

Christopher Gillett | 19 August 2014

Opera in the Rockies **Central City's golden era**



Central City Opera House, Colorado, USA. Photo by Jim Havey

Main Street in the old mining town of Central City is famous for its casinos, its Wild-West-style gunslingers and - a fully functioning opera house. Christopher Gillett, there for the annual festival, finds an unexpected thirst for opera among the Goldrush miners.

Drive west from Denver, Colorado, and you climb into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The air is thin and leaves you short of breath. It was here in the mid 19th century that prospectors collectively said to themselves 'there's gold in them thar hills' and often prompted by nothing more than hunch, started digging.

In 1859 a man called John Gregory struck gold, literally; hordes of bearded men with names like Jeremiah and Elmer followed, and within a year, ten thousand people were living in what came eventually to be known as Central City. All over the Rockies, small but immensely wealthy mining towns were springing up with delightful names like Golden, Fairplay and, my favourite, Leadville, which was originally called Slabtown but which actually prospered from silver. Central City became known as 'the richest square mile on earth'.

In 1878 the people of Central City decided that what they really needed, like any small, mountain mining town at over 8,000 feet above sea-level, was an opera house. And so one was built. Just like that, in the space of a few months. You could be forgiven for thinking that the driving force behind the project was a large body of Italian and German emigrés, but you'd be wrong. They were Welsh and Cornish, no doubt missing all of that opera pouring out of Wales and Cornwall at the time.



Over in Germany, Wagner

(/uk/learn/composers/richard-wagner) could

barely raise the the funds to get the Bayreuth Festspielhaus built, but between 1860 and 1920 a staggering 150 opera houses were built in Colorado, many of them in obscure corners of the Rockies. So, while we all imagine the so-called Wild West was nothing but gunfights, saloons and lynchings, in fact they seem to have been rather partial to a bit of Offenbach, Verdi (/uk/learn/composers/giuseppe-verdi) and Gilbert and Sullivan. The pity is that of those 150 houses, only a handful have survived.

Central City's first 'opera' was *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* and, as far as I can discover, they had to wait another thirty years before The Lombardi Grand Italian Opera Company dropped in to do *Il trovatore* with '48 artists and singers'.

As the precious minerals rapidly depleted so did the fortunes of the Colorado mining towns. By 1910 the boards once trod by Buffalo Bill (who is buried nearby) and P.T. Barnum creaked no more and the house became a cinema. The population of the town was rapidly diminishing. By 1920 there were only 552 people living in Central City, two more than the seating capacity of the one-time opera house that now only showed movies.

Determined to save the opera house, three ladies started a festival in 1932 and it has, bar the war years, continued ever since. The first production was *Camille*, starring Lillian Gish, but opera has dominated since 1939. An unofficial try-out house for the Metropolitan Opera for a while, many big stars earned their spurs here. Bass-baritone Samuel Ramey sang in the chorus in 1963 when baritone Sherrill Milnes was singing in *Don Giovanni*.



In 1956, Central City produced one of its most famous successes when it premiered *The Ballad of Baby Doe* by Douglas Moore. It's a work that isn't widely known outside the States, where it has become a staple. Based on a true story, Baby Doe is local too. She came from Central City and ended up in Leadville after a scandalous affair with the silver millionaire who built Leadville's opera house (which still survives) and which bears his name, Horace Tabor. The price of silver crashed and so did the fortunes of Leadville, Tabor and Baby Doe, who died penniless in a shack; the very stuff of which operas are made.

Central City Opera has become the most enduring of America's summer opera festivals – of which there are many – which is truly extraordinary given that the town itself has continued to decline. The 1970 census listed just

228 inhabitants. In 1990 the town was granted a gaming licence, and the handsome Victorian brick buildings that line Main Street, once shops and hotels of varying salubrity, became, almost without exception, casinos.

Central City now suffers from a sort of schizophrenia, struggling to be both a cultural hotspot and a somewhat dissolute gambling dive. There's nowhere to eat, nothing to do, that doesn't involve walking through the doors of a casino. Wild West-style gunfights are staged on Main Street while just around the corner, the audience waits to enter the opera house for *La Traviata*. Anyone who imagines, as I did, that this is some sort of American Glyndebourne should try eating out for breakfast. It's an eye-opening experience, munching on pancakes at 8am surrounded by bleeping slot machines.



The festival has a formula: one classic from the mainstream opera repertoire, something less familiar that is modern or Baroque, and a piece of music theatre. This year's productions are *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Dead Man Walking* and *The Sound of Music* (in which my wife Lucy Schauerer is singing, which is why I drove up the mountain). We'll be back next year too, spending the first week fighting for breath, coping with altitude sickness. The fees are modest, but are made up for by a generosity of spirit, a common determination in the company that, bonkers as it may have been for those Welsh and Cornish miners to have built an opera house in the middle of nowhere, at 8,500 feet, the pioneering devotion to an ideal of creating good art will be upheld as long as there is a gasping breath in their bodies.

[Read more from Christopher Gillett in his regular blogs for Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\).](#)

CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION

2014 FESTIVAL
JUNE 28-AUGUST 10, 2014

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DEAD MAN WALKING

RICHARD RODGERS & OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II'S
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