

'Baby Doe' Returns, Still Girlish at 50

By [Tim Page](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Washington life has always been filled with the stuff of opera -- ambition, conspiracy, lust and treachery, among less savory elements. Still, it wasn't until the middle of the Eisenhower administration that composer Douglas Moore and librettist John Latouche got around to actually setting an operatic scene in the District of Columbia -- at the Willard Hotel, no less!

Strains from "The Ballad of Baby Doe" filled the hotel's luxe Crystal Room yesterday afternoon, when it was presented in a lively truncated rendition by members of the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program of Washington National Opera. It was a time for celebration -- of the opera's 50th-anniversary year (it had its premiere in Central City, Colo., in the summer of 1956) and of the 20th anniversary of the reopening of the hotel, now the Willard Intercontinental. Champagne, scones and gold-flecked chocolates were served; arias and duets were sung; and the afternoon closed with a complete performance of the wedding scene, on the very ground where the real-life hero and heroine of the opera, silver baron Horace Tabor and his semi-scandalous second wife, the former Elizabeth "Baby" Doe, were married in 1882.

On that long-ago evening, President Chester A. Arthur was in attendance, and Moore and Latouche put him in the opera as well (of all the chief executives to immortalize in song!). "Baby Doe" historian David G. Kanzeg, who narrated yesterday's performance, said that presenting the work at the Willard was the "Washington equivalent of doing 'Aida' at the Pyramids." This opera is one of those works that inspire deep devotion in those they touch; indeed, a small group of operaphiles follow productions around with the enthusiasm and avidity other listeners once reserved for the Grateful Dead. Kanzeg calls himself a "Doehead" and maintains a Web site for others with the same calling (<http://www.babydoe.org/>).

It is a charming piece, quite unlike anything else in American opera. Moore's score combines elements of 19th-century American popular music -- waltzes, ballads and genteel honky-tonk, among others -- in a manner that is evocative and nostalgic without ever descending into sentimental wallowing. At times, it sounds almost like Stephen Foster with a few "wrong" notes tossed in as a gesture toward modernism. And the story, which is closely based on what really happened, is a natural -- the tale of a man who effectively throws away fame, power and the promise of position for the woman he loves. (The real Baby Doe cherished Tabor's memory to the end and eventually froze to death on the floor of a Colorado mine the two of them owned.)

The performances, presented in period costumes and accompanied by the hardworking and sensitive pianist Thomas Rimes, were bright, energetic and very much in the spirit of the afternoon. Trevor Scheunemann, who sang the role of Tabor, has a mellifluous and versatile baritone voice. He has the gifts to be a genuine "crossover" artist in the best sense of the word; it would be just as easy to imagine him in "Carousel" or "South Pacific" as in Verdi or Puccini, which is a nice mix for this particular piece.

I hope it will not be taken as a slight on Elizabeth Andrews Roberts's captivating performance of Baby Doe, both vigorous and poignant, to make the observation that some of her highest notes

sounded somewhat tight. To this taste, it was a fundamental misstep on the composer's part to create such a sweet and simple character and then have her sing in a register that is anything but. Only the very young Beverly Sills, in my experience, has been able to negotiate the cruelly stratospheric demands Moore makes on a coloratura soprano voice.

Mezzo-soprano Magdalena Wor sang an aria for Tabor's first wife, Augusta, with appropriate gravity. The cast also included Claudia Huckle, Greg Warren, Byron Jones, VaShawn McIlwain, Samantha McElhaney, Obed Ureña and Yingxi Zhang. The "Wedding Scene" was conducted by Benjamin Makino.

There will be no repeat performance, but those who want to listen in can visit <http://www.dc-opera.org/> , where excerpts of yesterday's program will be streamed, beginning today. Don't be surprised if you are tempted to become a Doehead.