Take the impact of hearing the engaging lyricism of *Rigoletto* for the first time. Mix it with the "old west" swagger of *Oklahoma*. Throw in sugary melodies a la Mozart or Puccini, a libretto in English, a true story with a tear-jerker ending and some show-off opportunities for soprano and mezzo virtuosos. The result is the opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, composer Douglas Moore and librettist John Latouche's only collaboration, and likely the high point of both of their careers.

A cumbersome piece—with eleven scenes and thirty-two cast members, not counting the chorus: five soprano arias, two baritone arias, a mezzo aria, a bass aria, two soprano/baritone duets, a mezzo/baritone duet, a mezzo/women’s quintet, five choruses. A long-ish piece as well: more than three hours of running time when performed with the traditional single intermission. Yet, since its 1956 premiere in the intimate confines of the Central City (Colorado) Opera House, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* has turned into one of the most performed of all American operas; second only to *Porgy and Bess*.

Virtually every domestic opera troupe has tackled it at one time or another. Countless opera novices have found their previous notions about opera transformed by it. Died-in-the-wool card-carrying DoeHEADS attest to uncovering previously unseen dimensions of it in every performance. It is, in short, an American artistic phenomenon of some order of magnitude.

Yet even today, almost fifty years after its premiere, its appeal remains enigmatic, and even its legitimacy as opera is frequently challenged. "Sentimental" and "dated" were among the kinder charges leveled against it by critics of the 2000 San Francisco Opera production. One called it a “hodge-podge…[with] an almost naïve, Main Street appeal that makes it much more dated today than in 1956.”

Notwithstanding such doubled-edged dismissal, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is one of the most performed stage works in the American classical repertoire. For better or worse, the opera’s sheer staying power attests to some kind of appeal, Main Street or otherwise, and raises interesting questions about where it ultimately fits in the American creative pantheon. Despite critics’ sniffs, *Baby Doe* seems to hang around for the sheer uncomplicated reason that lots of people like it: singers, opera buffs, people who have no interest in opera but are attracted to the historical story.

**A CHILD OF ITS TIME**

Though perhaps not the “great American opera,” it’s certainly something of remarkable consequence in American musical history. Emerging at about the same time as Broadway's *West Side Story* (both of them inadvertently sharing a
strikingly similar dramatic and musical moment on the measure-and-a-half phrase accompanying the words "I have a love..."), *Baby Doe* is an opera-as-musical counterpoint to Bernstein's musical-as-opera. After concluding its successful debut summer in Colorado, Moore and Latouche's opera was even being seriously considered for a Broadway run, for which, hindsight suggests, it wouldn't have been well suited. But that's another discussion.

Curiously, its "popular" inclinations, which derived no doubt from John Latouche's exceptional pedigree in writing for Broadway, as well as Douglas Moore's own theatrical aspirations, may be responsible for much of its success. Latouche was a collaborator in staging *Cabin in the Sky*, *The Golden Apple*, *The Vamp* and *Candide*, among others. As a young man, Moore performed at The Cleveland Play House, and later oversaw elaborate stage presentations in his own home by members of his family, and friends such as John Kander, co-creator of *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, and Jack Beeson, composer of *Lizzie Borden*, *The Sweet Bye and Bye* and *Hello Out There*.

*Baby Doe*'s theatrical sensibilities are unmistakable. Its first act opens during a celebration outside "a brand new" opera house. Its last act concludes on another opera house’s empty stage. Its best moments are "fourth-wall" declarations to the audience by the main characters, e.g. "the Willow song," "Augusta, how can you turn away?" and "O God, ain't there never no one...?" The story even goes that Latouche and Moore found their inspiration in an instant, while poking around the stage of the Tabor Opera House in Leadville, Colorado. Whatever its origins, its creators have left us with a stage work that somehow succeeds with audiences where other American operas fail. No one can definitively say whether *Baby Doe*'s attractiveness comes from its text, or its music, or the harsh reality behind the story, or a combination of all of the above. They are each components in formulating the overall impact of the work, and each contributes its own aura as such. Nonetheless, the fact remains that there appears to be little else in American opera that can approach *Baby Doe*'s ability to move audiences on so many levels consistently over so many decades.

That being said, *Baby Doe* is not without its issues. Its length and relatively static stage action often leave audiences impatient, especially if the production or the voices are less than interesting. Its large cast and frequent scene changes require some ingenuity, as well as adequate production resources to do it justice. On the whole, it seems to have fared better in smaller houses than in larger ones: as chamber opera, rather than "grand" opera. Indeed, certain recent episodes appear to reinforce that notion.

In the 2000/2001 season, for instance, there were *Baby Doe* performances in San Francisco, New York, Salt Lake, Indianapolis, Norfolk and Bergen, New Jersey. While the critics who'd seen it in the big houses bushwacked the work, in the smaller venues, by contrast, audiences typically adored it for its easy accessibility, its tonal clarity and the opportunity it offered singers to act.

**I'M READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP, DR. MOORE**

Then, in August of 2002, the Museum of TV and Radio in Manhattan, screened a
restored, long-lost kinescope of a live studio version of Baby Doe done for ABC-TV’s Omnibus series. Attendees, seeing the film for the first time, were surprised by how deeply they were drawn into the characters’ minds by the TV camera’s scrupulous eye; much moreso than on any of the from-time-to-time televised showings of staged Baby Doe productions. And deeper than they could have experienced while seated in even the jewel box intimacy of Central City’s 1878 auditorium. In that black-and-white kinescoped performance, done in 1957, a year after the opera’s premiere (and not seen since), yet another Baby Doe was revealed—one that seemed to stretch beyond the confines of the TV screen, while at the same time being flattered by it. Despite being an otherwise totally familiar work to those in the screening room, the work of art known as The Ballad of Baby Doe was markedly changed by its encounter with the picture tube. One could gaze into the eyes of the singers. One could see them sweat. One could practically taste their kisses. With the help of the close-up lens, an already powerful theatrical story became even more compelling.

Douglas Moore was certainly no stranger to television. In 1951, a few years prior to Baby Doe, Moore’s friend Gian Carlo Menotti premiered Amahl and the Night Visitors, the world’s first "TV opera," on NBC. Moore himself shaped the Omnibus Baby Doe presentation, overseeing the editing of the opera down to an hour. Shortly thereafter, he even wrote a "TV soap opera" opera--Gallantry--complete with commercials.

Though it was probably not intentional, The Ballad of Baby Doe’s “small-screen” affinity may nonetheless be significant. For though it makes an easy first-impression when done on stage, the piece works especially well the closer an audience can get to its characters, its text and its music. Those who have an intimate acquaintance with the work, e.g. performers, fans and real aficionados, argue that it reveals more on each hearing, much as any great piece of art. And that the more one knows of it and its story, the more interesting it becomes.

Yet some would say, as well, that its “intimate” character may also be its weakness. Whereas large-sized opera houses tend to favor grandiose works—a Tosca, with its cathedral scene, or an Aïda, with its “Triumphal March,” or a Carmen, with its bull ring--Baby Doe seems to get lost in such a setting. Its charms are rather more subtle; better suited perhaps to the living-room (or bedroom) than the town square.

Of course, heavily populated stage tableaux have always been attributes of grand opera. And Baby Doe is no exception, i.e. the "dance hall" opening, the Washington marriage reception, the Governor’s Ball, the Bryan election rally. They tend to be there primarily for backdrop purposes, however, rather than as crucial plot elements; not essential to the story, and more like scenery…albeit animated scenery, in a Greek chorus kind of way. Even in the opera’s final scene, which takes place ON an opera house stage, and in which memories and specters haunt a dying Horace Tabor, the overall effect is one of personal introspection and redemption, rather than of some form of public witnessing. After all the civic noise subsides, only the intimate and personal remain on stage to see us to the conclusion.
The public is, in fact, the antagonist in *Baby Doe*. In an opera in which none of the principle characters is particularly villainous, in the typical "grand opera" sense, society, and perhaps the era in which the story is set, constitute the real adversaries. Horace and Augusta don’t hate one another, as much as misunderstand each’s needs. Baby Doe isn’t Augusta’s rival, but Horace’s champion. On the other hand, throughout the piece, the crowd has expectations of all three that are far higher than their capabilities. Indeed, whether Augusta’s friends, or Horace’s cronies, or the guests at the Willard Hotel reception, or the last act spectral chorus (which even sings a "grand opera" chorale mocking Horace Tabor’s failures), the members of public, in this opera, seem all too eager to taunt the principal characters for their inadequacies, their human frailties and their unconventionality. What does it say, then, when, in the end, we are drawn to the Tabors precisely BECAUSE OF those frailties and their departures from convention?

One is left with the impression that this opera intima could easily survive without its “Greek” choruses; that they only serve to reiterate thoughts that are also handled elsewhere in the score. (Indeed, the current owners of the Tabor Opera House in Leadville have recently had some success staging it that way—with only three singers and a narrator.) The principal characters’ inner broodings and personal manifestos are what dominate *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. The musical and dramatic high points aren’t the big concerted numbers, exciting as many of them are, but rather the soloists’ arias in which the personal puzzlings of each of the characters are put on display. This opera works best in closer quarters because all of the important stuff happens in the minds of the principals, and not in their interactions. Their private ruminations, delivered via a series of inspired musical statements, empower the opera with its unique capacity to pull deeply on an audience’s own emotional heartstrings. Ultimately, it’s by virtue of the main characters’ quiet longings, more than their passionate outbursts, that we’re moved.

A common charge is that there is very little on-stage action in *Baby Doe*. Perhaps so. In opera history terms, these characters emote, ala the static stages of Monteverdi, rather than engage, ala the hot-blooded extravaganzas of Verdi? But rather than a liability, their quietude, in the end, may be the source of the opera’s
powerful impact on audiences. Instead of declamations of near-mythological epic figures, we have the musings of real historical persons; Americans, with personal histories and feelings. As observers of their struggles, we in the audience can relate; we can connect to Horace and Baby and Augusta and their fears and heartaches. Far from failures! Moore and Latouche have given us HEROIC characters, who attain immortality through love and forgiveness, and who imbue the opera with a spiritual dimension that derives from the classic “American dream,” if not from some higher power.

One great advantage that it has, unlike most operas from the great European canon, is historical fact. The Ballad of Baby Doe owes its libretto to a true story; one that audiences often know and can easily relate to, especially if they’ve come across any of the themed Baby Doe restaurants, the Tabor Center mall in Denver, the movie with [Edward G. Robinson](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000072/) or any of the dozens of articles and books that have been published about the Tabors during the last century. It’s not at all unusual to find a remarkable percentage of the audience on any given night, already familiar, if not intimate, with the story and its outcome. Indeed, the story’s very public visibility in the early 1950s (at least in Colorado) probably allowed John Latouche to achieve a level of authenticity in his libretto that, for the most part, comfortably passes muster with the historical record.

**TOWARD A NEW AMERICAN MUSICAL FORM**

Even in purely musical terms, however, The Ballad of Baby Doe is clearly something special. In the few decades since it was composed, the opera has already worked its way into the hearts and minds of countless musicians and opera lovers. Its arias have taken their places in published anthologies. Its roles have become plum targets for young singers. Virtually every American opera company, save the Met, has performed it. And none of it could have happened without having Moore’s remarkable score with which to start.

Such excellence was not necessarily inevitable, either. At best, most of Moore's other works labor to be memorable. In his recorded orchestral and chamber music, in his other operas (including the deservedly celebrated Devil and Daniel Webster), good melodies and convincing lyric follow-through are the exception, not the rule. Baby Doe, by contrast, brims with page after page of brilliance: singable melodies, beautiful harmonic contrasts, evocative changes of rhythmic energy and bold dramatic tension. And though he wrote another opera shortly thereafter, the one-act Gallantry, which has some delightful moments, it is vastly outdistanced by the Tabor opera in sheer tunefulness, in melodic treatment and, ultimately, in audience appeal.

All the more astonishing, perhaps, when considered in light of what else was being composed in the early 1950s! It was the time of a post-war revisitation of European musical ideas on North American soil; ideas newly tempered by Nazi privations and civil devastation: post-nuclear modernism, spare and brooding noir staging, Sprechstimme, “honk-squeek” musical angst. It was a period when an explosion of pent-up European artistic energy burst onto the American musical scene with the help of powerful new technologies--TV, long-play recordings, reel-to-reel tape recorders--to disseminate everything more quickly, in more places...
Douglas Moore was on the front line, as head of music at Columbia University, where a gaggle of household names were making their own richly prolific ways through the contemporary creative scene. Between the end of World War II and the premiere of Baby Doe, the Columbia Opera Workshop churned out eighteen operas by the likes of Robert Ward, Henry Cowell, Gian Carlo Menotti, Virgil Thomson, Jack Beeson, Lehman Engel and Otto Luening, with distinguished help from Norman Corwin, Gertrude Stein, Langston Hughes and William Saroyan, among others.

Moore’s creative impulses, however, were somewhere else; stylistically removed from the frenzy. At a time when most serious composition in Europe, and much of America’s, was difficult for listeners to take, Moore was content to write unashamedly melodic music. His style was steeped in Americana; paying homage to parlor music, folk ballads, dance-hall high jinks and corn-bred hymn singing. In fact, in Baby Doe, it seems that Moore’s life-long interest in developing an indigenous American music that drew upon traditional songs and harmonies reached some magic culminating point. It was as if all of his classical training (he studied with Nadia Boulanger, Eugene Isaïe and Ernest Bloch), his theatrical aspirations (he performed as a young man and even had a stage in his living room in Cutchogue, Long Island) his Yankee background (his family had settled on Long Island’s North Fork in the early 1600s) and his desire to show the way toward an original musical form all came together around the story of Colorado’s most notorious Senator and his two devoted wives.

Somehow it all clicked. Though they were two distinct personalities, Moore and Latouche uncovered a certain artistic synchronicity that allowed them to tap into the infinite to create something enduring. For one brief period, their brains meshed at a formidable level, reminiscent of other creative teams: Rogers and Hammerstein, or Gilbert and Sullivan, or, indeed, Verdi and Boïto. Together the result was more powerful than either had ever achieved separately. And, afterward, in the annals of history, their names would forever be linked.

Sadly, John Latouche barely saw any of Baby Doe’s success, dying a month after its premiere. Douglas Moore, who lived another decade, saw the opera take New York by storm, be preserved in a best selling recording, and then become that rare item--an American opera that audiences WANTED to see again and again. He completed four more operas after 1956, including Carrie Nation, which gained some modest notoriety. But nothing...absolutely nothing he did ever again matched the intense intrinsic power of The Ballad of Baby Doe.

Humans have long used theatrical/musical manifestations of various types to capture their cultural stories, and to serve as a kind of secular community ritual: helping to define their values, articulate their expectations, venerate their heroes. The zarzuela in Spain, Japanese Noh theatre, Tibetan opera, Central European operetta, French burlesque, music hall shows in Britain, and even Broadway musicals in America, all present unique “takes” on their distinct cultural scenes. With the possible exception of classic Broadway material, however, these “operatic” forms don’t generally travel well. When performed outside of their particular milieus, they are seen largely as museum-piece artifacts--interesting
primarily as windows to other cultures—rather than as genuine entertainment.

*The Ballad of Baby Doe*, likewise, has seldom ventured beyond the U.S. borders. The Santa Fe Opera gave performances of it in Berlin and communist Belgrade in 1963. An indigenous German production (in a meticulous German translation done by a descendant of famed music patron Prince Esterhazy) was mounted in the Westphalian city of Bielefeld in 1984 (photos of which may be seen in this website’s “performance” section). In 2000 an English-language concert version was done in nearby Wuppertal. And two largely unheralded recent productions in Great Britain round out the totality of *Baby Doe*’s foreign exposure since it debuted in 1956.

But should we take this lack of interest as emblematic of some deficiency in the work? Is *Baby Doe* America’s *Zigeunerbaron*, i.e. a frothy confection that makes little lasting impression? Probably not. Its greatness may actually be reflected in this inability to connect overseas. The fact that middle America responds while *Mitteleuropa* doesn’t should come as no surprise to us. For at the heart of the work we know as *The Ballad of Baby Doe* are qualities that separate it from other genres, and make it a unique work; not Broadway, not exactly opera by European standards, or folk-opera, or some distorted kind of cabaret, but a new, suitable-for-television thing. (A distinction it shares, by the way, with Bernstein’s hits of the same era—*Candide* from December of 1956, followed shortly thereafter by *West Side Story* in January of 1957, both of which have never become quite comfortable in standard comic opera, or Broadway musical or grand opera niches.)

*Baby Doe*’s very “American-ness” necessarily makes it less accessible to non-Americans, and renders it a less comfortable fit among the European repertoire with which it’s usually compared. Just as Americans have less appreciation for the theatrical “dialect” that makes the works of Otto Nicolai or Emmerich Kalman so popular with the residents of Vienna or Munich, the base metal elements of *Baby Doe* are missing from the European, Asian or African experience. Even educated people on other continents have limited personal knowledge of the political economics of westward expansion, or of the motley music of middle-class parlors, dance halls, Appalachian front porches and American country churches, or of the often liberating personal choices made by women and men in the Old West.

*Baby Doe*’s authors dug into their own backgrounds for inspiration, and eventually created something that reaches deeply into America’s complex historical psyche for its meaning and its source of power. For over forty years, satisfied audiences across the country have attested to the effectiveness of their effort. Having done so, however, Moore and Latouche may inadvertently have compromised some of the work’s inherent universality. Like good regional cuisine, or vernacular literature, which frequently requires some palate development before it can be fully appreciated, *Baby Doe* may, in the end, have been too narrowly defined to allow for broader consumption. In their effort to create something truly representative of the American “epoch,” Moore and Latouche may have succeeded, far more than they could have expected, in coming up with something that is truly new and unique; something distinctly American; a form that is the first in its line, neither fish nor fowl. But also, something of an outcast, standing apart from conventional settings, while still always being judged against them.
As a stage production, *Baby Doe*’s not a sure bet. In order for it to work, it must work on all levels: dramatically, musically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and intellectually. It is a multi-faceted challenge for stage directors, for performers, and for audiences. If all of the challenges are satisfactorily met, the result can be wonderful and transcendent. If the results are shaky in any way, the work itself can seem inadequate or flawed or, at least, disappointing.

But what seems to make it work at all (and probably makes it the unique statement that it is, ultimately), is the way in which it is able to put on stage, for all to see, the distinctive, darker characteristics that are the fine-grain realities of the American experience as a whole. Throughout American history, the core of “the American dream” has involved overcoming a similar kind of multi-dimensional life challenge, i.e. to achieve success one must discern the right moments, have the right talents, and use the right tools. Unlike Europe or Asia, where personal achievement is often proscribed by ancestry or social class, the essence of every American’s “pursuit of happiness” contains the notion that, if one works cleverly and well enough, one can EXPECT to transcend individual circumstances in order to achieve the full blossom of life’s gifts. In the United States of America, perhaps in its purest form since ancient Greece, there is an expectation that life might in theory become art, and that a rich, art-full life may be spent in a kind of theatrical pursuit of the opportunities that every new moment presents. It’s an idea as familiar to the traders on Wall Street in 2003, as it was to Augusta Pierce Tabor in Kansas in 1859, or Elizabeth McCourt Doe in Wisconsin in 1877, or Horace Austin Warner Tabor in Colorado in the 1880s.

**HOW CAN A MAN MEASURE HIMSELF?**

For many, though, the reality of America has often been something quite different from the expectation. A satisfying, “art-full” life in America has seldom been a “slam dunk,” a point that the opera makes quite profoundly. It’s especially easy now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, for us to recognize this, and other lessons that *The Ballad of Baby Doe* has to teach us. Easier than it might have been even a decade or two ago. Our own age has sharpened our appreciation for the flaws in the American economic arrangement. The fickle fortunes of late nineteenth-century silver “barons” like Horace resonate more than ever in our current era, in which global corporate meltdowns can decimate pensions overnight. The forty air miles between the rusted tipples and ghost towns of Gilpin County and the empty fifty-story skyscrapers that currently dot downtown Denver remind us that booms and busts aren’t merely quaint historical moments to be examined in retrospect. They have their current-day analogs, that we must also live through.

The Baby Doe story contains bellwether lessons about this messy old American life of ours; about our frequent myopia over what’s really important, and about our resistance to changes even in the face of overwhelming evidence; other lessons, too, about hubris, and stubbornness, self-deception and fear. In *Baby Doe*, three individuals (not a whole lot different from ourselves we find) tackle their individual lives, suffer the inevitable consequences brought on by their own limited vision, and leave us to ponder how their motivations compare with our own. Horace grew up in the age of the Bowie knife and pistol—a time when personal will and “gumption” were enough to build empires. He died in an age of markets and
industrial capital; where the stock ticker, the telephone and battleships made the
difference. His downfall wasn’t one of the heart, but of the head. He simply
couldn’t cope with the changes, and didn’t recognize his own vulnerability. His
relationships with Augusta and Baby Doe provided the stage on which he played
out his hopes and fears as best he could.

At a deeper level, though, the opera talks to us about aspects of the American
class that we lately find missing from much of our public consciousness:
tolerance, love, faithfulness, reverence, forgiveness, immortality—attributes that
permeated our ancestors’ lives in a host of ways, but seem dusty and outdated in
our 24/7 electronic whirlwind. Attributes that get drowned out by the stories of our
might and our greatness and our invincibility and our “godliness.”

The reason that Baby Doe persists in animating audiences is that it tries to reconcile
these conflicting tendencies in our culture. It seeks to make sense of the divide that
defines the American character—the clash of the masculine anti-intellectual warrior
impulse, and the feminine, merciful, nurturing impulse. If you will, the golden sun
and the silvery moon, to use the metaphorical language of the opera. In so doing, it
speaks to the great struggle that haunts us all; the conflict between so-called high
and low culture that plays itself out everyday in our popular entertainment, our
politics, our economy and our educational system.

Baby Doe speaks loudly to the “cockeyed optimist” in us all, pointing up the folly
of holding on to adolescent passions long after adult prudence is called for: a
common issue in the American psyche, in which “irrational exuberance” provides
the enabling force to move on, when better judgement and experience suggest
settling down instead. In its own way, this simple human story, in the guise of late
nineteenth-century Colorado history, and embellished by its transformation into
compelling stage drama, is able to drill down into the depths of every twenty-first
century American’s personal fears, and offer its own version of how to interpret
them. At base, it’s a cautionary tale; approachable in all-too-familiar twenty-first
century terms. The three main characters are basically honorable folk, motivated
by traditional notions of personal integrity despite their various shortcomings. But
each, also, suffers from a stubborn, gaping disconnect from proportion and
common sense that ultimately leaves them lonely, exhausted and, in the end, tragic.

The community ritual that this unique theatrical experience provides, is certainly no
magic lozenge for all that ails us. It’s neither a prescription for deliverance, nor a
testament of beliefs to be trumpeted from the purple mountaintops. It’s merely a
story, from our country’s history, told in a manner that pitted two men’s skillful
imaginations against the many dimensions of our rich creative traditions. The result
was something enduring. Something that, in the end, contains “sentimental” and
“old-fashioned” American virtues that come from, as Lincoln said, “the better
angels of our nature.” And there may lie Baby Doe’s legacy. For, in the long run,
those virtues may be just the guideposts we need to clarify our way through the
myriad of choices we face in this vast and looming new century.

After all, what were those zarzuelas for, anyway!?!?!

January 2003, Cleveland