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Sound and fury of Thatcher the opera

France

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A succession of disconnected and jarring notes emerges from a piano while violins screech in a melody-free chorus above the roll of thunder — or perhaps of bombs. It is a disturbing and unharmonious sound, but to French ears it is the musical representation of Baroness Thatcher's imprint on history.

The late Prime Minister is the central character in a contemporary opera that opened last night. The work, subsidised by the French Government, is unlikely to please her supporters as it portrays her as a senile and shadowy figure close to General Augusto Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator.

Yet the opera highlights a continued fascination with her personality and time in power. Lady Thatcher, according to its Argentine-born composer, is more than just a controversial politician. She is the stuff of mythology.

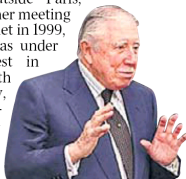
The storyline of *Aliados* (Allies), which opened at the Gennevilliers Theatre outside Paris, centres on her meeting with Pinochet in 1999, when he was under house arrest in London. Both are doddery, with Pinochet hamming up his senility to

escape prosecution for crimes against humanity, and Lady Thatcher's nurse struggling to awaken her fading memory. The Chilean sings in Spanish, the Briton in English. There are French surtitles for the audience.

But the backdrop is sombre — at least in the eyes of Esteban Buch, the Franco-Argentine musicologist who wrote the libretto as a political reflection on Lady Thatcher's support for the South American ruler whose regime is accused of murdering 50,000 people.

"Dictatorship, war, misery, death. That is what these few minutes are made of," Buch said. "If Margaret Thatcher had gone to see Augusto Pinochet out of the sight of TV cameras, it would have been just as serious from a moral view but it would not have this mythological potential."

Lady Thatcher, who is played by Nora Petrocenko, a Lithuanian soprano, forged a close relationship with Pinochet when Chile provided help for Britain over the Falklands war. The opera, according to a press statement, is intended to provide an "aesthetic representation of the conflict" as well as a study of individual and collective memory. It is also due to be performed in Strasbourg and Rome.



The opera mocks Lady Thatcher's meeting with General Pinochet in 1999, left