake of love.

The finishing touch to my outfit will be a delightful little handbag that I picked up from the Glyndebourne shop when I was there last summer. It's made of the softest quilted taffeta silk in duck-egg blue (my colour), with a cheeky beaded tassel to add a touch of fun. It's called '**L'Elisir**', named after one of my favourite operas, Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, a story in which true love triumphs and everyone lives happily ever after. Just like in real life (sigh!).



*'When I am in London,
I dine at Green's.'*

I'm going to be at the opera in London during Valentine's week to see an old 'friend', so I've booked dinner at **Green's** on the 14th. That'll set the scene for our evening at the Royal Opera House to see Mozart's *Don Giovanni* a couple of nights later.

My love affair with Green's started many

years ago when I asked a well-travelled friend to recommend a smart London restaurant offering discretion and comfort in an intimate and elegant environment. I have since become an ardent admirer.

Founded by Simon Parker Bowles in 1982, this restaurant in the heart of St James's is one of the West End's longest running productions and is considered by many to be a great British institution. Just off Piccadilly, the restaurant is well positioned between the art galleries of St James's and Mayfair, Theatreland, the Royal Opera House and nearby shopping on Bond Street.

Green's combines the intimacy of a club with the elegance of St. James's, for a dining experience that is faultless and memorable. The menu offers British food, prepared well – fresh fish, meat and seasonal game.

Green's 'Classics' range from potted shrimps, smoked salmon with Irish soda bread or salmon fishcakes as starters to smoked haddock with champagne sauce or calves' liver as main courses. Fish dishes are perfectly cooked, whether practically unadorned, like pan-fried sea bass, or beautifully sauced, like grilled halibut with hollandaise sauce. Carnivores will delight in the venison and pheasant terrine or open beef fillet Wellington. All rounded off with classic puddings, blistering cheese and even traditional Welsh rarebit. Naturally, a range of fresh native and rock oysters are available.

The restaurant also boasts an inspired champagne, wine, beer, cocktail and spirits selection.

You can choose to enjoy the delights of Green's in private – in the St James's Private Dining Room. Green's opened a sister restaurant in the heart of the City of London (opposite the Bank of England) in 2009.



The Ruinart champagne bar at the Royal Opera House, London

'In the interval, only the finest champagne will do.'

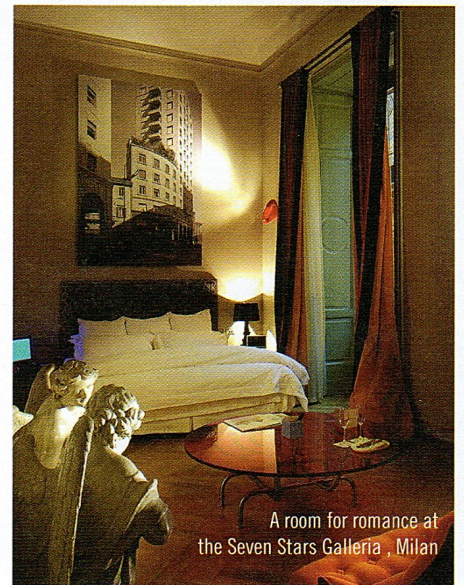
At the Royal Opera House, there's nowhere better to catch up on first-half gossip than the wonderfully stylish new **Ruinart Champagne Bar**, which runs the length of the spectacular floral hall. A glass (or two) of Ruinart is a taste of tradition itself – it's the oldest champagne house in existence, dating from 1729, which is a whole generation before Mozart's Don Giovanni raised a toast to wine and women for the first time in his famous 'Champagne Aria'. I love the clean, fresh Chardonnay flavours in this elegant champagne. It certainly puts me in the mood for romance.



Seven Stars Galleria, Milan

'In Milan, I like to live in the lap of luxury.'

The morning after our Covent Garden visit, my old friend and I catch the plane to Milan, where we round off our Valentine's week at my favourite opera house, La Scala. I love the passion of Italian audiences – the atmosphere at the opera is always so highly charged. We're seeing Verdi's *Aida*, so I'll be wearing Cindy Battisti's fabulously exotic *Aida* bracelet to help me keep track of the story! It'll be dinner back at the hotel after the show, because I don't want to miss a single second of my time at the sumptuous **Seven Stars Galleria**, just round the corner from the opera house and situated in one of Milan's most breathtakingly beautiful arcades. The hotel's luxuriously appointed suites are named after famous composers: Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi... My own favourite is the very theatrical Puccini suite, with its dramatic red velvet curtains and little statues of putti at the end of the bed. As part of our Romantic City



A room for romance at the Seven Stars Galleria, Milan

Break, we get dinner, flowers, chocolate and a complimentary bottle of champagne, a perfect nightcap after the opera. By the time our private butler arrives to serve us breakfast in bed the next morning, I hope my companion and I will be more than just good friends...

COMPETITION



Win a romantic dinner for two with a bottle of Laurent Perrier champagne at Green's Oyster Bar & Restaurant!

To enter, simply drop us an email with the subject GREENS to competitions@rhinegold.co.uk, or send a postcard to **Rhinegold Competitions, 20 Rugby Street, London WC1N 3QZ**. Please include your full name, address and a contact telephone number. (Deadline for entries: 17 February 2012.)

Terms & Conditions

Offer redeemable at Green's Duke Street, St. James's, London
Maximum value not to exceed £150
To be used by 31 March 2012

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