

NATIONAL REVIEW | MUSIC

Changing, and Staying the Same



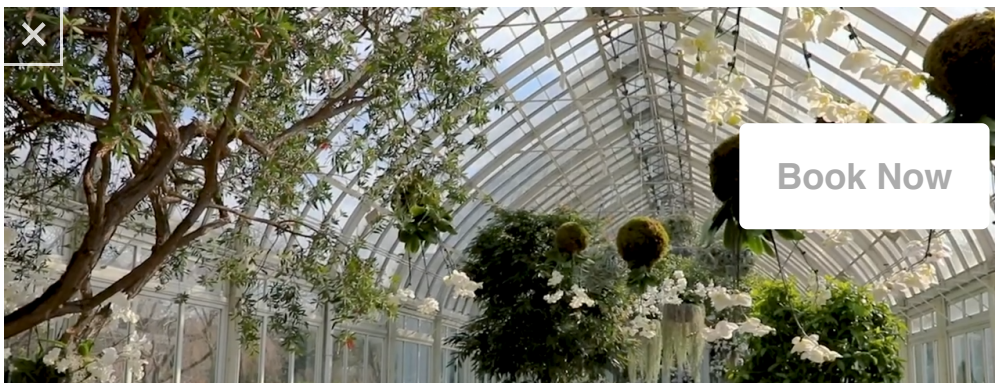
Frank Ragsdale (Father Pirrone) and Kim Josephson (Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina) in *The Leopard*, by Michael Dellaira (score) and J. D. McClatchy (libretto) (Courtesy of the Frost School of Music)

By **JAY NORDLINGER**

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The Leopard and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, on the American opera stage

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Below is an expanded version of a piece published in the **current issue of NATIONAL REVIEW**.*





Two classic Italian novels had their premieres about five weeks apart: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* premiered in New York on January 27; *The Leopard* premiered in Miami on March 5. Having discussed the first opera elsewhere, I will concentrate on the second here — but they have a connection.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote his novel, *The Leopard*, from 1954 to 1956. He could not find a publisher. He died in '57. Elena Croce (daughter of Benedetto) gave the manuscript to her friend Giorgio Bassani — who would come out with his book *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* in 1962. Bassani saw to it that the Feltrinelli house published *The Leopard*. This novel became classic almost immediately.

It is Lampedusa's only novel and he wrote little else. Lampedusa is one of the great one-book authors, along with Boris Pasternak, Ralph Ellison, and others we could name.

He was born in 1896 into the decaying Bourbon aristocracy. His father was the prince of Lampedusa (an island off Sicily). The author-to-be would inherit the title in 1934, when his father died. Our Lampedusa was the last of the line — the last of the princes.

He had a melancholy life, to a large degree, and he spent a lot of time reading: reading and reading and reading. He was smitten with literature. All the while, a book was brewing within him — a book based on his family, and his great-grandfather in particular. As we have said, he produced *The Leopard* in the last years of his life.

Why that title? The novel's prince — the prince of Salina (rather than Lampedusa) — is called "The Leopard" because that animal is featured on the family's crest. In Italian, the title is "Il Gattopardo," and if you want to get seriously zoological, *gattopardo* equates to our "serval" or "ocelot." But "The Leopard" works so much better.

The book is about society and politics: the passing of one world and the birth of the next. But it is no sociological or political tract. It is personal too — about relationships, and individual lives. For example, Concetta loves her cousin Tancredi, but he thinks of her as more like a sister. He loves Angelica, whom he marries. This shatters Concetta.

The Leopard takes place during the Risorgimento (mid 19th century), when Garibaldi, Mazzini, and their people were trying to unite Italy, casting aside the old kingdoms and fiefdoms. There is a famous line in *The Leopard*, which goes, "If we want everything to stay the same, everything needs to change." What does that mean? It is subject to interpretation. What I get from it is, "The old guard has to accept some liberal reforms, so as not to be smashed by revolutionaries, as in Robespierre's France."

Watching the new opera, I thought of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the Strauss opera. In *Der Rosenkavalier*, the baron makes fun of the new monied class — from which he is plucking a bride — as his social inferiors. Now listen to a bit of *The Leopard*, as impoverished aristo gossips size up a maiden of the new class (Angelica, as it happens):

Do you see her simpering greed?
The coarseness of spirit?
The reddish mole on her neck?
Those pointed teeth. Really!
The difference in breeding is glaring.

Lampedusa's novel, you could say, explores the questions "What is conservatism? What is liberalism? What is reaction? What is revolution?" There is also the matter of the particular versus the broad, or a tribe versus a grander state. Listen, once more, to the libretto of the opera:

. . . Sicily does not speak as the others do — Piedmontese, Milanese,
Tuscans and Romans,
They are all different,
Each the tribe of its own territory,
Made of the very earth
They cultivate and defend.

So, yes: Lampedusa's novel explores many political and societal questions. But do not forget: It's a cracking good story, too.

It is some people's favorite book, and it is certainly one of mine. I studied it in college, with Maria Rosaria Vitti-Alexander, a professor of Italian. (I wrote about her, and also about another beloved professor of mine, Barbara J. Fields, the historian, in the March 22, 2021, issue of NATIONAL REVIEW: "[Back to School](#).") Please don't tell Professor Vitti-Alexander, but I used the famous English translation by Archibald Colquhoun, along with the original. I had the two side by side.

The Leopard is not for everyone, because nothing is. Our late NR colleague Linda Bridges — a keen student of literature — said that she could not quite get with *The Leopard*. I said, "Not to worry. I'm maybe the only person who ever quit *Crime and Punishment* midway through."

In 1963, Lampedusa's novel was made into a movie, directed by Luchino Visconti. Like the book, the movie is a classic. It stars Burt Lancaster, Alain Delon, and Claudia Cardinale. But hang on, wasn't Lancaster an American and Delon a Frenchman? Yes — their lines were dubbed. Supervising the dialogue was Mr. Colquhoun.

The new opera is by Michael Dellaira, born in Schenectady, N.Y, in 1949. "I'm from a large working-class family of Italian immigrants," he says in an [autobiographical sketch](#), "and I was the first to go to college." He started out as a rocker. He then studied classical composition, with Milton Babbitt, Goffredo Petrassi, and other big names.

I would like to quote a bit more from that sketch, because I find this information fascinating:

Stravinsky told a student I knew that everybody, while listening to a piece of music, is constantly guessing what's going to happen next. If they guess right more than half the time they will say the piece is predictable or boring. If they're wrong more than half the time they will say the piece is erratic or incoherent. I would add that the composer should try to surprise listeners with something better than what they expected to hear. Those surprises are usually my favorite moments in a piece of music and usually why I want to hear it again.

The libretto for *The Leopard* is by J. D. McClatchy. Dellaira has written two other operas with him: *The Secret Agent* (based on Conrad) and *The Death of Webern*. Webern? Yes, Anton Webern, the Austrian composer, who was shot by an American G.I. in September 1945. It was some terrible mix-up.

J. D. McClatchy — “Sandy,” as he was known — died in 2018, shortly after the completion of *The Leopard*. He was born in 1945, in Bryn Mawr, Pa. He was an outstanding man of letters: author of six poetry collections; editor of *The Yale Review*; president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; and so on.

As an opera librettist, he was very, very busy. The recent age of American opera might as well be known as The Age of McClatchy. He collaborated with William Schuman, Ned Rorem, Bernard Rands, Tobias Picker, Lowell Liebermann, Lorin Maazel . . . Better, and shorter, perhaps, to list the American composers he did *not* collaborate with.

I was lucky to know him. We never met in the flesh, but we corresponded for a long time. I wrote about music for him at *The Yale Review*. I imagine his politics were different from mine. He never brought it up, and neither did I. What a gent he was.

Dellaira and McClatchy present *The Leopard* in scenes, vignettes, tableaux. Sometimes a character speaks right to the audience, as others onstage freeze in place. The character speaking to the audience serves as a narrator, explaining who's who and what's what.

The Leopard has the feeling of a chamber opera. The score is neat, transparent, and light on its feet. Though plenty sophisticated, it dares to be simple. The opera is through-composed, I would say, without arias, ensembles, and other showstoppers. Does Dellaira's *Leopard* resemble anything? I thought of Ravel, the aforementioned Strauss, and Barber, for reasons I could detail — but mainly it is its own thing.

Giving the premiere of this opera was the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami. In the pit was Gerard Schwarz, that veteran American conductor. Before taking up the baton, he was one of the leading trumpeters in the world. For 26 years, he was the conductor of the Seattle Symphony. No conductor has been a greater advocate of American music.

In the title role — Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina, a.k.a. “The Leopard” — was Kim Josephson, a veteran American baritone, who teaches at Frost. Singing the role of Tancredi was Minghao Liu, a tenor with a most

unusual background. Born in China, he studied in Donetsk, Ukraine, at the Prokofiev Academy. He also — I am quoting from his **bio** — “won 12 professional underground hip-hop dance competitions during his stay in Ukraine.”

Just a few words, please, about *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. As noted above, Giorgio Bassani came out with his novel in 1962. Eight years later, it was made into a movie, directed by Vittorio De Sica. The new opera? Its score is by Ricky Ian Gordon and its libretto by Michael Korie. They are two Americans born in the mid 1950s. They also made an opera out of a Steinbeck classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Like *The Leopard*, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is about society and politics, and it is also about personal things: Giorgio loves Micòl, who does not love him back; Alberto loves Giampi, who does not love him back. The story is set in Ferrara, as World War II and the Holocaust approach. Some Jews are upper-class and Republican; some Jews are middle-class and Fascist. The Fascists consider the Republicans snobs.

In the end, they are all Jews, and almost all of them are murdered.

The premiere of the opera took place at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, at the very bottom of Manhattan, at the edge of New York Harbor. As I left the museum, to walk to the subway, I glanced across the water and saw the Statue of Liberty, all lit up. I thought what a precious thing liberty is, and how lovable.

