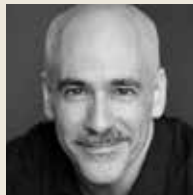


FAVORITE

PETER BOYER

Composer
Photo: Danika Singfield



New York—Welcome to the Land of Freedom...
Anonymous, Published July 2, 1887
South Street Seaport Museum, gift of Fritz Gold,
1994.017.005

Peter Boyer has struck actual notes that resonate not only with American immigrants, but also with his own ancestors. He has composed 35 concert works that have earned him a Grammy nomination and many other accolades. Among his compositions is *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* (2002), which brings together a full orchestra with actors and projected images to acknowledge the millions of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island between 1910 and 1940. The piece includes verbatim remembrances that Boyer obtained through the Ellis Island Oral History Project — words written long ago by seven immigrants hailing from Russia, Hungary, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Poland, and Belgium.

After visiting the island numerous times and reading immigrants' letters recounting their impressions of sailing into New York Harbor, Boyer delved into his own family's past and learned something new. "Although my grandfather had told me about his father having come to America from Naples, little else about that trip was known," recalls the composer from his home and studio in Altadena, California.

"So many who started life anew in America didn't dwell on the journey itself; my great-grandfather Francesco, who died when I was 12, never mentioned anything



to me. He sailed from Europe in May 1912, and I'm struck by the fact that this was the month after the *Titanic* had sunk. I wonder how his knowing this might have affected his impressions of the voyage."

Complementing Boyer's personal experience of Ellis Island were historical images of it he carried in his head. One was an engraving published in the July 2, 1887 edition of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, the original of which is owned by New York's South Street Seaport Museum. Its caption reads *New York—Welcome to the Land of Freedom—An Ocean Steamer Passing the Statue of Liberty: Scene on the Steerage Deck*. This colorful and detailed scene shows a group of immigrants reacting to the vista into which they are sailing. As the exact ethnicities of the figures are not immediately discernible, the group can be thought of as representing the whole of the European continent from which most immigrants in that era came.

Boyer's epic composition, which has been performed 286 times by 125 different orchestras, directly echoes much of what

we see in this image, which was drawn by one of the newspaper's unnamed staff artists. He notes, "I look at this and feel an actual chill down my back seeing their different expressions and thinking about what they all had to go through on this voyage."

"The Statue of Liberty is clearly a symbol here," Boyer continues, emphasizing that it was dedicated in 1886, the year before the illustration. "This image is both reportage and commentary that captures the emotions of these people. It pulls you in." Indeed, the figures, after enduring many days in cramped quarters, collectively demonstrate excitement at seeing the looming statue, the harbor full of ships, and, though it is not visible, the city skyline, at which some appear to be gazing in awe.

"The illustration conveys the communal sense of arrival," Boyer observes. "Everyone depicted is about to begin their new chapter." His composition is an audible articulation of the emotions such people likely felt, and their voices live on through it.