Ever Young: Douglas Moore and the Persistence of Legend
by David Kanzeg

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Having agreed to help mark such an auspicious occasion, I knew that I was in trouble when a friend wished me luck, and then went on to wonder what I had to do with some folks on Long Island who were having a centennial celebration for Dudley Moore. "Is he 100 already?"
Another friend allowed that if they could persuade Kevin Costner to film Douglas Moore's opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* maybe, then, they could call it *Dances With Wives*.

Most of my friends, though, have no opinion at all. They know, along with most Americans, nothing about Douglas Moore, or the opera, or the story of the Tabors, on which the opera is based. I wish to speak, today, about all three.

First...Moore.

Born, Cutchogue, Long Island, August 10th, 1893.

Died. Eastern Long Island Hospital in Greenport, Long Island, July 25th, 1969.

B.A. in 1915, and Bachelor of Music in 1917 from Yale.

World War I Navy Lieutenant (j.g.).

Studied music with Vincent D'Indy, Ernest Bloch and Nadia Boulanger.

Author of two books on music. Organist. Composer. Teacher.

Married, with two daughters.

Moore was Chairman of the Dept. of Music at Columbia University from 1940 to 1962; President, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, from 1953 to 56; director of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (better known as ASCAP) from 1957 to 1960, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1951 for his opera *Giants in the Earth*.

Next...Horace Tabor.

Born, November 26th, 1830, Holland, Vermont.

Died, April 10th, 1899, Denver, Colorado.

Left home at age nineteen to work as a stone cutter in Massachusetts and Maine. Moved to Kansas Territory in 1855 where he farmsteaded and served in the "free-soil" territorial legislature.

Married his first wife Augusta Pierce in 1857.

Moved to Colorado in 1859 to find a fortune, and, in 1860 opened a general store in California Gulch, near what would become Leadville, Colorado. Eighteen years later, Tabor struck it rich, at age 48, by grubstaking two immigrant shoemakers, who then went out and stumbled onto one of the Leadville's first big silver strikes.

Tabor eventually ended up buying one of the highest-yielding mines in all the west--the fabulous *Matchless*. A mine that, in its heyday netted more than $2,000 worth of silver ore a day; so much that Horace couldn't spend it fast enough.

At one time or other, Tabor was a banker, a mine owner, a Mayor, a Colorado state legislator, Lt. Governor, acting Governor, briefly U.S. Senator, financier, land speculator, railroad owner, steamship owner, stagecoach and express line owner, lumber baron, newspaper publisher and postmaster; often

simultaneously. Today, there are no towns, counties or mountains named for him, though there was a telephone exchange in Denver that carried his name before phone exchanges were changed to all numbers.

Horace was married twice, first to Augusta Pierce, of Augusta, Maine, then to Elizabeth McCourt "Baby" Doe, of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He had one son, with Augusta, one son and two daughters with Baby Doe, and died in near poverty.

Finally...the opera.

The Ballad of Baby Doe...commissioned in honor of the Bicentennial of Columbia University by the Koussevitzky Foundation of the Library of Congress and dedicated to Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky.

Written by Moore to a libretto by long-time friend John Treville LaTouche, and premiered in 1956 in the Opera House in Central City, Colorado. It received its New York premiere in 1958 and was recorded in the same year, with Beverly Sills in the title role, along with Walter Cassel and Frances Bible. That recording has been reissued at least twice, the latest during the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976 by Deutsche Grammophon. A true story, with an accessible score, and a penchant for attracting star talent to sing it, *Baby Doe* has become one of the most performed major American operas in its relatively short life.

Now, perhaps, before I go any further, I should explain who I am. I'm not a musician, though I have sung a bit on stage, and one time got all the way through Bach's *"Little" G-Minor* organ fugue; keeping up with the E. Power Biggs recording, no less.

Only once, though.

I'm also not a writer or a historian, though I've had a few things printed in what might be called public broadcasting's trade press. Articles about programming, and election law. I did USE the word "opera" in one of those pieces...in purely a generic way, though. I make my living doing radio. I'm also a music lover. And I'm someone who has spent far more time, over the last twenty-five years, than I ever would have thought, with Douglas Moore and the other players in this incredibly protean story.

I first came across *The Ballad of Baby Doe* a few years before Moore died. I

chanced to hear it one day on the radio around 1964 or '65, and paid only partial attention to it. At seventeen, I hadn't yet developed any particular attraction to opera as a form. I think I had actually heard five complete opera performances by that point in my life, counting the TV version of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and the time my mother forced my aunts and me to sit totally still in our living room and listen to her complete recording of *La Traviata* in one gulp.

But, even though I was paying only half-attention, *Baby Doe* caught my ear, as it has many others; enough for me to remark about it to another high school friend who was also just discovering opera. A while later, both of us were in a record store in Pittsburgh, when we came across that recording--the only one the opera's ever had. "Hey, that's that opera you told me you heard on the radio, isn't it?" he said. And that album was the first of four copies of *Baby Doe* I now own.

Now, part of this story is about Beverly Sills, you see. I discovered *Baby Doe* right about the time when Sills was taking the world by storm in the New York City Opera production of Handel's *Julius Caesar*. My friend and I had been to a Cleveland Orchestra performance in which she had sung two of Cleopatra's juicier arias, and we were (to put it mildly) eager to hear anything she put on record. So her *Baby Doe* recording fit the bill.

But what a fit! The opera had five sumptuous arias for Sills as Baby Doe, not to mention some gutsy stuff for Horace and Augusta Tabor, plus rousing dance hall choruses, and that grand bass-baritone "Cross of Gold" set piece for Williams Jennings Bryan. Gorgeous music. Real-life drama. Douglas Moore had given the world an opera novice's dream.

I've heard a lot more opera since then. And Beverly Sills' singing career is now one of the great musical memories partially preserved on discs. But Moore and Baby Doe have always been there, riding along like some friends with whom you never lose touch. They were there a year after that encounter in the Pittsburgh record store. By then I was a student in Bogota, Colombia. And though I don't remember much about the Colombia-American Cultural Center there, I do remember the day that I lost my umbrella in the snack bar; which was the same day that I noticed, in the record section of their library, four copies of the *Baby Doe* recording, including two of the original pressing. In Bogota, Colombia!

Moore and Baby Doe were again in evidence when my town librarian brought

a bunch of books about Tabor back to Ohio after a driving trip out west. (Did she get an earful when she asked me whether I'd heard of the story!)
They were there again, during the country's bicentennial year, when the New York City Opera company mounted a facsimile of the 1958 *Baby Doe* production. It featured Ruth Welting in the title role and served as the first Live from Lincoln Center radio-TV opera simulcast on PBS. I flew to New York just to hear it.

Moore and Baby Doe. Twentieth century composer and nineteenth century legend. Or are they?

I think that what's remarkable here is that the various pieces of these stories share for more proximity with one another than we might, at first glance, suspect. Forty-two of Douglas Moore's seventy-six years on the planet were years in which the historical Baby Doe Tabor was alive, and living either in Denver or in her cabin outside the *Matchless Mine* in Leadville, Colorado. Today we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Douglas Moore's birth not far from this spot in 1893...a year that closed with ten percent of the people in Colorado (45,000 adults) out of work. They called it the Panic of '93, and it brought about the assignment to creditors of a building we'll hear more about--the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver. It also brought about the final collapse of Horace Tabor's world...the very year Moore was born! Just fifteen years before, Tabor had begun to forge an American legend, by becoming the richest man in Colorado practically overnight. By winter of 1893, however, he, Baby Doe and their two girls were living in a shack in West Denver.

He died five-and-a-half-years later in 1899, when Moore himself was five-and-a-half.

Tabor visited my hometown of Cleveland, by the way, a year after he struck it rich. He came to Ohio in 1879 in order to purchase a Colorado mine from some wealthy industrialists. Forty-two years later Douglas Moore came there--to Cleveland--to study with Ernest Bloch, and to work at our then new Museum of Art. That was in 1921...the same year that Baby Doe's first husband, Harvey Doe died in Milwaukee.

While in Cleveland, Moore taught, conducted, acted on the stage at the Cleveland Playhouse, and wrote, among other things, the composition that was to secure for him a Traveling Pulitzer Scholarship. An organ work called Four Museum Pieces, it contains a musical portrait of four items in the

Museum's collection, and was performed in an orchestrated version by The Cleveland Orchestra in 1923, with Moore himself conducting.

Anyway, Moore's Pulitzer Scholarship came in 1925--the year that Tabor's youngest daughter Silver Dollar died tragically in Chicago. The following year, 1926, Moore joined the Barnard faculty.

Then, in 1932, the movie *Silver Dollar* premiered, starring Edward G. Robinson as Horace and Bebe Daniels as Baby. Premiered, by the way, in that same Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver. For the occasion, the real Baby Doe allowed some silver ore from the *Matchless Mine* in Leadville to be displayed. She did not attend, however. In fact, she was advised to sue the producers for the way they'd portrayed her in the film. She never did.

Nor did she ever see the film, though some friends invited her to see it with them when it came to Buena Vista, forty miles south of Leadville.

As stories go, though, I think that early celluloid effort missed the best part by jumping the gun. For, three years after the movie opened, Elizabeth McCourt "Baby" Doe Tabor's colorful life came to an end in a manner befitting...well...an opera, if not a movie.

On March 7th, 1935, after some especially wintry weather, her frozen body was found resting serenely on the floor of her cabin at the mouth of the *Matchless Mine*. Horace, on his deathbed, supposedly had made her promise to hold onto it; that it would make millions yet. She kept her promise (often with the help of a firearm) even when she legally no longer owned the property. But it never again amounted to much, the U.S. having abandoned silver as a basis for currency. And on March 8th, 1935, the morning after they found her body, Douglas Moore read her obit at the top of page 23 of *The [N.Y.]Times*, a moment that would incubate for another two decades before finding full expression in his opera.

I hesitate to load too much into this profile. But, since we're talking opera here, ironically, opera and opera houses reverberate throughout this story. Some accounts have the real Baby Doe attending the grand opening of the Central City Opera House in 1878, where the opera that bears her name would have its world premiere roughly four score years later. And Horace built two of his own. One in Leadville in 1879, (which Moore and LaTouche used as the setting for the opening scene of the opera), and one in Denver, that I've already mentioned--the Tabor Grand--which serves as the locale for the

opera's final scene.

Again, first Central City, then Leadville and then Denver.

Both Baby Doe and Horace were of course in the audience for the dedication of the latter...on September 5th, 1881, a mere three years into Horace's fortune, and just twelve years before Douglas Moore was born. On that night--probably the most glittering night Denver had ever seen--one of the most opulent theaters in the West began its life with the "Mad Scene" from *Lucia* and a performance of Sir William Wallace's opera *Maritana*.
You remember William Wallace, the illustrious composer of such other masterpieces as *Matilda of Hungary* and *The Maid of Zurich*, and "who," it is written, "won the admiration of the Begum of Oude."

So much for William Wallace.

The Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver was itself demolished in 1964, two years after Moore retired from Columbia, and the same year that one Carl Zuckmayer published a German language play *Das Leben des H.A.W.Tabor* in Frankfurt. (By the way, Zuckmayer choose to translate *The Matchless Mine* as *die Unerschöpfliche*--"the Inexhaustible.")

So what does all this chronology add up to? Why is it important?

My own feeling is that this propitious juxtaposition of people and events constitutes one of those uniquely instructive historical developments: a series of happenings, and locales, and personages that embodies, in a severely economical way, the length and breadth of what we are as Americans. And as a result, in that very expansiveness, it is compelling to us in ways that perhaps more celebrated, more concentrated aspects of our history, such as Sherman's March to the Sea or the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, are not. Grand as those enterprises were, they remain only reflections of the larger historical picture. By contrast, Baby Doe "was always the real thing," to quote from the opera.

To me, the opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is merely the most visible feature of a single continuous story. A story that uses the full geographical sweep of the settling of a continent to illuminate a simple human love triangle and the impulses that drove it. A story that combines a strange romantic tension, of rich and poor; of ancient alongside modern. A tension Moore expressed especially well by merging grass roots, homegrown folk sensibilities with

formal European musical and creative forms into a work that is immediately accessible even to people who have no previous experience with it, or any other opera.

Though we think our history long and distant, in reality it is so very short. Consider for a moment...Horace Tabor's father Cornelius was born the year George Washington died. My own father was born thirteen years after Horace died. I was born thirteen years after Baby Doe died. As we mark this anniversary, we're invited to reflect on almost two hundred years of intricate historical detail. But we are a mere three steps from its very beginning. Were it not for this chain of events not only playing out but playing itself out so artfully, none of us would be here today.

In case I didn't say so, I think we're dealing here with something quite unique. In examining the Baby Doe phenomenon we must face the realization that though we generally see epic character only in stories form other places and cultures, this Baby Doe "thing" presents us with an epochal saga that is developing before our very eyes...in which we are, indeed, players.
What's it like to live through an epic period? Did the chroniclers of Alexander Nevsky or Beowulf fully appreciate their roles in fashioning history? In those cases, we can only speculate, of course. In this case, we have our own experience to guide us.

For myself, I believe that we are profoundly blessed to be so close to a story such as this; that is so fraught with life and vitality that it can capture the heart in so many different forms. Roughly one-hundred years after the fact, people are still aroused by the Tabor mystique and its subsequent developments. Aroused, with Moore's help, and by means of the other artifacts that it has left in its wake: the considerable tourist industry that has grown up in Leadville, and elsewhere in Colorado, around Baby Doe's memory, for example. More than a century later thousands can still derive a profound degree of excitement, of empathy, and even insight from hearing about the Tabors. And some, if they're lucky, can even find meaning, which is the essence of an epic. Though the Tabors may not be precisely the figures of traditional heroic tales, their story is no less instructive, nor emblematic.

Just as with Caesar and Cleopatra, understanding Augusta, or Horace or Baby Doe Tabor requires us to look into ourselves in deeply circumspect ways; to find out what we're about, by seeing aspects of ourselves in them. Douglas Moore's skill and artistry help us along in that respect, just as Handel's did for that earlier couple.

In this, as in other heroic tales, though, nation-building is the real theme; and forging an American character the real task. Horace Tabor's rags-to-riches-to-rags life could not have happened anywhere but here...in our America. Nor could Douglas Moore's opera, with its wonderful melting pot of musical and stylistic elements, have come about anywhere else. Not only did Tabor become rich on the front-line of American continental expansion, he met his misfortune at the hands of the American democratic process. So profoundly so that Moore felt compelled to weave segments of the nineteenth century's most famous political statement, William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, into the opera's climactic musical point.

(It's fun to recall that when *Baby Doe* was performed in Belgrade in 1961 one Marxist reviewer found it especially easy to use Horace Tabor's demise as a classic illustration of the inevitable evil of western capitalist excess. Will John D. Rockefeller, Donald Trump or Leona Helmsley ever make it to the lyric stage?)

The legacy of riches we recognize here today is hands-down an American one. Most of Moore's operas, (and he wrote eight) and much of his other music, plainly bears this deep connectedness with our national identity: *Jesse James*, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, *P.T. Barnum*, *The Headless Horseman*, *Moby Dick*, *Simon Legree*, *Farm Journal*. These are not the elements of a classical Eurocentric canon.

In *Baby Doe*, however, Moore transcended even the rest of his work. He, and his librettist John LaTouche, became contributors to the legend as well as merely interpreters. Through whatever cosmic divination they were inspired to focus their considerable talents on an already ripe chapter of our history and remake it as their own. And thereby they came to be yet two more characters in a wonderful, continuing American saga that now includes their glorious opera, a film, a classic recording, a German language play, a German-language translation of the opera libretto done for some 1985 European productions, scores of bibliographical materials, another opera premiered just three months before Moore's...also in Colorado, a nationwide chain of "yup-scale" restaurants called "Baby Doe's Matchless Mine" and downtown Denver's primary indoor shopping mall--Tabor Center. Complete with Brooks Brothers. *Unerschöpfliche*. Inexhaustible. Volume alone would qualify it for some kind of specialness.

All this for someone who was afraid of never being remembered. Horace Tabor. Who was abetted, as it were, by our friend Moore, who himself was troubled by the notion that his metier wasn't really opera.

In sum, the historical Tabor story simply leads the on-going march down an extraordinary creative path that involves the very essence of this country's strengths, while laboring under remarkably American difficulties as well. The strengths emerge in the uncommon vigor of the story's participants, in the force with which it captures and ruthlessly examines universal themes, and in the notion that, in America, new realities can always be built by making over old ideas and old materials. Moore's own town, one of the earliest settlements in this part of the world, is remade, via Douglas Moore's notoriety, into something different from what it was even in Moore's time. New realities from old materials.

On the other hand, uniquely American difficulties persist throughout this tale, as well. In questions like how to transcend the rudeness of a young and in many ways uncompromising culture that doesn't care much for losers (or opera), no matter how useful or inspirational. Or how to cope, in compassionate, human terms, with the rip-roaring relentlessness of our take-no-prisoners economic worldview, or how to move beyond the temporary but hard-won achievements of a nation in the making in order to establish something lasting. These are the tough resonances of epic reality. In the end, we probably should all be grateful that we're not Horace or Baby, or Augusta Tabor; but that there were such people to live a story so demonstrative as to inspire such other people as Douglas Moore and John LaTouche to invigorate it so effectively. Through their efforts both life and art have been forever informed and enriched.

So, Happy 100th Birthday, Douglas Moore. It's a privilege to share it with you and your friends.