

American Opera: The Sublimation Of Ordinariness

by Derek M. Mills

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"What, then, is the American, this new man?", Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked over two centuries ago. It is with the response to this familiar defining question that American national opera--just as American national painting or American national fiction--must necessarily be concerned.

Certainly the quip that "American national opera is an oxymoron" is not without justification. The repertoire has a long enough history, but its enduring successes have been comparatively few. Nevertheless, an interesting body of such work has emerged that treats American themes and American experience, that wrestles with the essential question of the meaning of being American. And on any short list of those operas would be Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

The leitmotif of Moore's operatic output, from the singspiel *Devil and Daniel Webster* that he wrote with playwright Stephen Vincent Benet in 1939 to his final opera about the prohibitionist *Carry Nation* in 1966, was Americana. In a sense, Moore is the Vaughan Williams of America music, or, to change the figure, a musical stylist much as Graham Greene or Anne Tyler are literary ones. His work is comparatively simple and accessible, with familiar melodic ideas and a ready theatrical sense. Indeed, Moore's music, while neither complex nor cerebral, has an "authenticity" that, as the composer Yehudi Wyner comments, causes a listener "mysteriously, to grow increasingly fond of it."

One of *Baby Doe*'s greatest strengths is John Latouche's inspired libretto. Latouche, who had a remarkable ear for the American idiom, assembled here our vernacular in a manner at once poetic and natural. Whole scenes are written using collections of cleverly captured clichés and oral rhythms woven together musically; they have an ease which makes them seem more a part of a play than of an opera. It is recitative that ripples with reality.

The story is quintessentially American as well. It chronicles an actual incident in nineteenth century history that involved common folk-ordinary Americans trying to survive, succeed, find love and fortune and meaning in a world of rapidly shifting values and mores. It's a love triangle involving Colorado's silver king, Horace Tabor, his puritanical wife Augusta, and Elizabeth "Baby" Doe, the "miners' sweetheart" who would become the classic "other woman." It's a story with political, social, and fiscal implications redolent of daily life even now--indeed, with the Clinton-Lewinsky affair prominent in the press, one of the lines, "another administration scandal," broke up the Boston audience during a recent matinee!

Baby Doe has acquired an orthodox performance canon over the years, shaped to a large degree by the recording with Beverly Sills in the title role and Emerson Buckley conducting. But recent productions--in Hartford, Washington, D.C. and Kansas City--have shown some experimentation in both staging and directing, and January's Boston mounting offered powerful new insights that may contribute to a revised performance tradition. Boston brought together the rare combination of a woman as director and a woman as conductor, rendered even rarer by the fact that both are former sopranos (and one, director Sharon Daniels, have been a well-regarded Baby Doe). Daniels seems to sense the essence of this opera to be relationship, and thus emphasized not only the usual political and social aspects of its use of Americana, but also its preoccupation with "moving west" as a personal journey, and with the reinvention urge that seems to overcome so many of us at mid-life.

Daniels' efforts were reinforced by Susan Davenny Wyner, who was here conducting her first opera. Her remarkable Serafin-like sense of lyric coherence and her careful attention to detail, nuance, hint and whisper perfectly partnered Daniels' approach. Her focus on and study of the architecture of the work allowed her to find meaning in even such usually neglected passages as the second scene's opening octet.

Elisabeth Comeaux was Boston's Baby, and her interpretation meshed seamlessly with that of Daniels and Davenny Wyner. She presented Baby as a woman who grows in intensity, maturity, and complexity as the opera progresses, in a characterization worthy of a Teresa Stratas, say, or even (!) a Maria Callas. Two examples: her first solo, "The Willow Song," which is usually treated as simply an introductory soprano showpiece was crafted by Comeaux as Baby's meditation on and farewell to her first marriage, so that we (and Horace, who overhears her) immediately are aware of her depth of

character, her vulnerability, and the centrality of relationship in her own life. The second example is the "Leadville Liebestod"--those marvelous four minutes of biblical hymn music and King James poetry that close the opera. Comeaux turns this always moving set-piece into a mini-drama, portraying in its space Baby first as a grieving widow, then as an aging and increasingly senile recluse, and finally as a redeemed and reborn lover. It is a daring, gripping, compelling reading, closing with a miraculous and spellbinding pianissimo on the opera's final phrase, "ever young," which shimmers and lingers in the house like a silver echo.

The Boston production thus offered a truly new emphasis in *Doe* interpretation. What director, conductor, and soprano did was to focus on and indeed celebrate relationship--and the risks and requirements of reinvention and renewal and rebirth. Thus they drew our attention to these themes as the opera's central concerns, using the personal to mirror and embody the political. The dying Horace realizes that his life's work--his buildings, his fortune, his corporations, even his children--has come to naught. "You will die a failure" says his first wife, Augusta. But Horace--and Baby--and Augusta as well, finally come to understand that the "only real thing" is enduring love, the authentic relationship that their quest has granted them.

This is an epic tale, to be sure, but it's an epic of dailiness. The Tabor were real people, and their quest was homely rather than heroic--or heroic because it was homely. It's an epic for the America of Studs Terkel, not for the Greece of Homer. And it is precisely this dailiness, this ordinariness, this "folks like us" quality that suffuses American opera as a genre. This is what we see, for instance, in Porgy's enduring optimism, in the unintended tragedy of the Murrants in Weill's *Street Scene*, in John Proctor's all-too-human nobility in Ward's *Crucible*, in Susan B. Anthony's pensive reflection on the meaning of her own "long life" which concludes Thomson's *Mother of Us All*.

And perhaps that finally is what makes American national opera significant--its ability to capture the essence of how we live, of the relationships we choose and the frontiers we conquer and the messes we make, of how our lives have become an enduring historical answer to de Crevecoeur's question. This "new man, this American"--flawed, fumbling and free--is at the center of America's national operas, and is quintessentially depicted in *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.