

# Opera Now

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# 20

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# NINO MACHAIDZE

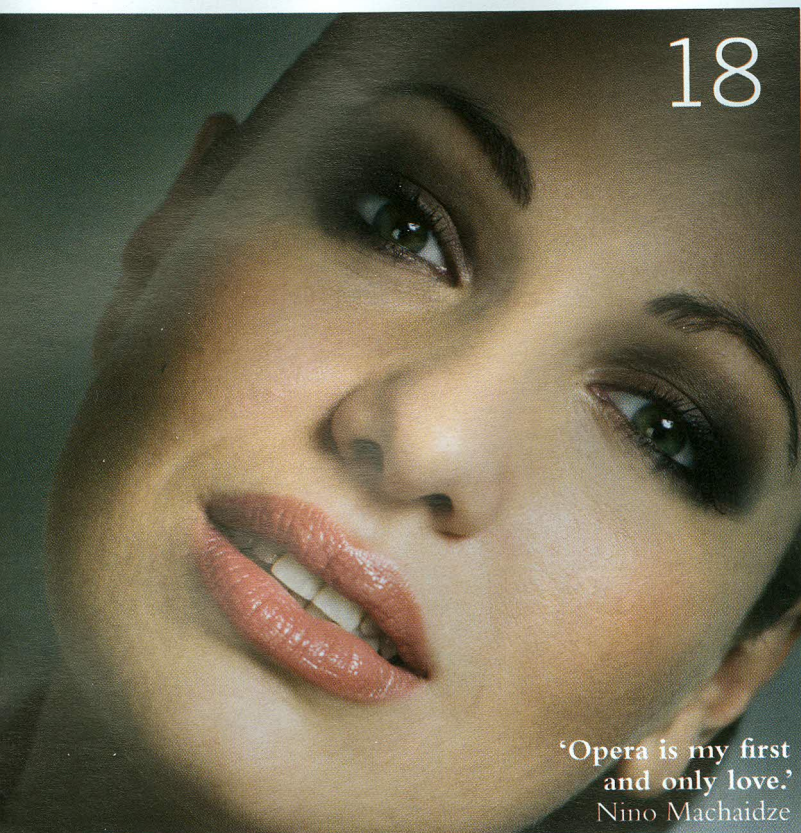
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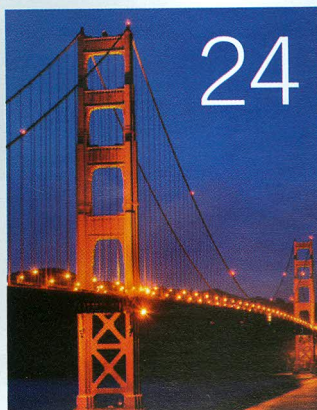
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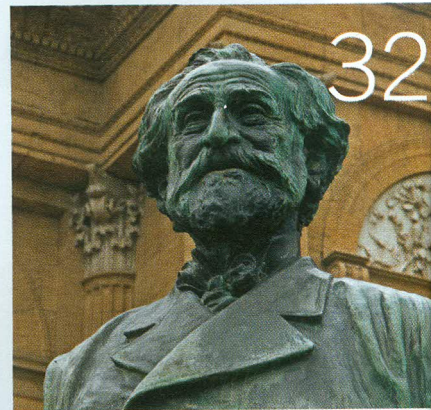


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and only love.'  
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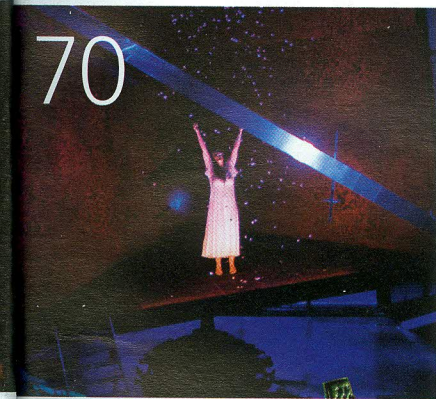
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COVER PHOTO  
Nina Machaidze  
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# Welcome

**T**he forthcoming anniversary celebrations for three of opera's greatest composers throw up some fascinating questions about opera and national culture.

Wagner inspires conflicting feelings of awe and shame in his native Germany. Attending a performance of Wagner in German-speaking countries feels like an act of worship and confession. In particular, his festival in Bayreuth is simultaneously a place of pilgrimage as well as self-castigation, where contemporary stage directors (great-granddaughter Katharina Wagner included) deliberately set out to exorcise the operas of their uncomfortable political subtext.

Benjamin Britten, whose very name is infused with patriotic possibilities, has an equally ambivalent place in the hearts of his countrymen (though for very different reasons). An outsider and a homosexual, his operas lampoon British attitudes to class and sex and expose hypocrisy and bigotry at the heart of provincial life. All this means that Britten can hardly qualify as a national hero, although there is something uniquely British about Britten's music and imagery in his operas – the cool, understated style and a keen ear for parody and satire. His music certainly deserves to have a bigger definitive role in British culture than, say, Elgar with his moments of Germanic bombast.

Then, of course, we turn to Verdi – surely a patriotic hero whose operas embody the spirit of a nation grasping at political unity and identity. Or is he? As Professor Roger Parker tells us in this issue of *Opera Now*, many of the myths surrounding Verdi and his operas were imposed on the works in hindsight and in order to fit a nationalist agenda. Verdi himself was a reluctant standard-bearer of the Italian nationalist 'revolution' and his operas are a prime example of how works of art are often burdened, unhelpfully, with a reductive political agenda.

Speaking of which, a *Daily Telegraph* blog reported last month that a number of Tory MPs (including Chancellor George Osborne) were seen slipping away from their parliamentary duties early in order to attend a performance of Wagner's *Ring* cycle at Covent Garden. It's nice to know that some British politicians are getting their priorities right at last, though I wonder if they'll do the same when Britten's *Gloriana* returns to the Royal Opera House next summer...

Ashutosh Khandekar