

Ellis Island: The Dream of America Composer's Note

Ellis Island: The Dream of America was born out of my fascination with the relationship between history and music. I'm drawn to good stories—especially stories which come from the past but are relevant to the present—and as an orchestral composer, I'm intrigued by the potential of the orchestra as a storytelling medium. Of course, orchestral music cannot tell stories in a literal way, but its ability to suggest scenes and emotions, and evoke responses in listeners, has challenged and stimulated composers for centuries. My fascination with the story of the Titanic led me to choose that as the subject of an early orchestral work, and considering the plight of that vessel's third-class passengers—humble European immigrants bound for America—led me to think more broadly about early twentieth-century American immigration.

America is a nation of immigrants, and our immigrant history is a profound part of our American mythology. In the history of American immigration, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty are icons of immense significance. In the years of its operation, from 1892 to 1954, more than twelve million immigrants, over 70% of all immigrants to the United States, passed through Ellis Island, the processing station which was “the gateway to America.” Today, more than 40% of the U.S. population, over 100 million Americans, can trace their roots to an ancestor who came through Ellis Island. The stories of Ellis Island immigrants are in many ways *our* family stories: whether they are the tales of our grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, or friends, so many Americans can relate to these experiences as part of our collective history. This is what makes Ellis Island stories so fascinating, and it's what drew me to this material as the basis of a major composition.

When I decided to create a work about Ellis Island, I knew that I wanted to combine spoken word with the orchestra. When I began researching Ellis Island, I learned of the existence of something which would come to define the nature of the piece: the Ellis Island Oral History Project. This is a collection of interviews, housed at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, with immigrants who were processed at Ellis Island during the years of its operation. Begun in 1973, the Ellis Island Oral History Project now contains over 2,000 interviews. The largest number of these were done during the late 1980s and early 1990s, catalyzed by the opening of the Museum in 1990. 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. Collectively, the interviews which constitute the Ellis Island Oral History Project—in both recorded form and in transcripts—are a treasure of immeasurable worth in American history. When I learned of the existence of this resource, I knew I had found the source from which my texts would be drawn: *real* words of *real* people telling their own stories.

The decision to use texts from the Ellis Island Oral History Project meant that the work would require actors, and it's an important distinction that they are not “narrators” or “speakers,” but actors. They deliver their monologues in the first person. The use of actors and, in live performance, projected images with the orchestra makes *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* a hybrid work which is closer to a theater piece than a pure concert work, though it is intended to be performed in the concert hall.

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, prior to composing the music. The creation of the script involved the selection, arrangement and editing of texts from the Ellis Island Oral History Project into a sort of dramatic narrative. This proved to be a huge task, not least because of the staggering amount of material which exists (much more than I could ever realistically canvas for material). Ellis Island welcomed (or rejected) immigrants from a great many countries over a span of more than sixty years, and so I wanted the immigrants' stories chosen for inclusion to be widely representative of both geography and historical period. And of course, I wanted to use stories which would say something important about the American immigrant experience, stories which were poignant, gripping, or even humorous. I examined over 100 interviews, and found many more stories than could be included in a 43-minute piece with 25 minutes of spoken word. Ultimately I settled on a structure which includes seven stories, four female and three male, of immigrants who came through Ellis Island from seven countries, between 1910 and 1940.

For the final text in the work, I knew from the beginning that I could not create a work about Ellis Island without making reference to the poem by Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, which is inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. This poem is synonymous with the Statue, Ellis Island, and American immigration in the minds of

many Americans. A number of immigrants interviewed for the project made reference to the poem, and the words of Katherine Beychok provided a natural bridge to a recitation of the poem, which serves as the work's epilogue.

The orchestral music in *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* is continuous, framing, commenting on, and amplifying the spoken words. Following a six-minute orchestral prologue, the work's structure alternates the individual immigrants' stories with orchestral interludes. In general, during the actors' monologues in which the immigrants' stories are told, the orchestra plays a supporting role, employing a more sparse orchestration and texture so as not to overpower the speaking voice. During the interludes, the orchestra assumes the primary role, and accordingly "speaks up" with fuller orchestration. The prologue introduces much of the work's principal thematic material. It is in two sections, slow and fast. In the first section, the work's main theme, simple and somewhat folk-like in character, is introduced by a solo trumpet, then taken up by the strings and developed. The second section is quick and vigorous, and introduces a fast-moving theme in the trumpets, with pulsating accompaniment in the whole orchestra, which I think of as "traveling music." These themes recur in many guises throughout the entire piece.

In addition to these, there are other important musical themes, some of which are associated with particular immigrants' stories. Of course I attempted to compose music which was appropriate for the nature and character of each of the stories. For Lazarus Salamon's story of the military oppression in the Hungary of his youth, a menacing snare drum tattoo is significant. But when he speaks of arriving in New York and seeing the Statue of Liberty, a quiet, hymn-like theme for the strings is heard—which will recur at a later mention of the Statue. Lillian Galletta's story is that of children's reunion with their father—an emotional and heartwarming story which I attempted to reflect in a lyrical "reunion" theme. The story of Helen Rosenthal is one of escaping the Nazis to find freedom in America, though her entire family perished at Auschwitz. For this I chose a solo violin to play a lamenting theme with a kind of Jewish character. In stark contrast to this is the story of Manny Steen, an irrepressible Irish immigrant and delightful raconteur. His story cried out for a "Tin Pan Alley" treatment, markedly different in style from the rest of the music. Just as each immigrant is a strand in the American tapestry, so I attempted to reflect their tales with various musical styles.

In live performances of *Ellis Island: The Dream of America*, there is a visual component which accompanies the music during the Prologue and Epilogue. This consists of images from the archive of historic photographs housed at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum Library. Many of these come from the collection of Augustus Sherman, a longtime Ellis Island employee who took a number of poignant and historically important photographs of immigrants. These immigrants' faces seem to tell their own stories, and it is little wonder that copies of many of these photographs are displayed prominently in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Work on this piece was begun in the months before September 11, 2001, and completed in the months that followed. During my research trips to Ellis Island in the summer of 2001, many times I had imagined what it was like to be an immigrant sailing into New York Harbor, and seeing the skyline of lower Manhattan. As the world mourned those devastating events, I often reflected on how that skyline had tragically changed. After September 11, the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island Immigration Museum, which draw millions of visitors each year, were closed to the public for over three months; the Statue itself did not welcome visitors again until August 2004. The reopening of these American icons reminds us of the endurance of the freedoms which have drawn generations of immigrants from around the world.

Ellis Island: The Dream of America was commissioned by The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, in celebration of the inaugural season of its Belding Theatre. It was premiered by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra under my direction, with a cast of actors directed by Martin Charnin, at The Bushnell on April 9, 2002. At that first performance, it was my great pleasure to welcome to the stage Lillian Galletta, the only one of the seven immigrants featured in my work who is still with us. This delightful moment was made even more poignant by the fact that her four older siblings, all in their eighties, who had traveled with her from Sicily to America in 1928, joined us that evening.

The stories of Ellis Island are stories of journeys. My personal journey with this project, from its conception in 1999, to its premiere in 2002, its recording in 2003, its release by Naxos in 2005, followed by its Grammy nomination, and its more than 100 performances to date, has been both a long and rewarding one. I hope that listeners may find these stories as fascinating, illuminating and inspiring as I do.

—Peter Boyer, 2010