

# CURRENT CHRONICLE

By: William L. Crosten

from *The Musical Quarterly* (1957?)

It would be hard to persuade most impresarios that a new opera by an American composer could outdraw such an established favorite as *La Tosca*; but that is what happened last summer during the annual Festival of Opera and Drama at Central City, Colorado. The piece that turned the trick was *The Ballad of Baby Doe* by Douglas Moore and John Latouche - an opera in two acts and ten scenes with three principal and a large number of minor roles, a chorus, and a medium-sized orchestra.

It was all quite fitting to the celebration of the Festival's twenty-fifth anniversary, for the story material of the work was drawn straight out of local Colorado history-maybe softened a bit, but still recognizable. The context in which the action takes place is the rise and fall of silver during the last quarter of the 19th century, and the characters are people whose lives were linked with that movement. We even make brief acquaintance here with William Jennings Bryan and Chester Arthur. The opera, however, is not really about silver - although the silver motif is never absent - nor is it simply a period piece. There is plenty on the stage to attract the eye; yet the heart of the whole affair is a moving, personal story that mainly concerns three characters: Baby Doe, Horace Tabor, and his wife Augusta.

Elizabeth (Baby) Doe came to Colorado from Wisconsin and, having left her first husband, turned up in Leadville, a mining town not far from Central City, around 1880 at the peak of the silver boom. The big man of the region then was Horace Tabor, a stonecutter by trade, who had suddenly become wealthy when a pair of miners whom he had grubstaked on shares struck it rich. Completing the trio is Augusta, a strong-willed woman who had been the backbone of the Tabor family for years while he was struggling along on nothing.

We meet them first when Baby Doe is a pretty, young blonde, while Tabor and his wife are middle-aged. Baby engages in a flirtation with him; he falls in love with her; and very soon what had started off as a trio turns into the eternal triangle.

As the story goes, Augusta is determined to kill the affair and hold on to Tabor, but he eventually divorces her and, while serving an interim senatorship in Washington, married Baby. He cannot make the marriage stand up socially, though, either in Washington or back home in Colorado, Baby being looked upon simply as an unprincipled adventuress who has ruined

Augusta's life. How inadequate that judgment is is only discovered after the devaluation of silver, which reduces Tabor to his original state of poverty. The truth is that, for better or for worse, Baby was deeply in love with him-enough so that for thirty-six years after his death she kept a vigil at the Matchless Mine, the last remaining symbol of Tabor's one-time power.

From a dramatic standpoint this tale has both movement and shape. It also covers considerable ground - some of it, I think, a bit too sketchily for best results. The opening two or three scenes, in particular, are rather shy on both atmosphere and explanation. They are not incomprehensible by any means, but they might prepare us better for the subsequent events if Latouche had taken a little more time here to establish the tone and make the personal relationships of the characters clear. After that the play moves on easily to the final scene or epilogue, which is a theatrical tour de force, telescoping past and future in Tabor's dying vision and fading out with a glimpse of Baby Doe thirty-six years hence as she comes to her own wintry death near the *Matchless Mine*. In the hearing, this is an enormously effective scene. Visually, however, it did not appear entirely successful to me at Central City despite the large amount of effort and imagination that went into its preparation. Perhaps the machinery was too evident. At all events, any director is going to have his hands full at this moment - elsewhere, too, for that matter, since the frequent changes of set can easily create a lag in the continuity unless they are handled swiftly and adroitly.

Such problems keep this from being an easy opera to produce. They should be borne with a light heart, though, for Douglas Moore has given us here a score that is probably his best to date. It is cast in the conservative style that he inclines to, but what is more important, it stands up in the theater on almost any grounds you care to mention. The pacing is well-modulated. The form is clear. The balance between pit and stage is nicely calculated. The orchestra is sometimes picturesque and ever alert to the progress of the action; while as for the vocal line, it is thoroughly distinguished, with a rich array of fine numbers and a recitative that really counts expressively. In the best sense of the word, this is bona fide opera music-abundant, imaginative, easy to follow in meaning, and always, as the French say, en situation.

It would have been easy in *The Ballad of Baby Doe* to settle for a gallery of western tintypes and let it go at that. Moore, however, has dealt with the story in what might be called the classic manner, avoiding all clap-trap and concentrating on the basic human elements that are involved. As a result, his characters come out with both profile and substance. The keynote of Baby Doe herself is a touching lyricism that grows in strength from the early duet with Tabor shortly after they first meet to her final big aria which celebrates their love and gives a melodic cap to the whole work. Song such as this, soaring yet always controlled, embodies in music the stability that Tabor seeks but never knows in his own person. His mode of expression tends to be explosive, somewhat coarse-grained. Musically, he provides contrast to the lyric element, but it is left for Augusta to generate the tension that gives the piece stature as a musico-dramatic experience. The early scene where she discovers Tabor's infidelity, the one where she confronts Baby, and the much

later one where she wrestles with the problem of whether to rescue Tabor from financial disaster are all treated in a highly affective, declamatory style that sits firmly in the great dramatic tradition of opera.

Moore has always mined the classic vein of opera and he does so again in this case. He rides no theory, makes no attempt to impress by the unusual in either form or vocabulary. What is unusual about this score in a day when practically every composer has an opera up his sleeve is that it communicates forcefully and directly about persons and events with no lost motion and with every cadence in its proper place. By now, of course, Moore is one of our most experienced composers in the serious musical theater and that fact shows up all the way through the work. In the words of Tabor as he speaks for the last time to Baby, "This is the real thing." [sic.] How far the piece will go on Broadway at this time is anybody's guess, although it seems to have the makings for popular success. But there is no doubt in my mind that it constitutes an important addition to our native repertory. The Koussevitzky Foundation, which commissioned the work, should be happy. The rest of us who take an interest in American opera can be grateful.