

# SCENES FROM ELLIS ISLAND

GUITAR MUSIC OF BEN VERDERY



1. What He Said 7:52

Ben Verdery & Simon Powis, guitars

Now and Ever

2. I 4:24

3. II 7:55

Ben Verdery, guitar

From Aristotle Ben Verdery (b.1955) Mark Martin (b.1988)

4. I. The Poet Being an Imitator 3:45

5. II. A Noun 2:29

6. III. A Verb 3:09

7. IV. The Wineless Cup 2:59

Ben Verdery, guitar; Mark Martin, mixed vocals

8. the rain falls equally on all things, a fantasy 12:57

rain clouds approach, in rain, separate drops fall together, heavy water, as the wind sings to the rain, after the rain (the smell, the mist), the wind's forgotten melody, partial recall of a storm, gentle rain underwater, liquid sunshine, rain returns. a downpour's secret, the calming of the water, a child's first rainbow discovering the rain falls equally on all things

Ben Verdery, guitar

9. Scenes from Ellis Island 13:45

Ben Verdery, classical, baritone and steel string guitar

Simon Powis, classical guitar; Guilherme Nardelli Monegatto, cello

Hawa Kasse Mady Diabate, vocals

Total Time 59:23

**F**ROM THE TIME I BOUGHT THE SEMINAL GOSPEL RECORDING, *Amazing Grace* by Aretha Franklin, I have been smitten with the spirit and the drive of gospel music. I remain inspired by the singers (Aretha has been one of my favorite musicians since I can remember!) in addition to the accompanying musicians, especially the pianists. *What He Said* was very much inspired by gospel music. In writing it, I hoped to capture some of the exuberance, soulfulness, spontaneity and interplay I hear in that music.

The three-note motive that one hears throughout the work I lifted from the piano part in Lyle Lovett's brilliant song *Church*. It was the first seed that helped the rest of the work to grow. Throughout *What He Said* exists a constant call and response from guitar to guitar. There is a repeated dialog in the bass strings. This is facilitated by the fact that the sixth string is tuned to D and the fifth is tuned to G in guitar 1. Following the opening is a slower section which serves as a short lament which leads into the remainder of the work. From here to its conclusion the piece twists and turns but always moves forward.

*What He Said* was commissioned by the 92Y in New York City and written for the legendary Assad Duo. It is dedicated to our dear friend luthier extraordinaire Thomas Humphrey. I would like to thank Simon Powis for his brilliant playing and his insightful musical suggestions while we were rehearsing the work.

*Now and Ever* (2007) is a two-movement work in which the interval of a minor second (i.e.: half-step) plays an essential part. I used an alternate tuning for the piece – D, G, D, A, A#, and E – and the open-stringed minor second between the third and second strings created

and inspired much of the melodic and harmonic material. It begins with the interval of a minor second and drifts away with the same interval at the end of the second movement. This interval represents the struggle and sorrow of so many repressed peoples throughout the ages. The piece is my musical statement against slavery of any kind. At the time of writing it, I was reflecting about the horrid history of slavery in my country. I have recently been dedicating live performances to the extraordinary and inspirational work of Bryan Stevenson.

The first movement begins and ends rather like a meditation on the half-step interval and becomes more animated in the center. The second movement is in a loose rondo form. Its rhythmic foundation and vitality is primarily based on the repetitive 7/8, 6/8 and 5/8 measures. The movement ends with a hopeful tremolo theme which has a slightly "circular" musical feeling because of the voice-leading and harmony.

*Now and Ever* is dedicated to David Russell and his wife Maria. I will always be grateful to David for asking me to write this work. His own recording of the piece can be found on his 2009 CD *For David* on the Telarc label.

*From Aristotle* is a four-movement work performed attacca. The text is taken from Aristotle's book on linguistics. It is co-composed by mixed-vocal artist Mark Martin and me. Mark and I tried to create music we felt best related to the text. The piece invites the listener to take a short sonic journey which includes sounds of nature, East Indian rhythms, Tuvan throat singing, lyrical vocal passages, parallel drum and guitar lines, and an extended beat box solo leading to the concluding baroque/gospel guitar lament.

*From Aristotle* represents one of the more unique and exhilarating collaborations of my career. It was written in 2015-2016 and premiered in January 2016. A video of the work can be seen on YouTube on both Mark's and my channels.

*the rain falls equally on all things, a fantasy* was commissioned by the Changsha International Guitar Festival in 2017. It is dedicated to its artistic director, the world-renowned virtuoso Xufei Yang. I am most grateful to her and the festival for asking me to write it.

The initial musical inspiration for this piece came from the song *Nachtstück* by one of my favorite composers Franz Schubert. In the slow/middle section of *the rain falls equally*

on all things there is a rhythmic and a slight harmonic reference to Schubert's masterpiece. The motive which occurs after the percussive introduction, is the driving force of much of the work. As you will notice, it occurs frequently in different modes and with different bass notes accompanying it. There appears mid-work a short melodic phrase that progresses in a canonic manner. This same melody is stated again in a different rhythmic setting and key in the final section. The piece emphasizes different bass notes at various points to give the illusion of a key center. These function as minor musical landmarks. The alternate tuning lends the piece much of its character. It is from top to bottom, E, A, G, D, A, D. This tuning allowed me in one section to explore unisons and glissandi in a particularly "rain drop" manner. The work is constantly seeking a tonal center and finally finds it at the very end in D major. It is an embellishment of the opening of the work.

Although written in 2017, *the rain*... was greatly revised in 2019. I decided in revising the work to add the following descriptions of various types of rain as they musically occur. These are not movements. They pertain to sometimes as little as four phrases of music. The piece is an exploration of the wonderful colors and sounds of the guitar. It is one of those works where the title came first. *the rain falls equally on all things*, a fantasy is as much a piece about the meaning of the title as it is about rain, hence the idea to sing the title at the conclusion of the work. I thought it was a good concept for myself and the young competitors to ponder.

"rain clouds approach, in rain, separate drops fall together, heavy water, as the wind sings to the rain, after the rain (the smell, the mist), the wind's forgotten melody, partial recall of a storm, gentle rain underwater, liquid sunshine, rain returns. a downpour's secret, the calming of the water, a child's first rainbow discovering the rain falls equally on all things"

*Scenes from Ellis Island* was commissioned in 1992 by Lou Manarino for his guitar ensemble at the Curtis High School on Staten Island. It has since been performed throughout North America, Australia, Europe and Japan. The piece was inspired by a trip to the Ellis Island Museum. I was particularly moved by various photographs of people in whose eyes one saw such hardship - so many, hoping and dreaming of a better future life here in Amer-

ica. Ellis Island was known as the "Island of Hope, Island of Tears." This description weighed heavily on my mind as I wrote the piece.

Since the Staten Island students who first premiered the piece saw Ellis Island weekly, if not daily, as they traveled on the ferry to Manhattan, I thought it was fertile ground upon which to base a composition for both the performers and the composer. As time has passed the piece has taken on a new meaning for me and many others that have performed it. Learned historians have taught us that the narrative of the America that I (a privileged, very liberal white person) grew up with—"a melting pot" where all races are "welcome"—is not and was not always quite so. This topic of who we are as a country takes on more meaning particularly in today's political climate. We, like so many countries, are a work in progress.

I was ever so fortunate that the legendary singer Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté so graciously agreed to sing on this recording. She enters in the beginning of the work and later in the finale. I arose early one August morning to hear her record via a WhatsApp at a studio in Madrid. In her first entrance, I asked Hawa to sing "yearning to breathe free" from Emma Lazarus's famous poem, *The New Colossus*. I gave her an outline of the pitches and the rhythms I wanted her to sing.

The final section of the work combines an East Indian rhythm with western harmonies and melodies. In most live performances this finale features an electric guitar solo. For this recording I wanted Hawa to improvise a solo. We agreed that she should sing in her native language, Bamana. For the text, I advised that she sing about "yearning to be free" from her own perspective. She improvised both the lyrics and the musical line. The translation of the what she sang is below. The engineer Matt LeFevre and I so loved her performances, we decided to overlap two of the three takes she did.

*Scenes from Ellis Island* is comprised of 8 sections/scenes with a brief introductory statement that is restated midway through the work. The two guitar solos preview the harmonic and melodic material for the final section. Each section reflects various human emotions. They unfold in layers, at times referencing the powerful unsettling waves of the ocean. Midway through the work each guitar ascends in pitch arriving beyond the neck of

the guitar and playing muted random pitches arhythmically. Following that is an improvisation where each guitar is given a particular sound it repeats. For example, one scrapes the strings with a coin, another, re-creates the sound of a lone seagull with a slide bar, further on they all perform Bartok *pizzicati*. Soon after the first few sounds; different voices enter beginning with Italian and ending with Tibetan. One hears towards the end of this section Nicoletta Todesco singing an Italian song in the distance. In difficult times and situations, hearing a familiar melody soothes the soul. The speakers in this recording are reciting poems, stories and even in the case of the Tibetan young woman, Kelsang Dolma, a sacred Buddhist text. It perhaps reflects what I think people heard in the barracks of Ellis Island where many had to rest if they were sick. Having lived in New York City for over 40 years, it is similar to what I often hear on various Manhattan street corners.

I am most grateful to Simon Powis, Guilherme Monegatto and Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté for their invaluable artistic contributions on this recording. A special thanks to Nicoletta Todesco for her singing and to all the Yale students who contributed to the spoken word section. An extra special thanks to Matt LeFevre for his brilliant engineering and mixing of the work.







## From Aristotle

*Song texts*

**a. The Poet Being an Imitator**

things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be,  
or things as they ought to be

**b. A Noun**

A Noun is a composite significant sound, not marking time,  
of which no part is in itself significant

**c. A Verb**

A Verb is a composite significant sound, marking time, in which, as  
in the noun, no part is in itself significant. For 'man' or 'white' does  
not express the idea of 'when'; but 'he walks' or 'he has walked' does  
connote time, present or past

**d. The Wineless Cup** (*no text*)

## Scenes From Ellis Island

*Translation of Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté solo*

Oh, my family

Africans are exhausted, Africans have suffered

If you are poor, you can never achieve your dreams in this world

If you are powerless you have no direction in life,

Oh my people

Don't you know,

Africans have suffered, Africans are tired, Africans are tormented

Suffering is terrible

Poverty is terrible

Empty-handedness is terrible

If you are poor, you can never achieve your dreams

Ah, oh...



Hailed for his innovative and eclectic musical career, **Benjamin Verdery** tours regularly throughout the US, Canada, Europe and Asia, performing at venues and festivals including Ottawa ChamberFest, 92Y Kaufmann Auditorium, Verona Guitar Festival, Guitar Festival of Belgrade, International Festival Internacional de Guitarra de Taxco (Mexico), Theatre Carré (Amsterdam), the International Guitar Festival in Havana, Wigmore Hall (London), and Metropolitan Opera in New York.

As a recording artist, Ben has released more than 15 albums and has recorded and/or performed with such diverse artists as Andy Summers, Frederic Hand, William Coulter, Leo Kottke, Anthony Newman, Jessye Norman, Paco Peña, Hermann Prey, John Williams, hip-hop artist Billy Dean Thomas, beat box/vocal percussionist Marc Martin and Nano Stern.

A prolific, published composer in his own right, many of Ben's compositions have been performed, recorded and published (Doberman-Yppan, Alfred Music) over the years. He has composed works for The Assad Duo, guitarists David Russell, Scott Tennant, David Tanenbaum, John Williams and John Etheridge, The Changsha International Guitar Festival, the Chilean Guitar Ensemble, the Pensacola Guitar Orchestra (FL), Kyo-Shin-An Arts

(NY), Wake Forest University, Thomas Offermann and the guitar ensemble of the Hochschule for Music and Theatre (Rostock, Germany) and the score for the documentary film *Corida Goyesque*. Ben's *Scenes from Ellis Island*, for guitar orchestra, has been extensively broadcast and performed at festivals and universities in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Europe, and the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet included it on their CD, *Air and Ground* (Sony Classical).

By turn, many of the leading composers of our time have created music for Ben, including Ezra Laderman, Daniel Asia, Martin Bresnick, Bryce Dessner, Javier Farias, Aaron Kernis, John Anthony Lennon, David Leisner, Hannah Lash, Ingram Marshall, Anthony Newman, Roberto Sierra, Van Stiefel, Christopher Theofanitis, and Jack Veas.

Ben owes much to his guitar teachers Philip De Fremery and Frederic Hand, both of whom he studied with at SUNY Purchase. The Master Classes he took in Arles, France with Leo Brouwer were seminal for Ben as well. He continued his studies with his mentor Anthony Newman and still receives coaching from his other mentor, Seymour Bernstein. He will always feel greatly indebted to what these and many others have given him over the many years.

Since 1985 Ben has been guitar professor at the Yale School of Music, Artistic Director of 92Y's Art of the Guitar series since 2007 and Producer of his Maui Summer Master Class since 1999. Ben is also an Honorary Board Member of the Suzuki Association of the Americas.



New York City and Denver based artist and musician **MARK MARTIN** is best known for playfully blurring the lines between language and sound through his energetic and dynamic blend of beatboxing and theater. Martin was recently featured in a Tedx Talk about his work with beatboxing. Winner of the 2016 American Beatbox Championships and the 2016 International 2016 BeatRhyme Battle, Mark has battled in and judged many international beatbox battles including the World Beatbox Championships, and the Grand Beatbox Battle. Martin's blending of storytelling with vocal exploration led him to a 5 year run with international touring musical theater company Voca People, as well as featured appearances on MTV. Mark enjoys collaborating with other musicians, especially his partner and 2x World Beatbox Champion, Kaila Mullady as Lightship. Together, Martin and Mullady created a curriculum teaching beatboxing as a tool for speech therapy.





### **HAWA KASSÉ MADY DIABATÉ**

possesses one of the most beautiful, versatile and expressive voices of West Africa. A jelimuso (female jeli or 'griot') from Mali, she has acquired a cult following as the charismatic singer of Trio Da Kali, an acoustic trio which was formed specially to collaborate with the Kronos Quartet, receiving rapturous reviews for her work on their collaborative award-winning album *Ladilikan* and for her moving performances with Trio Da Kali, who have

toured widely in Europe and the USA to critical acclaim. Hawa's charismatic voice is emphatically 21st century, but it is also steeped in the rich heritage of Mali's griots, the hereditary musicians that date back to the founding of the Mali Empire in the 13th century. She was born into a celebrated griot family, the Diabatés of Kela, a village in southwest Mali famous for its music. The Kela Diabatés have a formidable reputation as singers, instrumentalists, and reciters of oral epic histories, with many legendary names from the pre-colonial era to the present, and today Hawa is the torch bearer of that great tradition. Hawa's father Kassé Mady Diabaté was known for his entrancing singing, moving his listeners to tears (from which he gets his nickname, Kassé, 'to weep'), a quality that Hawa has inherited, along with the nickname. Her great-aunt was Sira Mory Diabaté, considered the most important Malian female vocalist of the 20th century, a prolific composer whose songs, like *Kanimba* (on the album *Ladilikan*) have become griot classics.



A passionate and expressive style coupled with a formidable technique has garnered attention for **SIMON POWIS** as a talented soloist, chamber musician and innovator. Growing up in Sydney, Australia, Powis undertook his first committed studies to the classical guitar with Raffaele Agostino at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Following on from Sydney, he studied in various festivals in Europe, the Royal Academy of Music in London, and under the guidance of Benjamin Verdery he completed a Doctorate in Music at Yale University. As a performer, Powis has performed internationally in Asia,

Australia, the Americas, and Europe. Solo performance highlights include the Kennedy Center, the Adelaide International Guitar Festival, and a solo tour in Beijing. Ensemble collaborations with string quartet, cello, violin, voice, and guitar duos have seen a range of performances and recording with highlights including the GFA Symposium with Ben Verdery, Carnegie Hall with the Linden Quartet, and the Rockport Music Hall with cellist Jacques Lee Wood.



A native of São Bernardo do Campo, Brazil, **GUILHERME NARDELLI MONEGATTO** (violoncello) was awarded third prize in the distinguished 19th Annual Sphinx Competition. In 2018, he served as co-principal of both the Verbier Festival Orchestra and Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra, where he had the opportunity to work with Valery Gergiev, Sir Simon Rattle, and Gábor Takács-Nagy. Guilherme is now a student at Yale, where he is honored to be co-principal of YALE Philharmonia, principal of the Grammy-nominated Yale Cellos. For the 2019-20 season, he will be part of the Apprenticeship Program with the Budapest Festival Orchestra.



Produced by Matthew LeFevre, Ben Verdery and Solomon Silber

*From Aristotle and Now and Ever* recorded by Solomon Silber at Elm City Records Studio, New Haven.

*Scenes from Ellis Island* recorded by Matthew LeFevre and Pedro Lopez at Temenos Studios Madrid. Mixed by Matthew LeFevre and Ben Verdery

All other compositions recorded by Matthew LeFevre at the Yale School of Music.

Mixed and Mastered by Matthew LeFevre

### **Spoken word in *Scenes from Ellis Island***

Kelsang Dolma (Tibetan); Horacio Fernandez de la Garza (Spanish); Valentina Crnjak (Croatian); Agata Sorotokin (Russian); Anteo Fabris (German); Qi Kong (Chinese); Nicoletta Todesco (Italian)

### **Instruments**

Ben Verdery Played a 1995 Greg Smallman on What He Said, a 1995 Greg Smallman, 2018 Gary Lee, a 2015 Otto Vowinkel Baritone guitar and a 2011 Jeff Traugott Steel string guitar on *Scenes from Ellis Island*. On all of the other works Ben played the 2018 Gary Lee.

Ben used D'Addario Recording strings and D'Addario Pro-Arte EXP High Tension.

Simon Powis played a Paul Sheridan 2008 Cedar and a 2018 Spruce Guitar with D'Addario Dynacore strings.

### **Performer Photos**

Ben Verdery: Andre R. Gagne  
Simon Powis: Jacques Lee Wood  
Mark Martin: Kaila Mullady  
Hawa Kasse Mady Diabate: Lucy Duran  
Guilherme Nardelli Monegatto: Laura Andrade

### **Content Photos**

Cover: "*Four immigrants and their belongings, on a dock, looking out over the water; view from behind*" c1912 Oct. 30, Library of Congress

Track listing: "*An excellent view of the front facade of the Immigration Station; a boat is docked in front*" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1902 - 1913.

Pages 7-8: "*Immigrants on a ship approaching New York City, bound for Ellis Island, with the Statue of Liberty in the background*" Wikimedia Commons

Pages 17-18: *Landing at Ellis Island*, Library of Congress

Back cover: montage of photo of Ben Verdery with "*The pens at Ellis Island, Registry Room (or Great Hall)*." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1902 - 1913.

Design: Marc Wolf ([marcjwolf.com](http://marcjwolf.com))

Special Thanks to Nicoletta Todesco, Derek Gripper, Lucy Duran, Jack Veas, Don Verdery, Laurelle Favreau, Rie Schmidt, Pedro Lopez, Yale School of Music, John Schaeffer, D'Addario Strings

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PANORAMIC  
RECORDINGS

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