

Baby Doe Is An Opera Rich In Americana by Robert Finn, Music Critic

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A good many European musicians-most prominently Antonin Dvorak-have wondered publicly why American composers did not draw more inspiration from this country's rich store of legend and history.

One composer who heeded that advice was former Clevelander Douglas Moore, whose popular opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* will be heard this week in a Cleveland Opera production.

In addition to making this opera out of the true story of Horace Tabor and young Elizabeth (Baby Doe) McCourt, Moore also composed operas about Daniel Webster and Carrie Nation. His most popular orchestra piece is called *The Pageant of P.T. Barnum*.

Moore wrote *Baby Doe* on a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the mid-1950s. It was premiered in 1956 in Central City, Colorado, and was taken up the next season by the New York City Opera in a celebrated production starring Beverly Sills.

The story is a conventional love triangle in the distinctively American setting of 1880s Colorado. Horace Tabor, a venturesome Vermonter who struck it rich in the western gold fields, deserts his somewhat formidable wife for the charms of the young and flirtatious Baby Doe. Eventually the two are married, scandal ensues and Tabor is impoverished by the abandonment of silver as the standard for U.S. currency.

The last scene is a flashback and flash-forward, showing Baby Doe, now a white-haired old woman, freezing to death years later at the entrance to the played-out silver mine.

Moore's music contains no actual quotations of folk tunes beyond one single fleeting reference to "Clementine." But he has done a skillful job of counterfeiting music of the period-sentimental parlor ballads, dance-hall tunes, political campaign songs. His operatic style is a kind of fluid arioso with set pieces that might be called Americanized Puccini. He has a facile melodic gift and he knows how to write gratefully for the voice.

Moore's librettist was John Latouche, an experienced Broadway hand. His text is a notch or two above the quality of most American opera texts. There are

some nicely drawn small-scale character portraits in addition to the fuller portraits of the major characters. President Chester A. Arthur makes a brief appearance before the Act I curtain, and there is a marvelously rousing free-silver campaign speech delivered by William Jennings Bryan.

The Bryan scene is one of those make-or-break, 10-minute operatic scenes. A skillful singing actor can simply take over the stage for those 10 minutes and make Bryan's transparent windbagery into one of the opera's highpoints. Bryan may have been a charlatan, but there hasn't been anyone on our modern political scene who could touch him for sheer platform effectiveness. Imagine an opera composer trying to make good theater out of the speeches of President Bush.

When Moore's opera was new, one critic commented that a country that can produce an opera that waxes lyrical about such subjects "can accomplish anything."

It is an interesting commentary on the American attitude toward opera that there was talk of producing *Baby Doe* on Broadway after its successful Colorado premiere. The project was abandoned, however. Potential backers withdrew because the piece had been produced as an opera, and they feared that dreaded word would kill its Broadway box-office potential.

The fear of opera seems to linger even to this day. Cleveland Opera's radio ads for its production carefully avoid the naughty word ("the show that made Beverly Sills a star...").

Composer Moore, born on the eastern tip of Long Island in 1893, came to Cleveland in 1921 to study with Ernest Bloch at the fledgling Cleveland Institute of Music. He became curator of music at the Cleveland Museum of Art and held that post for four years. One source says that during those years he acted at the Cleveland Play House, but authorities there have been unable to confirm this.

Moore's opera has had a decent number of productions since its birth. It was seen in Cleveland at least once before, during a tour of the New York City Opera about 1960. There was a production in the 1970s at the Willoughby School of the Arts in which the role of President Chester A. Arthur was sung by Plain Dealer columnist William F. Miller.

Baby Doe is a work of smooth lyricism and unashamed popular appeal. Moore certainly was no Puccini, but he knew what worked in theatrical terms and he produced a piece of Americana-counterfeit Americana perhaps, but close enough to the real thing so that the difference doesn't really matter.