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.
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 are 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 Serse, 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 puttin

FIRST RATE, BUT NOT FIRST DATE
Cosi 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.

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!).

‘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 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.

‘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
'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 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

DIRECTORY

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www.operabracelets.com

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