

Coming soon to an aria near you

FORGET book clubs. The latest intellectual pursuit to impress your friends with is a private opera viewing. One month you can focus on Baroque. The next you could dwell on Bel Canto. There's no need to swot up in advance because the performances will come to you. In your living room.

No space is too small to become a mini concert hall for an evening and you needn't worry about the neighbours because, apparently, the only thing they ever complain about is not being invited.

At least that's according to Marie Soulier, who started Opera Pour Un Salon (literally, opera for the living room) three years ago. She now hosts around 12 OPUS events a year. Many of her clients are regulars and others individuals looking for something original for a special celebration. Marie, who is French and lives in London with her husband and two children, hopes to recapture 19th-century parlour music.

'OPUS started by accident,' she

Gastronomic skills just aren't enough for home entertaining any more. *Helen Croydon* reports on the rise of the operatic dinner party

says. 'I wanted to see *La Bohème* at the Royal Opera House but I couldn't afford it.

'I mentioned my disappointment to a friend, who knew a soprano who was just starting her career. She suggested we host a small event at my home and have her sing. Everyone loved it and said: "When shall we do this again?"'

'Over the next year we organised more events and word spread.'

Soulier likes to keep OPUS small and bespoke. 'I always visit a client's home first,' she says. 'I need to get an idea of space, number of guests, what opera they like. If they don't know about opera, I try to get an idea of their taste in other music and their personality. Then I can choose a singer, genre and selection of arias suitable for that crowd.'

The biggest home event she has organised was for 45 people in a mansion and it included a pianist, a cellist, a violinist and two vocalists. The smallest was hosted in a one-bedroom flat with a vocalist and fold-up piano.

The evening I am lucky enough to attend is for a wedding anniversary, hosted in a house in south London with around 20 guests. Tucked in beside the bookcase are our pianist and soprano Georgina Rosanna Murray. Both are adorned in glittering evening gowns and in full make-up.

The first aria is *Un Bel Di Vedremo*, a scene from *Madame Butterfly* where the heroine is waiting for the return of her lover.

Picking on one lucky man, Murray sings directly to him, stroking his head and flirting. The guests find it hilarious.

'You can have great fun per-



Home girl: Soprano Georgina Rosanna Murray loves the challenge of adapting her voice for a small space

FEDERICO CARNEVALI



Sing with your supper: Whether you live in a mansion or a one-bedroom flat, you can bring the majesty of the opera to your own home

forming in such an intimate setting,' she says. 'You can interact and use the guests as props. And they love being part of it.'

'BUT it is also more intimidating than performing in a concert hall,' she admits. 'People get to see you up close, warts and all. We train our voices to fill a much bigger space, so when we are singing in a small place, it is challenging to adapt – but it's a great experience.'

The guests are mesmerised. Four confess they have never seen live classical music before but by the

third aria they were in tears. 'I always see people reach for the tissues,' says Soulier.

'People get very moved by opera, especially when they are so close to the musician. Hardened men get all emotional and people who thought they hated opera end up heading straight for the opera section on iTunes afterwards.'

Soulier is passionate about nurturing and promoting young musical talent. All her performers are under 30 and many have trained at prestigious music institutions such as The Royal Academy, Trinity College or The Royal College of Music. She recruits on recommen-

dations and always watches them perform before taking them on.

I was surprised how much can fit into a 15sq ft living room. It may not have the same lighting and acoustics as the Royal Opera House – where tickets can cost more than £200 – but you'll get a better view.

One guest was so impressed he booked one for his own birthday.

'It beats another murder mystery theme or fancy dress,' he says. 'And there are far fewer broken glasses at the end of the night than a normal drinks party.'

www.operapourunsalon.net hosts private evenings from £750.

TODAY'S WATCH

MENTAL

DVD, Blu-ray, VoD (15)

The Sound Of Music meets *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* with a spiky dose of Kath & Kim in this zany Aussie comedy from PJ Hogan, the creator of 1990s feel-good mega-hit *Muriel's Wedding*.

While Muriel lived in Porpoise Spit, Shirley Moomchore (Rebecca Gibney), a down-trodden mum with a Julie Andrews obsession, lives in the

suburban hell of Dolphin's Head. When the reality of life gets too much, Shirl retreats to the local asylum, causing her neglectful husband, Barry (Anthony LaPaglia), to employ a random hitchhiker (Toni Collette) as a nanny to their five unruly daughters.

Collette has a ball as a C-word-spouting, pot-smoking Mary Poppins, who teaches the girls there's 'no such thing as "mental" –



just different shades of normal'.

That *Mental* is apparently based on Hogan's own family story makes the dubious title slightly more forgivable and injects an affecting honesty to the knockabout proceedings. That said, tonally, it's like a kangaroo in a china shop. Flipping between brash, breezy, confusing, irresponsible, sad and funny, it's one for those who like their comedy 'alternative'.

Larushka Ivan-Zadeh

TODAY'S READ

FIFTY SHADES OF FEMINISM (Virago)

This collection of 50 essays – edited by Lisa Appignanesi, Susie Orbach and Rachel Holmes – is both a response to *Fifty Shades Of Grey*'s notion that being a woman is about submitting to desire – and a look at the state of feminism 50 years after the publication of landmark text *The Feminine Mystique*. Packed with contributions from high-profile women and reflecting a wide range

of concerns, it acts as a microcosm of contemporary feminist identity: colourful, inspiring, infuriating, earnest, solemn, worthy, witty, issue-based, angry, self-obsessed, dry and impassioned – all at once.

Some contributions are exceptional: Xinran's analysis of the meaning of Chinese characters representing women; Jeanette Winterson's evocation of the emotional poverty inflicted by a porn-obsessed culture that



divorces sex from love; Natasha Walter on the challenges for feminists of going beyond the personal; and Hanan al-Shaykh's account of her nonconformist

neighbour all stand out. Few are as lively and immediate as the final entry by Alice Stride, who won Virago's competition to be included in the book with her funny, furious account of her sister's extreme intimate grooming.

Tina Jackson