

# *The Ballad of Baby Doe: Central City Opera Has Important Premiere*

By George Lynn

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With as gala a celebration as the old Central City Opera House (Denver, Colorado [sic]) ever had seen, a new American opera based on a tale of the fabulous mining days of Colorado, was given its world premiere on July 7, 1956. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* was presented alternately with *Tosca* by the Central City Opera Association as special attractions for the 25th anniversary of its Festival in the revitalized old mining town. Douglas Moore's opera was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Foundation of the Library of Congress, in honor of the Columbia University bi-centennial, and is dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitsky. One might surmise that the story of the silver mining days had too much local flavor to have universal appeal; however, it is a curious type of provincialism, if it is that, which would combine the talents of the late John Latouche of Virginia, librettist, and Douglas Stuart Moore, New York composer, with a Colorado story to form an opera commissioned in memory of a naturalized New Englander of Russian extraction. This type of provincialism equals the American story...as American as *Tobacco Road* or from log cabin to the White House.

Librettist Latouche was able to take the Horace A. W. Tabor story to his lyrical forge and design an opera book in two acts of ten scenes in such a way as to excite composer Moore to give the opera-goer a rare treat in American music theater. Douglas Moore has consistently found inspiration in the folk legends and folk music of our country. His opera output includes *White Wings*, 1935; *The Headless Horseman*, 1936; *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, 1938; *Giants in the Earth*, 1949; and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, 1956. It is refreshing to hear a work and to see a production where libretto and music are truly unified. There are very few instances of forced declaiming, which to this writer seems such a predominating feature in contemporary vocal and choral writing. It is evident to the listener that the drama is foremost and that it is a mission for the composer, never an amenity.

Douglas Moore has lived so long with American music that by now the folk element is naturally identifiable in his original music. Music for *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is not only appropriate to the action but has a sympathetic quality with strength in the emotional impact. Varying harmonic schemes are always suitable to the dramatic moment - dissonant for harsh or strong scenes and lyric for those of passionate intensity. There is reality without brutality. The orchestration not only provides motivation for stage action but more than that, it is used as emotional "cue" for the singing. Like the orchestra in Verdi

operas, it must be present to give the complete musical picture.

The chief characters in *The Ballad of Baby Doe* are drawn from Colorado lore in fact, and in a significant period of American history. Baby Doe, Horace and Augusta Tabor and citizenry of Leadville and Denver are recreated from Colorado's fabulous silver mining era along with President Chester A. Arthur, and Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who give us the larger story of national economic strife when silver goes and gold comes as coin of the realm.

The story of which the opera is made is that concerning the "classic triangle" of Tabor and the women he married. The treatment by Latouche is that of Tabor's domination by both Augusta and Baby Doe. The story encompasses the years from 1880 to a little beyond 1900. In this period Tabor rises from rags to riches due to the economic precocities of his wife Augusta. He meets young and beautiful, but unhappily married Baby Doe who supplies him with love and appreciation. Ultimately this results in Tabor's divorcing Augusta to marry the "other woman." His social ostracism is followed by an economic denouement, with Tabor ending his life in rags again. His devotedly faithful second wife, Baby Doe, remains at his side and after his death maintains an irrational thirty year vigil at a worthless mine he had bequeathed to her.

*The Ballad* is a tragedy in the sense of "a comedy with a tear." While the action occurs in the final quarter of the 19th century, this stylization is mere chronological incident in the traditional story of the basic greed of man. In effect, the provincialism in this opera is no more than the correct setting out of which grows moral fact.

As opposed to its Central City running mate, *Tosca*, by Puccini, in which there are three acts of one scene each, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is served up in two acts of ten scenes, the first act having six and the second act four. The tragedy of Tabor begins to unfold immediately in Scene I where the tough citizenry of Leadville make an attempt at vicarious aristocracy culminated by Tabor's building an opera house in which the musical greats of the world will appear. With this nouveau riche attitude breeding nothing but boredom for the men, they escape the concert and rough it up in front of a neighboring saloon. All of this loneliness in luxury is the natural setting for Tabor's romantic meeting with Baby Doe. The stalwart Augusta Tabor determines to destroy this relationship and in Scene IV she almost succeeds, but her sarcastic barbs give Baby Doe the determination to remain with Tabor.

In Scene V, one of the most charming scenes occurs when Augusta's very proper women companions goad her into revenge. The first act ends with the marriage of Tabor and Baby Doe during his 30-day Senatorship in Washington. The four scenes of Act II propel the social and economic retard of Tabor. He fails to understand Augusta's visit as a warning of his impending collapse along with that of silver. With the heart of a gambler, he pins all his hopes in William Jennings Bryan, free-silver candidate for the presidency. This excitement is short-lived as Bryan is defeated.

Old and ill, Tabor returns, a broken man, to the Tabor Grand Theater which

he built, and relives in a curious fantasy many of the happy and sad moments of his life. Baby Doe joins him as the one reality remaining. After she has sung his dirge, the opera closes as she moves to her vigil at the *Matchless Mine*. The evening ends quietly.

Paderewski in his *Memoirs* reminds us at one point that "opera is entertainment." *The Ballad* is that. There is a story, music, choreography and stage design-all combining to make entertainment. In many instances the work stems from the best in American musical comedy. Only at salient points is there an aria framing preceding action. The opera is entertainment-not an essay in great literature or thought-provoking musical idiom. In effect, text and tune have met and found compatibility. Douglas Moore and John Latouche have made an outstanding contribution to Americana in the world of entertainment.