

The EUROPEAN
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REVIEW

The Leopard Finally Gets an Operatic Adaptation

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” This paradox, freely translated from the original Italian, *Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi*, is the seminal line of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel *The Leopard*. Unfolding during the wars of Italian unification, which made Italy a belated nation state in 1859-1860, the plot centers around a Sicilian princely family’s struggles with modernity and the compromises it must make in the attempt to maintain its position.

The titular “leopard,” of its title—*gattopardo* in Italian—refers to a Sicilian feline hunted to extinction by the mid-nineteenth century. Featured in the Tomasi coat of arms, the animal stood as a painful metaphor for the family’s decline. The last of his line, Tomasi based the novel’s central character on his great-grandfather, Prince Giulio, and placed him in a similar dynastic predicament. Fabrizio, the Prince of Salina, has lost much of his wealth, while the vulgar peasant Calogero Sedàra has risen in fortune and renown. Increasingly alienated from his stultifying social milieu and resigned to inevitable decline, the Prince must consent to the marriage of his nephew Tancredi to Calogero’s surprisingly winsome daughter Angelica, who will bring an immense dowry, rather than to his own daughter Concetta, who can offer only love and piety. As the domestic drama unfolds, Tancredi also enthusiastically embraces the *Risorgimento*—Italy’s political resurgence through national unification—despite leftist political overtones that betray family loyalties and threaten the traditional order.

Lampedusa’s novel had a tortured history on its path to posthumous publication in 1958. The bombing and looting of the Tomasi family palace in Palermo during World War II (restored only in 2015 and repurposed as a condominium) plunged Tomasi de Lampedusa into a deep depression, and he was not able to explore his literary aspirations until his final years. Even then, a passage in the novel mentions that the beautiful rococo ceiling of the palace’s ballroom

would be destroyed by a bomb manufactured in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1943. As if to confirm his darkest thoughts, the leading Italian publishers of the postwar era pronounced *The Leopard* and its romantic nostalgia for a politically suspect nobility so hopelessly out of fashion as to be unpublishable. Lampedusa died in 1957, just two weeks after receiving his final rejection. Only the recently established Feltrinelli, founded and run by a spoiled mercantile heir strangely drawn both to Eurocommunism and maverick projects, took the risk after the author's death.

Despite the sneering of Italy's avant-garde creative class, *The Leopard* enjoyed massive appeal and became an instant classic. Arguably the greatest Italian novel, it was an international bestseller that still ranks among the most popular works of fiction in a world besotted by *Brideshead Revisited*, *Downton Abbey*, *Bridgerton*, *The Gilded Age*, and an escapist vogue for aristocracy and its travails. Just five years after the novel's publication, the famous director Luchino Visconti, himself the scion of a ducal family, adapted for a sprawling, if flawed, epic feature film still in popular circulation.

Although romantic nostalgia that foregrounds intense personal drama against sweeping historical events is the marrow of Italian grand opera, *The Leopard* has only now found its way to the stage. Like the modern Italian literary establishment, postwar composers also overlooked the work as a source for opera, largely having abandoned romanticism as *passé*. To their peril, and in many cases to their obscurity, they ignored audiences who continued to inhabit a fundamentally Romantic age. Fortunately for the spirit of humanity, our viewing public still vastly prefers exploring love to expounding upon meaninglessness, indulging in deep passion to smirking at arid irony, and delectating in pleasure to dwelling on guilt. And with the horrors of the world reaching a fevered pitch, our culture still looks not merely for escapism but for whatever meaning can be gleaned from other tales of worrisome times that left people confused and world weary.

Lampedusa's estate jealously guarded the novel's operatic rights until 2014, when the American composer Michael Dellaira secured them after rereading *The Leopard* following a trip to Sicily. Commissioned by American Opera Projects that same year, Dellaira collaborated with the celebrated poet J. D. McClatchy, who died in 2018, just two months after the score was completed. In 2016, excerpts of the still incomplete *The Leopard* were performed at the Manhattan School of Music, and later that year a portion of the work was recorded by the Boston Conservatory orchestra at the Berklee College of Music. Pandemic complications froze the entire performance world for two years, and *The Leopard* only had its world premiere in March 2022, in a run of two performances by the Frost Opera Theater at the South Miami-

Dade Cultural Arts Center in Cutler Bay, Florida. Gerard Schwarz, a Distinguished Professor at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music and Artistic and Music Director of the Palm Beach Symphony, led the work with an authoritative hand. Dellaira has achieved an incredible success with a rare contemporary work that deserves more productions, though in Italy, as the composer tells me, Titanus Films, which produced Visconti's film adaptation, holds and will not relinquish the rights to stage performance.

Most modern American operas sound like overdone musical films, with unmemorable, ambient scores that merely accompany stage drama. Many newer American operas are also gratuitously overburdened with tiresome social commentary, usually dwelling on the dilemmas of minorities, issues of gender and sexuality, or narcissistic peering into the unfulfilled existence of much of our creative class. Here we have instead a solid exploration of a classic literary work, unselfconsciously relating the travails of a demographic as currently unpopular as white European aristocrats. Tightly scored in two acts clocking in at two hours, Dellaira has interwoven a whole system of motifs to evoke strong emotion and cavatina-like monologues to introduce characters and their feelings. He has a fine sense for dance, with waltz rhythms permeating the score. McClatchy's libretto is accessibly written in a crisp and comprehensible American vernacular with a few French phrases reserved for the Salina family's governess. One might miss the Italian, but opera has never been bound to the language of original stories that are often universal. To no ill effect, many of Verdi's operas were based on works originally written in French, Spanish, or English. Puccini took us to China, Japan, and the American West.

As the Prince, veteran baritone Kim Josephson sang with presence and extraordinary gravitas. Robynne Redmond, an accomplished mezzo-soprano, performed admirably as his pious wife Stella, registering a deeper impression than the character leaves in the novel. Bass Kevin Short delivered a fine comprimario performance as the visiting Chevalier Chevalley di Monterzuolo, who fails in his mission to recruit the Prince into the new order. Younger singers took on the roles of the drama's youths. Especially impressive was Yaqi Yang's lithe Angelica, a part for a soprano who deserves to be heard. Tenor Minghao Liu, who trained at the Prokofiev Conservatory of war-torn Donetsk, of all places, imbued the role of Tancredi with a roguish recklessness. Theandolwethu Mamba is the first singer I have encountered from the African nation of Eswatini, as Swaziland has been known since 2018. A fine baritone, he captured Calogero's oily self-promotion with a splendid sense of determination. Jeffrey Buchman's sets were simple but elegant and moved easily for frequent scene changes.

Perhaps most importantly, Dellaira accomplished a vital goal for any operatic adaptation: he added something new. While much of the plot is familiar from Lampedusa's novel and

Visconti's film, including the ball scene and the Prince's bath, the opera foregrounds the passed-over Concetta as a character of equal prominence to the Prince. Her life story, which ends as a spinster fifty years after the events of the novel, shows that while everything else has changed, she has not. As she becomes more agitated in the opera's final scene, she cries out what so many of us may feel in our own ever more bizarre world, whose fading certainties and mounting indignities fuel all manner of neurosis. As she declaims McClatchy's words with immense bitterness:

Nothing has changed!
Nothing has changed!
A good girl all her life.
A good girl all her life.
So she has the man who was mine.
My father has whatever he wants.
They are all the same—all of them! And I—I have nothing.
The fading memory of old desires. What can I do now?
What could I ever have done,
Caught in this dead place, Caught in this family?
Nothing has changed.
Nothing ever changes.
Nothing ever changes.

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