



MUSIC FROM THE HEARTH

The latest trend in entertaining – the House Concert – has arrived, and is gracing the livingrooms of the privileged many. SARA PANKHURST is all ears...

You sink down into the sofa, a glass of red nestling snugly in your hand. As you close your eyes, the sound from the piano quartet washes over you. A low, haunting melody fills the air. You open your eyes – the clarinettist is so close you could reach out and turn her pages. Ladies and gentlemen: welcome to the world of the House Concert.

Once the fancy plaything of English nobility, by the early 1900s the House Concert in England had all but disappeared. The spread of public concert halls and the advent of vinyl had radically changed people's music listening habits.

But recently, House Concerts have been making a comeback, first in America then Europe. And now they have washed up on UK shores, gracing the living rooms not just of the privileged few but anyone with a frontroom and a power socket or two.

The Host (the one with said frontroom) invites friends for an evening of live music. The band – singers, duos, quartets – receive a flat fee, with the Host offering the concert as a treat for their guests. Otherwise, admission is charged – often £10-£20 per head – which goes directly to the performers and offsets some of the bad-pay-for-musicians karma.

The concert lasts for an hour or up to two sets of

45 minutes, often original material. Any genre goes from classical to pop, but the mood is more singer-songwriter than prog rock. There's no need for sound-crunching speakers with woofed-up bass either: amplification is minimal or dispensed with altogether leaving voices and instruments as stripped down as possible. A rare treat in our technological age.

Acoustic music and small "venues" mean guests get a unique up-close and personal experience, an evening that can be surprisingly moving and intimate. And after the show, musicians mingle with guests instead of vanishing in a puff of smoke on the tail of the last note. With House Concerts, the barriers between audience and artist are gone and the result is a night typically described as "unforgettable".

One group leading the way in the House Concert scene in the South East are the Brighton Film Quartet (main photo). Their evocative, minimalist pieces composed by their pianist, Penny Loosemore, create an almost dreamlike atmosphere. An ambient soundtrack, subtle lighting and candles at their House Concerts add to the atmosphere, a perfect setting for their Einaudiesque music.

For 25 years, Loosemore organised her own impromptu musical evenings for friends in London then

Brighton, and decided to set up the first official House Concert for her Quartet in April 2014 at a flat in Hove's elegant Brunswick Square. It was a huge success and led to more bookings including a Manor House in Uckfield, a 40th birthday party and a New Year's gig in a stately

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home. One Host even hired his own cocktail maker.

Hilary Cooke, creative producer at Brighton Dome and Festival, and a guest at their first concert, is converted. "It was such a beautiful and atmospheric evening. And was even more special for being held in somebody's home."

House Concerts are starting to pop up all over the UK, with Turners Hill House Concerts attracting

national press interest, and House Concerts York described by BBC6 Music as "one of the top 10 venues for up and coming acts". A new website, www.giginyourhouse.co.uk, connects potential Hosts and musicians.

Loosemore is excited about the revival of House Concerts. "Big venues and huge sound systems can sometimes make the audience and musicians feel detached. But the atmosphere at a House Concert is electric. I think we've forgotten what fun it is to entertain each other in a home.

"Guests can't believe how good music sounds at close range and, as musicians, we love playing just feet away from our audience, plus the socialising afterwards. House Concerts are definitely the next big thing."

To book the Quartet for a London or Home Counties concert, see www.brightonfilmquartet.com or call Penny Loosemore on 0788 1915593.



LOUNGE LISTENERS: (main photo) a rapt audience at a recent House Concert in Hove, Sussex; (from top left clockwise) guests arrive; time to top up before the concert; the Brighton Film Quartet; Tessa (violin) and Emma (clarinet) take it away; candles create an intimate atmosphere

