

Peter Boyer

Ellis Island: The Dream of America



Teacher Guide

For Educational Performances

Meet our composer/conductor: Peter Boyer

Questions and answers



Where did you grow up?

I was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1970, and grew up in Rhode Island.

At what age did you start playing an instrument, and at what age did you start composing?

I began playing the piano at the age of 15, and I started composing right away. At first, I didn't understand how to write down the music I was composing, though I knew how I wanted it to sound. I have been composing ever since.

What were your first compositions like?

At first, from age 15-17, I composed songs. Like most teenagers, I enjoyed popular music, and wanted to write songs like those I knew. My favorite artists included Billy Joel, Dan Fogelberg, and Harry Chapin, who all wrote and sang their own songs. I played and sang their songs constantly, and started writing and singing songs of my own (both lyrics and music).

During my sophomore year in high school, I took a music history course, in which I was introduced to many works of classical music for the first time. One work that made a big impression on me was Mozart's Requiem, which is a Mass for the Dead. Shortly after that, just before I turned 17, my grandmother died, and I decided that I would compose a Requiem Mass in her honor. This was very different from the popular songs I knew. I worked on this 40-minute composition for more than two years, from age 17-19. Just after I turned 20, I conducted the premiere of this work with 300 performers, including a huge chorus and orchestra! The audience's reaction to my Requiem was so strong that it helped me decide that composing and conducting music was what I should do with my life.

When did you begin conducting?

I started conducting when I was 17, in a choral piece of my own that was a sketch for my Requiem. My first conducting teacher was my high school choral director, and the first group I conducted was my high school chorus. I continued studying conducting through college and graduate school.

What kind of studying did you do after high school?

I trained at three schools after high school, for a total of nine years! I attended Rhode Island College for four years, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in music. Then I attended the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford for four more years, and received the degrees Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts. After that, I moved to Los Angeles, California, and studied music for film at the University of Southern California for a year. I composed and conducted constantly throughout these years, and had a number of wonderful teachers. Shortly after that, I became a professor myself, so now I teach, as well as composing and conducting.

Where has your music been performed?

I have been very fortunate to have many performances of my music around the United States and in other countries. There have been about 75 performances of my orchestral works, in such cities as New York (at the famous Carnegie Hall), Los Angeles, Dallas, Detroit, Buffalo, Fort Worth, Hartford, Santa Barbara, and many others. I have made two recordings of my music in London, including one at Abbey Road Studios (where the Beatles recorded their albums!) with the London Symphony Orchestra. My music has been played on the radio all around the United States and in Europe, and has been performed as far away as Germany and Romania.

Which work of yours has been performed the most?

The one you are going to hear: *Ellis Island: The Dream of America*.

Do you know how to play many of the instruments in the orchestra?

Actually, no. The only instrument I play is the piano.

In that case, how can you compose for all the instruments in the orchestra?

Well, it's taken a long time and a lot of hard work to be able to do that! Most composers who write music for the orchestra cannot play all the instruments. What composers must do is learn a lot about how every instrument works: how high and low it can be played; how loudly or softly it can be played; what types of musical lines it can play easily; which types of musical lines are more difficult; etc. Composers also have to learn how each of these instruments sound when blended together with others. This craft is called *orchestration*. The best way to learn orchestration is to study the work of master composers who have written for the orchestra. It's one of the most challenging parts of being a composer, but it's also great fun.

What have been your most interesting and unusual projects as a composer?

There have been a number of projects that have required me to think about music in interesting ways. A few years ago, I was commissioned to compose music to celebrate the opening of a big new hospital, which required me to think about what kind of music would be appropriate for that event. Of course, *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* was an interesting and unusual project, for many of the reasons I discuss below.

Another project which was unusual, challenging and fun was my most recent composition. The Pacific Symphony, an excellent orchestra in Orange County, California, wanted to commission a big piece to celebrate its 25th anniversary. The orchestra wanted to celebrate its commitment to education, and do a project that would involve many elementary, middle school, and high school students along with the orchestra. Together we assembled a chorus of 120 high school singers from around the county to sing with the orchestra. I composed a song entitled *On Music's Wings*, which was an "anthem" for the occasion. About 600 elementary and middle school students from about 15 schools throughout the county learned the song, and sang it with piano at their school concerts. Then for the gala concert, all of these children combined in one huge group for the finale of the piece. While singing this anthem, they walked into the outdoor theater, and gradually surrounded the 6,000 people in the audience, and the 300 performers on the stage. At the very end, we invited the audience to join in singing, so there were literally thousands of voices joined together celebrating music!

What is your favorite part of being a composer and conductor?

The most exciting and satisfying part of being a composer and conductor is the performance. A composer may work on composing a particular piece for months or even years before it is ready to be rehearsed, and a conductor may spend weeks or months learning the piece before being ready to conduct it. Every member of the orchestra has practiced his or her instrument for years to master it, so whenever 50 or 75 or even 100 musicians come together as an orchestra, it is an important moment. Rehearsing together, working toward an excellent performance is very hard work. But when composer, conductor, and orchestra have the opportunity to play for an audience who can enjoy and be touched by the music they have created, it's all worth it!

Ellis Island: The Dream of America

About the work



What is the subject of this work?

This work is about Ellis Island and its role in American immigration in the first half of the twentieth century. Not all orchestral works have “subjects” or “tell stories” (sometimes the music isn’t “about” anything, but is just meant to be enjoyed as pure music). But in this case, the work has a definite subject.

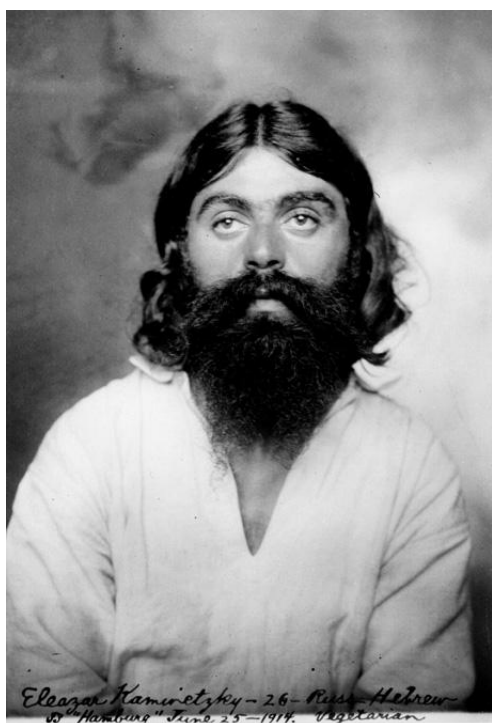
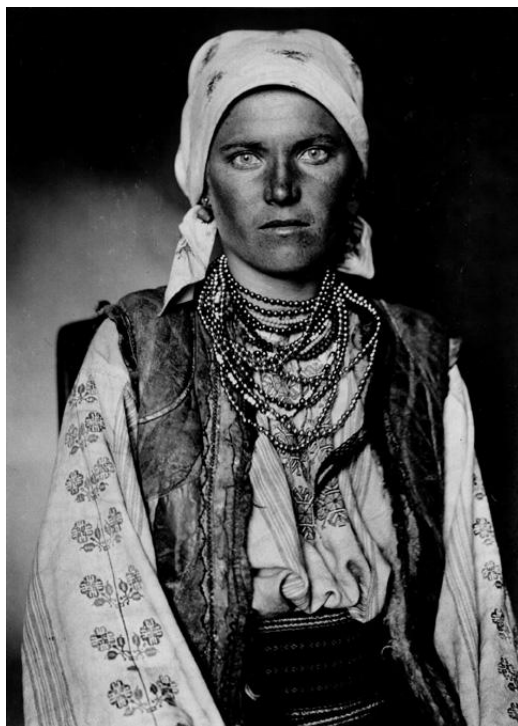
What are the elements of this work?

Ellis Island: The Dream of America employs various elements, some of which are unusual for a work performed in the concert hall. First and most importantly, the work calls for a symphony orchestra, that wonderful and powerful collection of instruments which composers have used for centuries. Elsewhere in this guide, you will learn in detail about the orchestra and its instruments.

Second, the work calls for actors, who read the words of actual American immigrants. The actors tell these stories in the first person, as if the immigrants were with us, telling us their stories directly.

Third, the work uses projected images. These images are historic photographs which came from the archives at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. They are projected on a screen above the orchestra during the opening section of the work, the Prologue, and the closing section of the work, the Epilogue. These are wonderful photographs which help visually tell the story of Ellis Island and American immigration by showing us what this experience was actually like. Many of these photographs were taken early in the century, from about 1900 through the 1920s. You will see photographs of immigrants crammed on ships, arriving at Ellis Island, being processed there, etc. Most importantly, you will see portraits of many actual immigrants—individuals and

families—who passed through Ellis Island. These few faces represent millions of immigrants who shared these experiences.



One word that is used to describe a work such as this is *multimedia*. This means that more than one type of medium, or type of performance, is involved. In *Ellis Island: The Dream of America*, there are three kinds of media combined: orchestra, actors, and images.

What will the actors be speaking, and where did these words come from?

The actors will be reading words from something called the Ellis Island Oral History Project. This is a collection of interviews with people who were actual Ellis Island immigrants: who came to the United States from other countries, and who were processed at Ellis Island. These interviews have been taking place for over 30 years, and there are over 2,000 interviews in the Ellis Island Oral History Project! The interviews can be heard or viewed in a special room at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. So, although you will be hearing actors, it's important to realize that the stories they are telling are true, and all the words you will hear were actually spoken by real people.

What inspired you to compose Ellis Island: The Dream of America?

Like many people, I am fascinated by good stories. Since I was a child, I have always loved stories that are interesting and compelling. True stories can be the most compelling of all. When I was a child, I first heard the story of the Titanic, the great ocean liner which tragically sank on its maiden voyage, taking with it hundreds of lives. The Titanic story has fascinated me ever since, and one of the most interesting facts about that story is the great number of poor immigrants the Titanic was carrying. This led to my interest in immigration from Europe to America early in the twentieth century. Thinking of the courage of immigrants who came from so many countries to America, having little more than what they could carry with them, and the dream of a better life, has always moved me deeply.

Being a composer who writes music for the orchestra, I am very interested in the kinds of “stories” that the orchestra can tell. Of course, since the instruments in the orchestra play musical notes instead of speaking words, the orchestra cannot literally tell a story. But it has tremendous power to suggest scenes, moods, and emotions. Part of the challenge and fun of composing for the orchestra is to attempt to tell stories in sound.

One day I realized that if I could combine my love for the orchestra with my interest in American immigration, I might be able to compose a powerful piece. I had the idea to find stories of American immigrants, to have these stories spoken with the orchestra, and to compose music that would help express these stories. I began doing some research about Ellis Island, and discovered the Ellis Island Oral History Project. I began to read many of the interviews with Ellis Island immigrants, and was inspired by many of their stories. Some stories were very happy while others were very sad; some stories were quite humorous while others were deeply moving. The stories directly inspired the music which I composed.

Why should Ellis Island: The Dream of America be of interest to me?

The stories of immigrants which are told in this work should be of interest to all Americans. The United States is often called “a nation of immigrants.” This is because, for hundreds of years, people from many other nations have come to the United States to make this nation their home, and they have eventually come to be part of the American fabric. With the exception of the Native Americans, all Americans are descended from immigrants, whether they came to the United States 200, or 100, or 50, or 25 years ago.

More than 40% of all people living in the United States today—over 100 million people—can trace their roots to an ancestor who came through Ellis Island. So the stories you will hear in *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* may be very similar to the actual stories of your relatives, such as perhaps your great-grandparents. Hearing what the experience of coming to America was like might teach you something about your own family history. And even if your own family has no connection to Ellis Island, it's very that some of your ancestors had experiences of coming to America from somewhere else. So hearing these Ellis Island stories can teach you something important about the nature of America, with its culture made up of so many other cultures.

A brief history of Ellis Island and American immigration

*From the National Park Service's official website
for the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island National Monument*



From 1892 to 1954, over twelve million immigrants entered the United States through the portal of Ellis Island, a small island in New York Harbor. Ellis Island is located in the upper bay just off the New Jersey coast, within the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Through the years, this gateway to the New World was enlarged from its original 3.3 acres to 27.5 acres, mostly by landfill obtained from ships' ballast and excess earth from the construction of the New York City subway system.

Before being designated as the site of one of the first Federal immigration stations by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890, Ellis Island had a varied history. The local Indian tribes had called it "Kioshk" or Gull Island. Due to its rich and abundant oyster beds, it was known as Oyster Island for many generations during the Dutch and English colonial periods. By the time Samuel Ellis became the island's private owner in the 1770's, the island had been called Kioshk, Oyster, Dyre, Bucking and Anderson's Island. In this way, Ellis Island developed from a sandy island that barely rose above the high tide mark, into a hanging site for pirates, a harbor fort, ammunition and ordinance depot named Fort Gibson, and finally into an immigration station.

From 1794 to 1890 (pre-immigration station period), Ellis Island played a mostly uneventful but still important military role in United States history. When the British occupied New York City during the duration of the Revolutionary War, its large and powerful naval fleet was able to sail unimpeded directly into New York Harbor. Therefore, it was deemed critical by the United States Government that a series of coastal fortifications in New York Harbor be constructed just prior to the War of 1812. After much legal haggling over ownership of the island, the Federal government purchased Ellis Island from New York State in 1808. Ellis Island was approved as a site for fortifications and on it was constructed a parapet for three tiers of circular guns, making the island part of the new harbor defense system that included Castle Clinton at the Battery, Castle Williams on Governor's Island, Fort

Wood on Bedloe's Island and two earthworks forts at the entrance to New York Harbor at the Verrazano Narrows. The fort at Ellis Island was named Fort Gibson in honor of a brave officer killed during the War of 1812.

Prior to 1890, the individual states (rather than the Federal government) regulated immigration into the United States. Castle Garden in the Battery (originally known as Castle Clinton) served as the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890 and approximately eight million immigrants, mostly from Northern and Western Europe, passed through its doors. These early immigrants came from nations such as England, Ireland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries and constituted the first large wave of immigrants that settled and populated the United States. Throughout the 1800's and intensifying in the latter half of the 19th century, ensuing political instability, restrictive religious laws and deteriorating economic conditions in Europe began to fuel the largest mass human migration in the history of the world. It soon became apparent that Castle Garden was ill-equipped and unprepared to handle the growing numbers of immigrants arriving yearly. Unfortunately compounding the problems of the small facility were the corruption and incompetence found to be commonplace at Castle Garden.

The Federal government intervened and constructed a new Federally-operated immigration station on Ellis Island. While the new immigration station on Ellis Island was under construction, the Barge Office at the Battery was used for the processing of immigrants. The new structure on Ellis Island, built of "Georgia pine" opened on January 1, 1892; Annie Moore, a 15 year-old Irish girl, accompanied by her two brothers, entered history and a new country as she was the very first immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island on January 2. Over the next 62 years, more than 12 million were to follow through this port of entry.

While there were many reasons to emigrate to America, no reason could be found for what would occur only five years after the Ellis Island Immigration Station opened. During the evening of June 14, 1897, a fire on Ellis Island burned the immigration station completely to the ground. Although no lives were lost, many years of Federal and State immigration records dating back to 1855 burned along with the pine buildings that failed to protect them. The United States Treasury quickly ordered the immigration facility be replaced under one very important condition. All future structures built on Ellis Island had to be fireproof. On December 17, 1900, the new Main Building was opened and 2,251 immigrants were received that day.

While most immigrants entered the United States through New York Harbor (the most popular destination of steamship companies), others sailed into many ports such as Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, San Francisco and Savannah, Miami, and New Orleans. The great steamship companies like White Star, Red Star, Cunard and Hamburg-America played a significant role in the history of Ellis Island and immigration in general. First and second class passengers who arrived in New York Harbor were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. Instead, these passengers underwent a cursory inspection aboard ship; the theory being that if a person could afford to purchase a first or second class ticket, they were less likely to become a public charge in America due to medical or legal reasons. The Federal government felt that these more affluent passengers would not end up in institutions, hospitals or become a burden to the state. However, first and second class passengers were sent to Ellis Island for further inspection if they were sick or had legal problems.

This scenario was far different for "steerage" or third class passengers. These immigrants traveled in crowded and often unsanitary conditions near the bottom of steamships with few amenities, often spending up to two weeks seasick in their bunks during rough Atlantic Ocean crossings. Upon arrival in New York City, ships would dock at the Hudson or East River piers. First and second class passengers would disembark, pass through Customs at the piers and were free to enter the United States. The steerage and third class passengers were transported from the pier by ferry or barge to Ellis Island where everyone would undergo a medical and legal inspection.

If the immigrant's papers were in order and they were in reasonably good health, the Ellis Island inspection process would last approximately three to five hours. The inspections took place in the Registry Room (or Great Hall), where doctors would briefly scan every immigrant for obvious physical ailments. Doctors at Ellis Island soon became very adept at conducting these "six second physicals." By 1916, it was said that a doctor could identify numerous medical conditions (ranging from anemia to goiters to varicose veins) just by glancing at an

immigrant. The ship's manifest log (that had been filled out back at the port of embarkation) contained the immigrant's name and his/her answers to twenty-nine questions. This document was used by the legal inspectors at Ellis Island to cross examine the immigrant during the legal (or primary) inspection. The two agencies responsible for processing immigrants at Ellis Island were the United States Public Health Service and the Bureau of Immigration (later known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service—INS).

Despite the island's reputation as an "Island of Tears", the vast majority of immigrants were treated courteously and respectfully, and were free to begin their new lives in America after only a few short hours on Ellis Island. Only two percent of the arriving immigrants were excluded from entry. The two main reasons why an immigrant would be excluded were if a doctor diagnosed that the immigrant had a contagious disease that would endanger the public health or if a legal inspector thought the immigrant was likely to become a public charge or an illegal contract laborer.



During the early 1900's, immigration officials mistakenly thought that the peak wave of immigration had already passed. Actually, immigration was on the rise and in 1907, more people immigrated to the United States than any other year; approximately 1.25 million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island in that one year. Consequently, masons and carpenters were constantly struggling to enlarge and build new facilities to accommodate this greater than anticipated influx of new immigrants. Hospital buildings, dormitories, contagious disease wards and kitchens were all feverishly constructed between 1900 and 1915.

As the United States entered World War I, immigration to the United States decreased. Numerous suspected enemy aliens throughout the United States were brought to Ellis Island under custody. Between 1918 and 1919, detained suspected enemy aliens were transferred from Ellis Island to other locations in order for the United States Navy, with the Army Medical Department, to take over the island complex for the duration of the war. During this time, regular inspection of arriving immigrants was conducted on board ship or at the docks. At the end of World War I, a big "Red Scare" spread across America and thousands of suspected alien radicals were interred at Ellis Island. Hundreds were later deported based upon the principal of guilt by association with any organizations advocating revolution against the Federal government. In 1920, Ellis Island reopened as an immigration receiving station and 225,206 immigrants were processed that year.

From the very beginning of the mass migration that spanned the years (roughly) 1880 to 1924, an increasingly vociferous group of politicians and nativists demanded increased restrictions on immigration. Laws and regulations such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Contract Labor Law and the institution of a literacy test barely stemmed this flood tide of new immigrants. Actually, the death knell for Ellis Island, as a major entry point for new immigrants, began to toll in 1921. It reached a crescendo between 1921 with the passage of the Quota Laws and 1924 with the passage of the National Origins Act. These restrictions were based upon a percentage system according to the number of ethnic groups already living in the United States as per the 1890 and 1910 Census. It was an attempt to preserve the ethnic flavor of the old immigrants”, those earlier settlers primarily from Northern and Western Europe. The perception existed that the newly arriving immigrants mostly from southern and eastern Europe were somehow inferior to those who arrived earlier.

After World War I, the United States began to emerge as a potential world power. United States embassies were established in countries all over the world, and prospective immigrants now applied for their visas at American consulates in their countries of origin. The necessary paperwork was completed at the consulate and a medical inspection was also conducted there. After 1924, the only people who were detained at Ellis Island were those who had problems with their paperwork, as well as war refugees and displaced persons.

Ellis Island still remained open for many years and served a multitude of purposes. During World War II, enemy merchant seamen were detained in the baggage and dormitory building. The United States Coast Guard also trained about 60,000 servicemen there. In November of 1954 the last detainee, a Norwegian merchant seaman named Arne Peterssen, was released, and Ellis Island officially closed.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson declared Ellis Island part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Ellis Island was opened to the public on a limited basis between 1976 and 1984. Starting in 1984, Ellis Island underwent a major restoration, the largest historic restoration in U.S. history. The \$160 million dollar project was funded by donations made to the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. in partnership with the National Park Service. The Main Building was reopened to the public on September 10, 1990 as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Today, the museum receives almost 2 million visitors annually.



Creating the work

Peter Boyer describes the process

The creation of *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* was a lengthy process which involved various kinds of work. Because of the unusual nature of the piece, there were many more steps involved than simply composing music.

Though I am a composer and not a writer, I decided early in the process that I would create the script for the work myself. Knowing that I wanted to use words of actual immigrants led me to the Ellis Island Oral History Project, described above. But that was just the beginning of the creation of the script. The Project includes over 2,000 interviews. Most interviews exist in two forms: recordings (tapes) and written pages, or transcripts. The average interview was nearly an hour in length, or 40-50 pages. To examine *all* the interviews would be an enormous task which would take perhaps a couple of years! Something a bit more manageable was necessary.

I worked with Dr. Janet Levine, the director of the Ellis Island Oral History Project, to get some guidance on selecting appropriate interviews to examine. She was very helpful in steering me toward some of the most interesting interviews. The special Oral History Project Room at Ellis Island contains most of the recorded interviews in searchable form. I spent many hours there looking at and listening to interviews, and examined over 100 of them. I searched by year of entry, by ship, by country of origin, etc.

The diversity of the immigrants who were interviewed was fascinating. Most of the interviews were done in the late 1980s or early 1990s, with immigrants who were often quite old. The oldest had passed through Ellis Island shortly after 1900; the youngest had passed through in the early 1950s. They had come from many nations around the world, but mostly from European nations. All immigrants interviewed for the Project were asked a standard set of questions: what life was like in their native country, reasons for coming to America, the nature of the voyage to port and the journey by ship, experiences arriving in New York Harbor and being processed at Ellis Island, their ultimate destination, and their experiences adjusting to life in the United States.

I wanted to include a diversity of immigrants in the work: men and women, from a variety of countries and ethnic backgrounds, who arrived at a variety of times. From the more than 100 stories I examined, there were at least 20 that I thought would work well in the piece. I acquired cassette recordings and many hundreds of pages of transcripts, and brought these back to my home in California to continue studying them. Perhaps the most difficult part was deciding what to leave out! I couldn't write an endless piece. After many weeks of work, I finally chose the stories of seven immigrants, who came to the United States from seven different countries between 1910 and 1940.

Choosing these seven, as difficult as that was, was still only one step in a long process. With each interview, a great deal of editing was required. In order to fit these seven stories in one work, each story as spoken by an actor could be only three to five minutes long. With each interview being about an hour in length, I could take only the most essential parts of each immigrant's story. And since the interviews were questions and answers, this format had to be changed so that each story read like a monologue.

This process of creating the script took four months. And that was before any music had been written! Only with a completed script could I begin composing the music. I began by composing a couple of themes (these are shown in the next section). I wanted to compose themes that would suggest the noble character of these immigrants, and their dreams of a better life. I needed to compose some themes which would be used throughout the work, and others that would be used only in certain stories.

The fact that the words of these immigrants would be spoken (rather than sung) while the orchestra would be playing presented certain challenges. In order for the spoken voice to be heard and understood while music is playing, the music must be of a certain character, and somewhat restrained. If a 75-piece symphony orchestra is playing at full volume, there is no way for a speaking voice to be heard. So I had to be careful about how loud or how "busy" the music would be while the actors were speaking. Perhaps the biggest challenge lay in the *timing* of

the spoken text against the music. When words are sung with orchestra, generally the *rhythm* of the words is notated specifically, so the singer knows exactly how fast to speak each word or syllable, and the words “line up” with the music in basically the same way every time. But with spoken words, generally the rhythm is free, or up to the actor. So determining how fast or slow each line of text would be spoken was crucial, so that I could write supporting music accordingly. My procedure, then, was to speak each line of the script aloud, many times, so that I had a sense of the speed of each line. One line at a time, one paragraph at a time, I composed music for each story, completing one story before moving on to another.

The first version of the music which I composed is what is called a *short score*. This is a condensed version, or “shorthand” version, of what will become the full score. A short score usually contains between two and seven lines of music (I used five), which contain all the essential musical information—all the notes and rhythms. I use music notation software called *Finale*, on a Macintosh computer, and play in all the notes with an electronic keyboard. I typed in every line of text, and “pasted” each line individually in the score above the accompanying music. The creation of the short score was really the task in which the main job of composing the piece was accomplished. This took five months.

As soon as I completed the short score, I began the process of *orchestrating* the piece. Simply put, orchestration involves assigning notes to specific instruments. For example, a given line of music might be played by a flute, or a trumpet, or the entire first violin section. In orchestrating, decisions are made about every note in every line of music, and which instrument or combination of instruments will play it. Whereas the *short score* might include five lines of music, the *full score* typically includes 25 to 30 lines of music. The full score is the complete final notated product. It contains every note of every individual part. *Finale* software can quickly extract each individual part—flute 1, flute 2, flute 3, oboe 1, etc.—from the full score. The score for *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* is over 1,000 measures in length. The orchestration of this work took one month, working about 80 hours a week—the premiere of the work was getting very close, and it had to be completed!

Finally, after completing the composition of the work, I had to make decisions about the photographs which would be used in performance. While doing my research at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, I had examined the entire collection of historic photographs in the collection of the library. There are approximately 2,000 photographs in that archive, and I had selected just under 100 of these for use in the piece. Like the Oral History Project, these photographs are available to the public, and copies can be purchased. I did not make decisions about the arrangement of these photographs, or where they would be used in the work, until I had completed the music. Then I decided that the most logical use of the images would be during the six-minute Prologue and two-minute Epilogue of the work. I arranged the photos in a general sequence that would visually tell the Ellis Island story: first, immigrants on ships; then portraits of individual immigrants and families; then photos of the experience at Ellis Island: arriving in the harbor, being moved onto ferries, disembarking, entering the Great Hall, waiting in lines, being processed, being examined and questioned, more waiting, preparing to board trains, etc. I “positioned” these photos against the music in the score in ways that naturally follow the flow of the music: the photos tend to change at the *downbeats* or starts of bars. In performance, these photos are run from a presentation on a laptop computer, and there is a person whose job it is to listen to the performance, follow the conductor, and advance the photos in time with the music.

From start to finish, the process of creating *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* took about ten months, though I had been thinking about it for well over a year before I began. I completed it only about a month before its scheduled premiere. The work was commissioned by the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts in Hartford, Connecticut, to celebrate the opening season of its new theater. The Hartford Symphony Orchestra gave the four premiere performances, in April 2002. Renowned director Martin Charnin, most famous for the musical *Annie*, cast and directed a group of seven actors, one to read each immigrant’s story. (The work can also be performed with two actors who read all the stories; this is how it will be done with the Richmond Symphony.) I conducted these first performances, and it was thrilling for me to have this work, “my baby,” come to life.

There was one aspect of the premiere performance which was especially gratifying to me. It so happens that only one of the seven immigrants whose stories I chose is still alive. Her name is Lillian Galletta. She was born in Italy in 1923, and she came to America from there in 1928, with her four older siblings. After composing the piece, I

was able to contact her and invite her to the premiere. Not only did she attend, but her four siblings, all in their eighties, attended as well! When the work was over, she was escorted to the stage by the actress who read her story, so that the audience could meet her. It was a profoundly moving moment which I will never forget.

The premiere performance was recorded for broadcast on Connecticut Public Radio, and the response to the work was so strong that it was later broadcast on National Public Radio, on a program called *SymphonyCast*. After such a long process of working on this piece, it was gratifying to have it broadcast to listeners around the United States. Since then, it has been performed many times, and I have always greatly enjoyed the audience's reaction to the work—especially hearing, as I often do, how many people find these immigrants' stories so similar to that of their parents or grandparents. It seems that the story of Ellis Island still speaks very strongly to many Americans.



A performance of *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* in Kalamazoo, Michigan, November 2003. Photo by John Lacko.

Structure and musical themes of the work

Ellis Island: The Dream of America is divided into fifteen sections, most of which are relatively short.

- Prologue
- Words of Helen Cohen, emigrated from Poland, 1920, age 20
- Interlude 1
- Words of James Apanomith, emigrated from Greece, 1911, age 16
- Interlude 2
- Words of Lillian Galletta, emigrated from Italy, 1928, age 4
- Interlude 3
- Words of Lazarus Salamon, emigrated from Hungary, 1920, age 16
- Interlude 4
- Words of Helen Rosenthal, emigrated from Belgium, 1940, age 30
- Interlude 5
- Words of Manny Steen, emigrated from Ireland, 1925, age 19
- Interlude 6

Words of Katherine Beychok, emigrated from Russia, 1910, age 10
Epilogue: "The New Colossus" (Emma Lazarus, 1883)

The Prologue, six minutes in length, is the longest section of the work. It serves to set the stage for the entire work, and to introduce several of the important themes that will be used throughout. The work begins with a single note, F, played very both very high and very low in the orchestra, creating a "spacious" sort of sound. The first minute of the piece moves very slowly, without a real theme, but only notes hinting at the theme which will soon be heard.

The principal theme of the work is introduced by a solo trumpet. This is the most important theme in the entire work, and it recurs at many points, in many guises. In this theme, I attempted to capture something of the nobility of the immigrants and the dreams which led them across the sea.

As the trumpet plays the last note of the theme, the woodwinds introduce an important "dotted" motive, playing it three times, descending. In my mind, this motive represented a repeated word: *freedom, freedom, freedom...*

Example 1, main theme: CD track 1, 1:14

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system consists of four staves: the top staff is for Piano/Vibr. (marked *mp*), the second staff is for Harp (w/sust. strings) (marked *mp*), the third staff is for Tpt. solo (marked *mf nobly*), and the bottom staff is the bass line. The second system consists of four staves: the top staff is for Wws. (marked *mf*), the second staff is for the Tpt. solo (continuation), the third staff is for the Harp (w/sust. strings) (continuation), and the bottom staff is the bass line (continuation). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics, articulation, and phrasing slurs.

This main theme and the “freedom motive” are repeated, played by different instruments, and developed as the Prologue continues. This leads to the second section of the Prologue, played at a fast and vigorous tempo. This section introduces another important theme, very “busy” and animated. To me, this suggested the immigrants’ travels, moving rapidly from one place to another. This theme also recurs in various places and guises throughout the work.

Example 2, “traveling theme”: CD track 1, 3:23

The musical score for Example 2, "traveling theme", is presented in two systems. The first system includes staves for Tpt. 1, Tpt. 2, Tpt. 3, and a Bass line. The second system continues the same parts. The music is in 3/4 time and features a driving, rhythmic theme. Dynamics include 'f' (forte) and 'poco cresc.' (poco crescendo). The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Later in the Prologue, the main theme and “traveling theme” are combined, with the main theme moving twice as slowly as the traveling theme. This leads to the climax of the Prologue, after which the energy dies down, and the stage is set for the first immigrant’s story.

From this point, the work alternates immigrants’ stories with interludes. In each of the stories, the music underlines or “comments on” what the immigrants are saying, and the music follows their words carefully. This is often called *underscoring*. The words are most important, so the music plays a supporting role. In the interludes, however, the music takes center stage, and “speaks up” as the most important element. The Interludes serve to bridge the immigrants’ stories together, and often introduce music that will be used in the following story.

The first two stories, of immigrants Helen Cohen and James Apanomith, and Interlude 1 primarily use the themes above. In Interlude 2, an important new theme is introduced. This theme sets the stage for the third story, that of

Lillian Galletta. This is a very sweet and emotional story of Lillian and her sisters and brother being reunited with their father at Ellis Island, after being apart for two years. I attempted to compose a theme that would capture the heartwarming character of this reunion.

Example 3, “reunion theme”: CD track 5, 0:17

Flute solo

mp espressivo

p

mf

ritenuto *a tempo*

p

mp

(Strings, Harp) *espressivo*

mp

The middle section of Lillian Galletta’s story describes a great storm at sea which the children experienced. As this was quite a dramatic event, I took the opportunity to use the “descriptive power” of the orchestra to create a musical storm to accompany this story.

The fourth story is that of immigrant Lazarus Salamon, who describes in vivid and terrible detail his youth in Hungary under a brutal Romanian army of occupation. In an attempt to evoke this military presence, I composed a rhythmic motive which is played by the snare drum. It is heard throughout Interlude 4 and the first section of his story.

Example 4, Lazarus Salamon snare drum motive: CD track 7, 0:23 and following; track 8, 0:00 and following

Snare drum

mp

Later in his story, Lazarus describes the “beautiful feeling” of seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. At these words, a simple theme associated with the Statue is introduced. This will be used also for a later description of the Statue, and it becomes the basis of Interlude 6.

Example 5, “Statue of Liberty theme”: CD track 8, 2:45



Following Lazarus Salamon’s story, each of the next two immigrants’ stories have themes composed specifically for them. Helen Rosenthal’s story is the most heartbreaking of them, for though she escaped the Nazis and made it to America, she learned later that her family and her husband’s family were killed in the Holocaust. For her story, I composed a lamenting theme, which is first introduced in Interlude 4, in which it is played in *canon*—the same melody played by different instruments starting at different times, played “on top of itself.” Later, during Helen’s story, it is played by a solo violin.

Example 6, Helen Rosenthal theme: CD track 9, 0:00



There could not be a greater contrast in stories between that of Helen Rosenthal and Manny Steen. Manny was an Irish immigrant who came to America in 1923. He was “a real character”: a charming and very amusing storyteller who loved to talk! His story was much longer than that of any other immigrant (2 hours of recording, 90 pages of transcripts!), and as he told it, most of it was genuinely funny. I felt that his story needed music that was quite different from that found in the rest of the work. I decided to write a kind of “Tin Pan Alley” theme for him—the sort of lighthearted, popular music that would have been heard in New York in the 1920s, like George Gershwin or others might have written.

Manny’s theme begins with solo piano, and goes through various keys, played by different instruments, such as clarinets, trumpet, and saxophones, as his story progresses.

Example 7, Manny Steen theme: CD track 12, 0:00

Easy swing feel, “Tin Pan Alley” style ♩=108

The image shows a musical score for Interlude 6. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with chords. The second system also has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with chords. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as 108 beats per minute. The dynamics are marked as *mp* (mezzo-piano).

As mentioned above, Interlude 6 is based on the “Statue of Liberty theme,” and develops that. The final immigrant story is that of Katherine Beychok, who came from Russia in 1910. The first part of her story describes the poverty of her childhood Jewish home, and the music is somewhat mournful, featuring a solo cello. When she describes New York Harbor and Ellis Island, she talks of a reunion with her father, as Lillian Galletta did, so the “reunion theme” returns. Then she describes, in very moving and emotional terms, her memory of seeing the Statue. The Statue theme returns, very slowly, and as she speaks of “all the wonderful words that were written on it by Emma Lazarus,” the Epilogue begins, and words of “The New Colossus” are recited. These are given below. The Epilogue uses the main theme, brought to a grand conclusion as the Statue and her welcome to immigrants are celebrated.

Script Excerpts

Three excerpts from the script of *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* are given below. This provides you a chance to become familiar with some of the words exactly as the actors will read them. In the case of the stories of Helen Cohen and Lazarus Salamon, remember that these are the actual words of these immigrants, telling their own stories.

Excerpt 1:

Words of Helen Lansman Cohen, born 1900; emigrated from Poland, 1920, age 20; passage on the Leopoldina. Interviewed November 13, 1985, age 85

I was dreaming to come to America. We had two uncles who came here when they were young men. And right after World War One they wrote and asked us if we wanted to come to America. But they couldn't send for the whole family; they just sent for three of us: my father and I and my younger brother. I was dreaming about it. I was writing to my uncles; I said, “I wish one day I'll be in America.”

We were supposed to get on second class, but we were in third class because so many people were going to America, because they opened the doors for everybody right after the War. It was very, very crowded. It was absolutely terrible, and I was sick the whole time; I was very, very sick. I said to my father, “Take me on the deck and throw me in the ocean, because I can't stand it.” But finally we got here, and we came to Ellis Island, and we couldn't get off the boat because there were so many people on Ellis Island. They didn't have enough room for us. So we had to stay on the boat six days. They ran out of food. We only had bread and water.

When we finally got on Ellis Island, my father sent a telegram to his brothers to come and get us. They never got the telegram. And nobody came, and we were worried sick. Then they told us, if nobody's going to come and get us off, they're sending us back to Europe. Can you imagine how we felt? My father was crying. He said, "My God, what's happening? Why don't they come? They don't want us, or what?" Finally my uncle decided that something is wrong, that he didn't hear from us. So he had a cousin in New York, so he called that cousin and he came and he took us off.

Yes, I was always dreaming of America. And I was dreaming, and my dream came true. When I came here, I was in a different world. It was so peaceful. It was so wonderful here. It was quiet. You were not afraid. The doors were open. I'm free. I'm just like a bird. You can fly and land on any tree, and you're free.

Excerpt 2:

Words of Lazarus Salamon, born 1904; emigrated from Hungary, 1920, age 16; passage on the Zeeland. Interviewed May 29, 1986, age 81

I did not have a normal childhood because there was a war, a never-ending war. That's all I knew of, the scarcity of food, the scarcity of materials. We had to fight for a piece of bread; hide it because it was taken away from you. So when I left, I just came with my shirt on my back.

The Romanians came in to Hungary as an army of occupation. When they came in, they were anxious to get rid of the minorities. The Jews had nobody who would stick up for them. The Romanians made Jews turn in their precious stones, silver coins, of which my father had a big amount. And not only did they take it away from him, but they beat him up mercilessly. And the soldier that beat him up didn't have the heart to hit him hard, and the officer hollered, "Hit him hard!" And before they took him away, he came over to us children: "Let me bless you." We never knew if he was going to come back because over there, they took you away and you disappeared. So when he came over to bless us, my mother collapsed and died.

We decided to leave. Of course, you couldn't come through Germany; it was closed off. So, to reach the Port of Antwerp in Belgium, you had to go through the underbelly of Europe. And it was a trip of five weeks. At that time, the railroads didn't have a glass pane in their windows; that's how bad it was. There wasn't a single pane in any car—unbelievable. I noticed, as we came closer to port, masses and masses of people from East Europe, from the Baltics. It was waves and waves of people; unbelievable what you saw.

This was an old broken down boat. The trip was eleven days on the ocean, and we were packed in tight, like in the army when they ship soldiers across. Nobody ate the first few days; everybody was seasick. I stayed in bed a whole week. The last two days, I finally got to taste food, and when I saw the lights I felt fine; I know we're nearing land. At dawn, when we saw the Statue of Liberty, like welcoming you, that was such a beautiful feeling. People started to sing and everybody was happy.

I feel like I had two lives. You plant something in the ground, it has its roots, and then you transplant it where it stays permanently. That's what happened to me. You put an end, and forget about your childhood. I became a man, here, all of a sudden. I started life new, amongst people whose language I didn't understand. It was a different life; everything was different, but I never despaired, I was optimistic. And this is the only country where you're not a stranger, because we are all strangers. It's only a matter of time who got here first.

The Statue of Liberty was a gift to the United States from the people of France, in celebration of the ideal of liberty. The 151-foot statue was created by French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, with structural help from Gustave Eiffel. A huge effort on the part of many Americans was required to raise funds for her 154-foot pedestal and foundation. As part of this fundraising effort, Emma Lazarus (1849-1887) wrote a poem in 1883 celebrating the Statue as a symbol for immigrants seeking a new life in America. The Statue was dedicated in 1886, and in

1903, her sonnet was inscribed on a plaque on the pedestal she had helped make possible. For more than a century, her words have been associated with the Statue, and the freedom and opportunity she represents. Perhaps more than any others, these words speak to “the dream of America.”

**Excerpt 3:
“The New Colossus” – Emma Lazarus, 1883**

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”



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Websites

For further research

American Family Immigration History Center: www.EllisIsland.org

This website of the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. provides for online searching of passenger arrival records, a very exciting and useful tool.

Ellis Island Immigration Museum: www.EllisIsland.com

The commercial website of Aramark, the official concessioner of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

National Park Service: www.nps.gov/stli/serv02.htm

This is the Government's official site of the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island National Monument.

Composer/conductor Peter Boyer: www.PropulsiveMusic.com

This site provides extensive information about Peter Boyer and his music.

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