

# Memories of an original Baby Doe

Leyna Gabriele helped launch a classic opera

**Bob Clark, Calgary Herald**

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Imagine being asked to take part in the creation of a modern American classic.

Such was the good fortune of singer Leyna Gabriele in the months leading up to the 1956 premiere of Douglas Moore's opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

It tells the dramatic story of the rise and fall of silver baron Horace Tabor who leaves his wife for another woman, Elizabeth (Baby) Doe, in the boom-and-bust mining days of 1880s Colorado.

"Douglas used to bring me the inked sheets of (Baby Doe's) songs and arias, and I'd learn them," says Gabriele, sounding much younger than her 83 years in a Herald telephone interview from her home in New York.

"I was the first one who ever sang the music."

Gabriele will take part in a free matinee community symposium at the Jubilee today focusing on historical, dramatic and musical aspects of Moore's most celebrated work.

She recalls meeting Moore, who was teaching at Columbia University, after performing in one of the composer's earlier operas, *Giants in the Earth*.

"He was the most courtly gentleman I've ever known," Gabriele says of Moore, who died in 1969 at the age of 75.

"He was very gentle and kind.

"He came right out of the Old School -- his manners were impeccable."

Although she was the first to sing Baby Doe's music, Gabriele was not the first to perform the role at the opera's Colorado premiere.

That distinction fell to soprano Dolores Wilson.

"When Douglas started writing *Baby Doe*, he had heard Dolores Wilson and liked the sound of her voice -- a sort of silvery soprano," Gabriele recalls.

"But my voice teacher's husband (a colleague of Moore's) who really liked my voice, said to Douglas, 'Why don't you ask Leyna to learn it?' -- because Douglas was perturbed that some of the writing was kind of high and difficult, and he wanted to be sure it was workable.

"So that's how I got involved."

Wilson, who was available and had already sung at New York's Metropolitan Opera, got the nod for the opening night of *The Ballad of Baby Doe* over Gabriele, who was still at an early stage in her career.

"I did the second performance and then we alternated," Gabriele says.

"When she got sick, I did at least four of her performances, so I ended up doing a lot of the first *Baby Doe* performances."

After becoming co-proprietor with her late husband, Vito Pisa, of a fashionable mid-town Manhattan restaurant in the mid-50s (*Chez Vito*) and running it by herself for seven years following his death in 1966, Gabriele began concentrating less on developing a promising classical singing career and more on teaching the techniques and importance of good acting on the operatic stage.

It was something that had increasingly engaged her interest even before her involvement with the title role of Moore's and librettist (and well-known Broadway lyricist) John Latouche's compelling musical story.

And to demonstrate the considerable drama that was there from the start in *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Gabriele is bringing the earliest known recording of the work with her to the Calgary symposium.

"Unbeknownst to any of us in the cast, Walter Cassel, who was doing the part of Tabor, was taping the performances every night (capturing what came through on the house public address system in his dressing room) -- and at the end of the run he gave us each a copy," Gabriele says.

"I had put my copy away and not listened to it for years until I decided to make a CD of some of my music for my family and friends.

"Nobody knew it existed -- and it's really quite fascinating."