

Let's see some U.S. operas for a change  
Just one American work from COC in 56 years New hall calls for  
broader repertoire  
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WILLIAM LITTLER

CENTRAL CITY, COLO.

Toronto is very much in the grip of Wagnermania these days, with the Ring of the Nibelung packing the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

But Mozart's *Così fan tutte* will follow Wagner's Ring onto the new stage in November and operas by Gounod, Shostakovich, Verdi and Strauss promise to round out the Canadian Opera Company's first season in its new home.

Then what? Are we to expect the same kind of programming presented by the company at the Hummingbird Centre for the past 45 years, or will the move to a new and better equipped venue signal a broadening of the repertoire?

Although Canada's largest opera company already boasts the country's broadest operatic repertoire, one important part of the literature remains almost completely ignored that emanating from south of the border.

Musicals apart, the Canadian Opera Company has mounted on its mainstage series only one American opera in its entire 56-year history, Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Consul*, and that was more than half a century ago.

Yes, not even George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, arguably the greatest American opera of them all, has come to its stage, although welcome on European operatic stages from England to Finland.

What have we been missing? Well, to consider only operas staged by Central City Opera, a list of acclaimed works stretches alphabetically by composer from Mark Adamo's *Little Women*, Dominick Argento's *Postcard from Morocco* and Carlyle Floyd's *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men* to Lee Hoiby's *Summer and Smoke*, Menotti's *The Medium* and Robert Ward's *The Crucible*.

Not that Central City's is your average opera company. Housed beneath a 19th-century roof in the erstwhile mining metropolis of the Rocky Mountains, 56 kilometers west of Denver, it will celebrate its 75th anniversary next year as America's fifth oldest opera company, with a record of achievement many a larger producer might envy.

It was Central City Opera that gave the North American premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* a few years ago. And it was in Central City three years ago that I attended the world premiere of Henry Mollicone's *Gabriel's Daughter*, based on the life of the first freed slave of the female persuasion to arrive in gold rush Colorado.

It has often been said that in order to be universal, a work of art must first of all be authentically local and Gabriel's Daughter isn't the only work in which Central City Opera has made this point.

Indeed, its most famous example is Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, premiered in Central City in 1956, since then staged in more than 30 other states and still awaiting export to Canada.

*The Ballad of Baby Doe* is actually set in the neighborhood of Central City, in nearby Leadville, where the Tabor Opera House, site of the opera's opening and closing scenes, still stands.

It tells the tragically triangular real life tale of silver magnate Horace Tabor, his first wife Augusta and the love of his life, the beguiling Baby Doe. Replete with scenes of revelry, gambling and old-fashioned human frailty, Moore's opera breathes the atmosphere of frontier America, and of western Canada, too, for that matter.

Moore's music belongs to a strong, continuing tradition of conservative Romanticism in 20th-century North American operatic composition, further exemplified by the works of Menotti, Floyd and Ward and more recently, in Canada, by John Estacio's *Filumena*.

Granted, opera traditionally follows a more conservative path than purely instrumental music, in part because of the importance of incorporating singable melodies.

And even for a work of its time, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* breaks no new musical ground.

So why has it proven so durable? The production in Central City this summer marked its 50th anniversary and among those packing the performances were the Doeheads, an organized group of fans who travel all over the United States in pursuit of performances of their favorite opera.

Few works in the 20th-century repertoire engender this kind of loyalty and it stems from a combination of the subject and its musical and dramatic treatment. The fact that Central City produces it lovingly revivals have taken place in 1959, 1966, 1976, 1981, 1988 and 1996 hasn't hurt either.

This summer's production faced its share of challenges when the originally scheduled Horace Tabor fell ill and had to be replaced not once but twice. No matter. Michael Ehrman, who launched his Central City Opera career as an assistant director for the 1981 revival, returned to preside over a strong cast, headed by Joanna Mongiardo in the title role, Robert Orth as (the third) Horace Tabor and most impressively of all, by that fine singing actress Joyce Castle as Augusta.

With the veteran John Moriarty, Central City's former artistic director, in the pit and a meticulously naturalistic production to support it, Douglas Moore's opera had all it needed to argue its case persuasively.

Would that case be as winnable elsewhere? Perhaps not. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* has virtually become Central City's signature, as true blue American as Harry Somers' *Louis Riel* is true blue bilingual Canadian.

But are the operas of Leos Janacek less welcome on our stages when they are set in rural Moravia?

Surely an opera's truthfulness to its subject argues powerfully for its communicability across borders and notwithstanding our security concerns, the aesthetic border between the U.S. and Canada is still largely invisible.

*The Ballad of Baby Doe* may not be the ideal choice for a successor to *The Consul* but it is high time the Canadian Opera Company took a closer look at the American literature of which it is a part.

It may be harder for us to cross the 49th parallel with our cars these days, but it shouldn't be all that difficult to take our eyes and ears.