

Lesson – *American Stories in Music*

Companion Videos – “Ellis Island: The Dream of America”; *West Side Stories: Coming to America*

Suggested Grade Level

Grades 7-12

Objective

Students will become familiar with Peter Boyer’s “Ellis Island: The Dream of America”. They will explore ways that a composer can effectively set text to music by expressing the feelings and content of that text through their musical choices.

Suggested Materials

- BPO video of Peter Boyer’s “Ellis Island: The Dream of America”
- *The New Colossus* poem by Emma Lazarus (provided)
- Texts from Ellis Island Oral History Project (provided)
- Optional: Video of *West Side Stories: Coming to America*

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Cr1.1.C.HS1a MU:Cr1.1.T.HS1a
MUCr2.1.C.HS1a MU:Cr2.1.T.HS1a
MU:Cr3.2.C.HS1a,b MU:Cr3.2.T.HS1a
MU:Pr4.2.C.HS1a MU:Pr4.2.T.HS1a
MU:Pr4.3.C.HS1a MU:Pr4.3.T.HS1a

New York State English Language Arts & Literacy Standards

Writing, Standard 1, 4, 5, 6 & 7
Reading, Standard 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 9
Speaking & Listening, Standard 1, 2, 4 & 6
Language, Standard 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6

New York State Social Studies Standards

Standard 2: World History
Standard 3: Geography

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Procedure

- 1) Peter Boyer received a 2005 Grammy nomination for “best classical contemporary composition” for the piece “Ellis Island: The Dream of America,” which sets the words of several European immigrants who came through Ellis Island and frames their words with dramatic orchestral music that is very much in an Americana vein. The piece ends with a powerful reading of Emma Lazarus’s famous poem (“give me your tired, your poor...”) as inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Play the instrumental opening to the BPO’s performance “Ellis Island: The Dream of America”.
- 2) After listening for a while, ask students what feelings this music gives them? What is the mood? Ask them to share what musical characteristics they notice such as tempo or dynamics. What instruments do they hear? Discuss how these musical characteristics affect the feeling or mood of the music.
- 3) After some listening and discussion, read the poem by Emma Lazarus that appears on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Clarify any words in the poem that are unclear for students. Then ask what the students think is being communicated in this poem. What feelings might the poem be trying to express?
- 4) Peter Boyer’s piece sets to music the words of several immigrants’ stories about coming to America. These texts came from the Ellis Island Oral History Project. You can share the five stories with students. Listen to the rest of the piece – the texts are narrated by students from the Niagara University Theatre Department.
- 5) Ask students to discuss why they think Peter Boyer chose to include the setting of Lazarus’ poem at the end of the piece? What dramatic musical and theatric elements are used at the end of the performance to capture the relief and joy that the immigrants felt upon seeing the statue in New York Harbor?

Extended Learning Option #1

Ask students to read one of the five stories from the Ellis Island Oral History Project. Have them think about the feelings that this immigrant expressed. If they were to write a piece of music that expressed those feelings what might it sound like? What instruments would they use? Would the text of the story be spoken or sung or rapped? Ask students to set their story to music using an instrument, computer program software, etc. that is available to them. If possible, have an opportunity for students to share with each other.

Extended Learning Option #2

Have students watch the BPO’s video of students at the International Prep school sharing their immigration experiences. Discuss with students how these people may have felt moving to a different country where they aren’t familiar with the culture, language, or customs. Have you ever been somewhere you were unfamiliar with or experienced something new? How did it make you feel? Have students research their own family lineage to see if they can discover any immigration experiences their family may have had. Some questions to consider during the research process:

- a) Did your family come to the United States from a different country?
- b) What is your family’s heritage?



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- c) Are there any traditions or customs your family partakes in that are unique to your heritage or ethnicity?

During the research process, have students select a musical practice or custom that reflects their family's cultural background. Have them describe the techniques and cultural significance of the music and provide a musical performance example (audio or video) to share with the class. Have students compile their research into a formal PowerPoint presentation to share with the class.



The New Colossus

by Emma Lazarus

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
Glowes 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!"



Stories taken from Ellis Island Oral History Project
Selected and set by Peter Boyer for “Ellis Island: Dream of America”

Story #1

Words of Helen Lansman Cohen
born 1900, emigrated from Poland, 1920 at age 20

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 is 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.

Story #2

Words of James Apanomith
born August 22, 1895, emigrated from Greece, 1911 at age 16

The village I was born in was Afede. I was raised in Volos. From Volos, I come to the United States. Volos was a waterfront. Fishing boats coming in and out. My father was a hardworking man, working day and night with the nets on the fishing boat. My father didn't tell me to go to America or not to go to America. He didn't say a word. He figured out that I make up my own mind. Although I was sixteen years old, I make up my own mind. We went to Pircaus, a port near Athens, and then we got the boat. We got up on the deck. Then my father, for the first time, expressed how he felt. We shake hands, and he say, “James, I never say to you go or not go. I'm very proud that you make up your own mind to go to America. I know you're going to have a better life in America than we have here.” And then he left, and he was crying. He was



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crying. Do you know how I felt when I left my home, my father and my mother? I was the first in my family to come to the United States. I was in third class. Seventy-five dollars for the ticket. There was three in the cabin. I was on the bottom bunk, and this man named Gus and his father on top of me. The trip was twenty-two days on the ocean. We arrived in New York and saw the Statue of Liberty. Gus asked me, "What's that statue?" And then we're looking at the statue, and his father say, "That's Christopher Columbus." And I put my two cents out. I say, "Listen, that don't look like Christopher Columbus. That's a lady there. They started examinations on Ellis Island. And I was alongside Gus, and I noticed he had a chalk mark on his back. I couldn't reach my back, so I asked him, "Do I have a chalk mark on the back?" So he looked, he say, "No." I say, "You've got one." And I'm thinking, either he goes back to Greece, or I go back to Greece. So what happened, the one with the chalk mark went back to Greece. He had to go back. I don't know why. I just pray, dear Lord, and thank God, that I was admitted to the United States through Ellis Island without a chalk mark on my back.

Story#3

Words of Lillian Galletta

born October 20, 1923, emigrated from Italy, 1928 at age 4 ½

My father spent most of his time going back and forth from Sicily to America because there wasn't enough work there for a carpenter. Practically all the Galletta family were master carpenters. And he'd come back and forth every couple of years. That's why all my brothers and sisters are spaced two years apart—my mother became pregnant every time he came over. It became too burdensome for my father to keep coming back every couple of years. You know, that boat trip was no joke. Then my uncle told him one day that he should take the whole family back with him. My mother and father came with the two oldest children first. Then about a year later, the other five children followed. I was the youngest. My uncle escorted the five of us to Palermo, and then we came to America from there. There were a lot of people, all class of people. Some just came with what they had on their backs. They didn't even have baggage. When we hit the Strait of Gibraltar, there was this terrible storm that broke out. It lasted three days. The water was so rough that the waves almost capsized the ship. People were throwing up, and if you wanted to faint, there wasn't room for them to faint. They couldn't lie on the floor. There was no space. These old women were throwing their medals in the water and getting down on their knees and crying, just praying to God to calm the waters. I remember New York Harbor. It was the most beautiful sight in the world because we didn't die in that storm. We were alive. We made it. We were in America, a free country. We would be reunited with our parents. My father came to meet us at Ellis Island. I can see that almost vividly. We were in this big room. And they call your name out. And when they called "Galletta," my father came running through the turnstile, and he squatted on his knees with his hands outstretched, and the five of us ran into his arms, and we were kissing and hugging. We were so happy to be together. He said, "We're all together now. We'll never be apart again."



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Story #4

Words of Lazarus Salamon

born 1904, emigrated from Hungary, 1920 at age 16

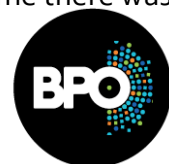
I did not have a normal childhood because there was a war, a never-ending war. That's all I knew of, the scarcity of food, the scarcity of materials. We had to fight for a piece of bread: hide it because it was taken away from you. So when left, I just came with my shirt on my back. The Romanians came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

Story #5

Words of Katherine Bevehok

born 1900; emigrated from Russia, 1910 at age 10

Hunger was a guest in everybody's home. By our standards, they had nothing. The majority of people were hungry all the time. The only time there was a relief from that poverty was on the Sabbath. Then the men came home, whatever they were doing, whether they were studying or working and making a living, and put on whatever better clothes that they had to get ready for the Sabbath. And went to shul synagogue and came home, and that was the time there was a



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decent meal in the house. All week long it was hunger. My father left for America when I was two years old, I didn't see my father until I came here. We couldn't get passports to get out then. We were Jews. It was all illegal. We traveled all night, and before it got light we stopped to hide out in somebody's house. We made it to the border, and then we took a train. We were going to Holland, to Rotterdam. They had to carry me screaming onto the ship. That's how afraid I was. We traveled for eighteen days in steerage. I was so sick all the time. I don't know why, but I was one of the sickest. It was a horrible trip. As soon as we hit the harbor in New York it was like rejuvenation. The water was blue, the sky, it was a beautiful day. Everybody was laughing and crying that they were here; they're in America. It was such jubilation that it just carried itself over even to me. A number of friends were there. Then I saw this man coming forward and he was beautiful, I didn't know he was my father. He was tall, slender, and he had brown wavy hair and to me he looked beautiful. He looked very familiar to me. Later on I realized why he looked familiar to me. He looked exactly like I did. And I fell in love with him right away, and he with me. And, of course, the first thing I had seen was that lady, the Statue of Liberty. It was a thing I can never forget to this very day, because when I think of her, when I think of the Statue of Liberty, I feel so wonderful and so good. I don't think there's anything under the sun that can make me feel better. It seemed that she was a vision from heaven, and it's been with me ever since.

