

notes

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ELLIS ISLAND / THE NEW WORLD

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: Antonín Dvořák, his wife and two children passed through Ellis Island on September 27, 1892, when he first arrived in New York City to become director of the newly founded National Conservatory of Music. During his three-year residency in New York (which included a summer vacation spent in Spillville, Iowa), Dvořák composed two of his greatest works — the *Cello Concerto* and the “*New World*” *Symphony*. Moishe Gershovitz arrived on Ellis Island from St. Petersburg a few years before, married another Russian immigrant, and the couple’s two sons — George and Ira Gershwin — changed the course of the American experience. At the start of the new millennium, American composer Peter Boyer, in his stirring *Ellis Island*, celebrated the millions of visitors and immigrants without whom the United States would never have become the great democratic republic it is today. 🎵



PETER BOYER

Born February 10, 1970 in Providence, Rhode Island.

SUITE FROM ELLIS ISLAND: *THE DREAM OF AMERICA FOR ACTORS & ORCHESTRA* (2002)

- First performed by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra on April 9, 2002, conducted by the composer.
- These concerts mark the first performances of this piece by the Des Moines Symphony.
(Duration: ca. 26 minutes)

American composer, conductor and teacher Peter Boyer, born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1970, received his undergraduate training at Rhode Island College and his master’s and

doctoral degrees from the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford. (At age 25, in 1995, he became the youngest recipient of a doctoral degree in the history of that institution.) He also studied privately with John Corigliano in New York, and completed the Film Scoring Program at the USC School of Music, working with the late Oscar-winning composer Elmer Bernstein. Since 1996, Boyer has been on the faculty of Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, where he holds the Helen H. Smith Chair in Music; he has also taught at the Henry Mancini Institute and the Conductors Institute at Bard College. Among his many distinctions are residencies with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and Pasadena Symphony, two BMI Student Awards, the First Music Carnegie Hall Commission, Lancaster Symphony Composer’s Award, Heckscher Prize from Ithaca College, and a Grammy Award nomination for Best Classical

Contemporary Composition for the 2005 Naxos recording of *Ellis Island*. Boyer has received commissions from such noted institutions as the Boston Pops, Pacific Symphony, Cincinnati Pops, Eastern Music Festival, Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, and American Composers Forum; recordings of his music appear on the Naxos American Classics, BSO Classics, Koch International Classics, Albany, FWSO Live and Fanfare Cincinnati labels. In addition to his work for the concert hall, Peter Boyer is also active in film and television as a composer and orchestrator, with credits including the History Channel, *Jurassic World*, *Inside Out*, *Star Trek*, *The Hunger Games*, *Minions*, *Cars 2*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, and the Oscar-winning *Up*.

Boyer's *Ellis Island: The Dream of America*, for actors and orchestra, was commissioned by the Bushnell Performing Arts Center in Hartford and broadcast on National Public Radio's SymphonyCast. It has been performed over 160 times by more than 70 orchestras and recorded on Naxos with a cast of renowned actors featuring Olympia Dukakis, Eli Wallach, Bebe Neuwirth and Barry Bostwick. The composer wrote, "*Ellis Island: The Dream of America* is conceived for performance employing a large orchestra in the concert hall, but its nature renders it closer to a piece of theater than to a purely symphonic work. As an American composer who is fascinated by the relationship between historical events and music, I was drawn to the idea of creating a symphonic work that would be based on the American immigrant experience. This concept drew me naturally to Ellis Island, the now-legendary immigrant processing station that was the gateway to America for literally millions of people. In the years of its operation, more than 12 million immigrants, or over 70% of all immigrants to the United States, passed through the halls of this

facility. 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. Thus, this is a theme of great relevance to all Americans.

"In researching the subject of Ellis Island, I learned of the existence of something that would 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 nearly 2,000 interviews.... Employing texts from the Ellis Island Oral History Project required that those words be properly presented. Whereas the few pieces in the symphonic repertoire that employ spoken word call for 'narrator' or 'speaker,' what this work demands is true actors who can embody the spirits of the individual immigrants themselves. For the piece to succeed, it is crucial the audience accept that the words they are hearing are being spoken in the first person.

"The creation of the script — around which I composed the music — 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 that exists (much more than I could ever realistically canvas). Because Ellis Island welcomed (or rejected) immigrants from a great many countries over a span of more than sixty years, 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 that would say something important about the American immigrant experience, stories that were poignant, gripping or even humorous. In fact, it seems the whole range of human experience is contained in the

Project, and the most difficult task was deciding what material to omit. I examined over 100 interviews, and found many more stories than could be included in a single piece. Ultimately I settled on a structure that includes the stories of immigrants who came through Ellis Island from different 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 (including my own).

“The orchestral music in *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* is continuous, framing, commenting on and (hopefully) amplifying the words. 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.”

The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, three bassoons,

contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, chimes, glockenspiel, snare drum, bass drum, tam-tam, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, triangle, tambourine, anvil, slapstick, four tom-toms, drum kit, harp, piano, celesta and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



GEORGE GERSHWIN

**Born September 26, 1898
in Brooklyn, New York;
died July 11, 1937 in
Hollywood, California.**

CONCERTO IN F FOR PIANO & ORCHESTRA (1925)

- First performed by the New York Symphony at Carnegie Hall on December 3, 1925, conducted by Walter Damrosch with the composer as soloist.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on December 31, 1983 with Yuri Krasnapolsky conducting and Earl Wild as soloist. Two subsequent performances occurred; most recently on March 27 & 28, 2010 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Christopher O’Riley as soloist.

(Duration: ca. 32 minutes)

Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony and one of this country’s most prominent musical figures for the half-century before World War II, was among the Aeolian Hall audience when George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* exploded above the musical world on February 12, 1924. He recognized Gershwin’s genius (and, no doubt, the opportunity for wide publicity), and approached him a short time later

with a proposal for another large-scale work. A concerto for piano was agreed upon, and Gershwin was awarded a commission from the New York Symphony to compose the piece, and also to be the soloist at its premiere and a half dozen subsequent concerts. The story — that Gershwin then rushed out and bought a reference book explaining what a concerto is — is probably apocryphal. He did, however, study the scores of some concertos of earlier masters to discover how they had handled the problems of structure and instrumental balance. He made the first extensive sketches for the work while in London during May 1925. By July, back home, he was able to play for his friends large fragments of the evolving work, tentatively entitled “*New York Concerto*.” The first movement was completed by the end of that month, the second and third by September, and the orchestration carried out in October and November, by which time the title had become simply *Concerto in F*. He gave the premiere with Damrosch the following month in Carnegie Hall.

Gershwin provided a short analysis of the *Concerto* for the New York Tribune: “The first movement employs a Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young, enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments and with a Charleston motif introduced by bassoon, horns, clarinets and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano. The second movement has a poetic, nocturnal atmosphere that has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated. The final movement is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping the same pace throughout.”

Though Gershwin based his *Concerto* loosely on classical formal models, its structure

is episodic in nature. His words above do not mention several other melodies that appear in the first and second movements, nor the return of some of those themes in the finale as a means of unifying the work’s overall structure.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, woodblock, tam-tam, bells, xylophone, whip and the usual strings.



ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

**Born September 8, 1841
in Nelahozeves, Bohemia;
died May 1, 1904 in
Prague.**

SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN E MINOR, OP. 95, “FROM THE NEW WORLD” (1893)

- First performed by the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893, conducted by Anton Seidl.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 12, 1950 with Frank Noyes conducting. Four subsequent performances occurred, most recently on November 13 & 14, 2010 with Joseph Giunta conducting.
(Duration: ca. 42 minutes)

When Antonín Dvořák, aged 51, arrived in New York on September 27, 1892 to direct the new National Conservatory of Music, both he and the institution’s founder, Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, expected that he would help to foster an American school of composition. He was clear and specific in his assessment: “I am convinced that the future music of this country must be

founded on what are called Negro melodies. They can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States. . . . There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source here." The "*New World*" *Symphony* was not only Dvořák's way of pointing toward a truly American musical idiom but also a reflection of his own feelings about the country. "I should never have written the *Symphony* as I have," he said, "if I hadn't seen America."

The "*New World*" *Symphony* is unified by the use of a motto theme that occurs in all four movements. This bold, striding phrase, with its arching contour, is played by the horns as the main theme of the opening movement, having been foreshadowed in the slow introduction. Two

other themes are used in the first movement: a sad melody for flute and oboe that exhibits folk characteristics, and a brighter tune with a striking resemblance to the spiritual "*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*" for the solo flute. The second movement was inspired by the forest funeral of Minnehaha in Longfellow's epic poem "*The Song of Hiawatha*," and the third by the dance of the Indians at the feast. The finale employs a sturdy motive introduced by the horns and trumpets after a few introductory measures in the strings.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle and the usual strings.