



“If Oceans Could Speak”

Episode 4 Transcript

Lera Auerbach: When words are not enough, turn to music

Lera Auerbach: [00:00:00] When we deal with scientific facts, they of course can be very important, but they don't necessarily translate directly to our emotions. So the thought was through music, through the power of this language, that bypasses words, to be able to give a listener, an audience, a glimpse. To share what kind of incredible beauty and wonder and miracle the Arctic is.

Jennifer Freer: Hello, and welcome to another episode of "If Oceans Could Speak", the podcast that listens to the oceans, through the personal stories of those who share their life with the sea around them. As always, Stefan and I are going to be chatting to the people behind these unique stories in the hope that our conversations not only intrigue, but inspire you to reflect upon your own individual connection to the Ocean.

Stefan Kirchner: In this episode, we're delighted to be joined by Lera Auerbach, exploring the perspectives of the Arctic ocean through the power of art, music and [00:01:00] storytelling. Lera is a conductor, pianist, composer, published poet, and exhibited visual artist. She has become one of today's most sought after and exciting creative voices. Lera's emotional and boldly imaginative music has reached global audiences, performing, for example, at Vienna's Musikverein and London's Royal Albert Hall.

Jennifer Freer: Lera was elected by the world economic forum as a young global leader in 2007. And since 2014, she also serves as one of their cultural leaders. Thank you so much for speaking with us Lera. Welcome to our podcast!

Lera Auerbach: Thank you.

Jennifer Freer: So, Lera, am I right in saying that you began composing music at the age of four?





Lera Auerbach: That's correct. Yes.

Jennifer Freer: Wow, I've actually just begun learning piano myself, and I'm only a few months in, but I can really understand just how exceptional that is and what a talent you have. So I guess I wanted to ask you, first of all, how this love for music and [00:02:00] composing music began in your life?

Lera Auerbach: Well, it was a most natural process for me because I grew up in a musical family.

In fact, on my mother's line for generations everyone had something to do with music and played an instrument. And on my father's line, everyone had something to do with literature. So somehow I'd have to suffer for both, I guess, but music was around me since I was born, even before, and it was most natural to start playing and composing and composing came because I always liked stories. I like to tell stories, to hear stories, to read stories, and I would come to a piano with sounds I would paint, a story. And then I wanted to be able to repeat the story and I remember one of the first [00:03:00] times I did it, I couldn't repeat it because it was improvisation.

I didn't remember it. And I was really upset because it was something beautiful that happened. And then I couldn't replay this story for my mother. And she said, well, all you have to do is just write it down and then I asked her, what do you mean? Write it down? You mean with the words, how do you write down?

And she said, no, you know, musical notes. Just, just write it with notes. So from very early on, from the age of four, I would improvise those stories. And then I always had this wish to write them down so I could repeat them. I would share them with others and that's how, that's how it began. So it was very natural. Very, just like writing words. It was, it was something that you just do with notes instead of words.

Jennifer Freer: It's amazing to see that you from such a young age, learned it as a language, not just as music, but as [00:04:00] a language. And that's really interesting.

Lera Auerbach: I think music is the language. And the beauty of it is that it's the most universal language of all, because it's not limited to the definitions of





words, so it bypasses the words and it connects to us on the subconscious level, on the emotional level, but it's definitely a type of a language and means of communication.

Stefan Kirchner: You grew up in Chelyabinsk in Russia, in the seventh largest city in Russia. How did you connect with the Arctic and what your interest in the environment come from?

Lera Auerbach: Well, Chelyabinsk has this sad reputation of being one of the most polluted cities in the world, and it had what is called Kyshtym disaster in Chelyabinsk region. So there are parts of the Chelyabinsk region which have radiation higher than in Chernobyl. And the wind during the Kyshtym catastrophe, the wind was not blowing west, it was blowing [00:05:00] towards the Arctic. So there is actually a trail of radiation going all the way to the Arctic from Chelyabinsk. Now, when I grew up there, it was a closed city to the foreigners, but the parts of the city in the Chelyabinsk region were closed also to the citizens. So they were like a scientific community where they would bring the best scientists, which were conducting all kinds of experiments, nuclear experiments, and so on.

So, for example, nobody was really allowed to talk about it. So, it's not like I grew up and everybody knew what was going on or what the radiation was and how dangerous it was. Yet, people, people didn't know, they just didn't know. They didn't realize what it meant. They knew something was wrong. They didn't know exactly what that meant, but I faced it in a way directly as a child, when I wrote my first children's opera, when I was twelve. And [00:06:00] the theater that produced it was actually in one of the scientific communities in Chelyabinsk 60, and usually it was typical that they would bring the best, you know, the best minds into those regions. But as a child, even though I was only twelve, I was not allowed to enter it for rehearsals and actually before the very first performance, I never heard it. I heard it from the theater, got permission to travel with this opera outside of this scientific community. And they came to the main city of Chelyabinsk and then they went to other cities, including Moscow.

That was the first time when I was actually able to hear my first opera. But of course, as a child, predation was something that was like an elephant in the room that nobody talks about. And as a child, you don't understand those things. You don't understand. Well, if there is an elephant in the room, why can't we say that it is an elephant in the room and what does [00:07:00] it mean? Is it dangerous?





Is it friendly? Can they get rid of it? So there were a lot of questions that I had then from the start, and of course, most of them could not be answered then.

Jennifer Freer: And, so going back towards the Arctic, you've visited the Arctic and the Arctic ocean on this journey that you went on with your music.

And can you tell us a bit about what it was like when you visited and do you have any memories that stand out in your mind in particular when you first stepped foot in the Arctic?

Lera Auerbach: Well, there are so many. It's actually one of those experiences you might prepare yourself for and you may read a lot. And yet when you're there, it's so incredibly overwhelming, breathtaking that nothing can really prepare you for the experience of actually being there in the moment and something that I did during that journey, I kept a diary and I made a very conscious [00:08:00] effort every day at the end of the day, to spend a couple of hours just writing, not only where we were or what we visited, but actually how it impacts me personally. And what I'm feeling at the moment. And one of the first things that happen is in a way you're hearing changes.

And it's a very different type of, I wouldn't call it silence because it's never fully silent, but because there are no human made noises. It's a very different feeling of being present in the moment and attuning all your senses to this incredibly vast overwhelming landscape and being really aware and something that I also noticed if you're here Inuit languages. People speak quietly, just generally the level or the volume comparatively is fairly quiet because they actually listen to each other. So in the West, we [00:09:00] often speak very loudly and nobody listens, but there, there is such an instinctive tuning to the surroundings that actually people speak very softly and they really hear each other.

So you feel, you feel very small when you come to the Arctic because everything is so, so grandiose, so beautiful. So overwhelming. And you also understand how it is very ridiculous, all the concepts of conquering nature, and there is no such thing as conquering nature because we are just a very, very small part of it.

So it, it is really a very humbling, transformative experience of changing perspective, perspective of one's place of a relationship with nature. And it





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forces you to see in a way, the larger picture, because the larger picture is what matters.

Stefan Kirchner: Thanks! Especially [00:10:00] you mentioned that the level of volume is lower. I think that's something that I've heard a couple of times from people who've been visiting the Arctic, moved to the Arctic, that one of the first things people notice is the relative absence of noise. Today, we are more and more getting attuned to the Arctic and people learn more about the Arctic. Certainly also because of climate change, and science is telling us now that there are problems for the future of the Arctic, including the Arctic ocean. At what time, and at what moment did you realize that the skill set you have, that you can incorporate them, use them also with regard to the environment in the ocean, that you can use your skills and translate those messages for a wider audience through music?

Lera Auerbach: Well, the power of the art, all arts, maybe especially music, is that it allows us to see ourselves from a certain distance, [00:11:00] yet to connect on the emotional level. So with music as we talked before, it bypasses the words, so it directly connects to your emotions.

So when the idea came, the, the initial impulse to write the symphony, the initial idea came at one of the gatherings in Geneva at the World Economic Forum. I talked to Enric Sala, one of the legendary explorers from national geographic, and Enric was telling me about his recent journey to St. Joseph's Land, and then he just stopped at the moment. I guess he asked me, do you know if there is any large symphonic work dedicated to the Arctic? and I couldn't think of any and we both went like there must be, so let's do it. And I think when we deal with scientific facts, they, of course can be [00:12:00] very important, but they don't necessarily translate directly to our emotions.

So the thought was through music, through the power of this language, that bypasses words, to be able to give a listener, an audience, a glimpse to share my wonder, my awe, this feeling that is absolutely overwhelming. What kind of incredible beauty and wonder, and the miracle Arctic is, and to try to share this with the audience, through the forum of the symphony.

And of course in the symphony orchestra, it's a miraculous being also. The, and I think during the pandemic, we all learn to appreciate a little bit more now, but



just the things of having this confidence of people in the orchestra, hundreds of people in the choir. So the symphony is written for a choir, a solo, piano, and orchestra.

So [00:13:00] that's the forces. When you have all this incredible possibilities and colours of all these instruments, all those people singing. It's like an incredibly large canvas. And of course it's also a great challenge. So this is how my own journey to the Arctic happened after this conversation with Enric.

So we thought, well, what's the first step. And the first step was for me to go there and experience it myself. And then of course it was only the beginning of the journey because it took me many years of research before I actually started writing.

Jennifer Freer: Wow. What an inspiring story. Thank you so much for sharing that. And of course, I should mention that we are talking about your symphony number four, *Arctica*, which was co-commissioned by the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, the National Geographic Society and the National Symphony Orchestra. And we absolutely encourage everyone to listen to it, where they can and to watch the footage of it being made. And we will put links to both of these resources on our website.

Stefan Kirchner: [00:14:00] The Arctic is home to millions of people, including millions of indigenous persons all over the Arctic. And the three of us, we're all external to the Arctic in a way and external to these indigenous communities. Lera, how did you incorporate indigenous perspectives and experiences into your work?

Lera Auerbach: Well, what happened initially is that I went with the National Geographic to Svalbard, and after the trip, which was of course absolutely incredible, I was supposed to return back to the United States, but I felt that I was missing the human part of the, because during the trip, it was all about the animals, the environment, and so on, but not about human and Inuit cultures.

I happened to have friends who lives in Greenland and I had the internet reception at the airport, as I was leaving. And [00:15:00] I connected to my friend and she happened to be in Greenland and I just asked, well, can I come right now? So, and it was all very fortunate because she is she's married to an



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Inuit from Greenland and they're very much connected to different Inuit communities.

And I was able to meet them and to hear the stories of the local people, to hear them sing, to see them dance, to meet with the elders. And that time really was quite unforgettable. And of course, afterwards, as I mentioned for a number of years, I also did a lot of research about Arctic cultures, different traditions, different languages.

It was quite an extensive research, not such an easy one because actually there is not, that much is still available material. So in fact, by now I have a very large research materials library dedicated to the Arctic, [00:16:00] but most of it is something you cannot find. These cannot be found easily. And some of it, you cannot find at all.

And of course, also my friends from Greenland and National Geographic were over helping me with a lot of materials as well. And it was quite fascinating to learn how different the traditions of the Arctic are from our Western traditions. And it starts with let's say fairytales.

In the West it's all about good versus evil. So, if you think about Western fairytales, how children learn, it's all about the powers of good versus powers of evil. This is not what happens in Arctic myths. It's actually, it's all about your relationship with nature and with animals and how you're part of it and how animals and humans, they in the way, one of the same, but sometimes animals have greater abilities because they can turn into humans. You talk to a person, you think it's human, but you realize it's a, it's a Fox or a, it [00:17:00] happens all the time that somebody gets married and then realizes it wasn't a human. And there are a lot of very incredible rituals and traditions.

For example, one of my favorites is conflict resolution. So in the Arctic, how do they resolve conflicts? You cannot just start beating each other because there are no hospitals and you become a burden on your community. It's not a good idea. And you can't hire lawyers, there are no lawyers, and their leader of the community, the shaman. He's not in charge. He is a poet. He is a poet, an artist and a drummer and dancer, but he is not the one who will say you're right, you're wrong. So how do they resolve conflict? The community gathers together





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and they have song duels. So each side improvises a song, dances and drums, and the purpose of the song is to make everyone laugh.

So to ridicule the whole situation, to tell about the situation, but to ridicule it and make it very funny. And whoever makes it the most funny and [00:18:00] gets the loudest laughter from the community, wins the argument. And I just think it's so incredibly beautiful. The concept. So you learn and through this research I was just getting more and more fascinated and, and of course I stayed in touch with my friends from Greenland and they were so enthusiastic and so happy about me writing this symphony. And it's been just a life-changing experience to be on this journey.

Stefan Kirchner: Thanks. Especially as a lawyer working in the Arctic, I think that's wonderful way to approach this. A couple of years ago, I had the pleasure of teaching law students in Greenland, in Nuuk, and it's really great to see an outside perspective on different ideas behind law and governance in the Arctic, on how to solve problems, how to solve disputes and to prevent them. Thanks a lot for this rare, special approach that especially lawyers and political scientists might often be lacking. Thanks!

Jennifer Freer: I [00:19:00] just keep thinking how incredibly lucky you are to have been able to gather all of this information and how incredibly lucky we are too, to then hear the outputs from that. So yeah, it's just think the whole process is just really special. So your symphony Arctica was voted best new symphonic work of 2019 by the Washington classical review, really for how it encourages listeners to reflect on the wonders of such a vulnerable region. And this is a really unique thing for music to do. And we wondered what, what comes next for Arctica and, and how do you plan to keep this, this legacy that you've created alive?

Lera Auerbach: Well from the beginning, the approach was that the symphony is actually only the beginning and I approach it as a trunk of the tree. And then the tree has, of course, many branches and leaves. And of course with the pandemic, things were a little bit on hold, but hopefully not. [00:20:00] The idea is of course, for the symphony to be performed in as many cities as possible in many regions. And every time it's performed, there are other events scheduled around it, such as panels, discussions, we bring different speakers from different perspectives who can have dialogue about the Arctic and we have exhibition. As I mentioned, I also was keeping a diary, which, at some point I plan to prepare





for publication. I have also written during the pandemic another book, *Nowhere Is Now Here*, where this trip and my own transformational experience through the Arctic, I'm writing about it in that book.

And there are plans for exhibitions. So the symphony serves as I mentioned at center or the, or the, or the trunk of the tree, but there is so much that can be done around it. And just to share the topic of the Arctic, perhaps with people who would normally not [00:21:00] necessarily think about it or to think that it's something that doesn't concern them, but now it's something that concerns all of us and you. The environment is not something that we can ignore, or we can not afford to.

And not for the sake of saving nature, but for the sake of saving ourselves. So, I see the symphony is at the beginning of its journey and I'm very grateful for the beginning that we had. And I'm looking forward to all this future performances and to share it with as many people as possible.

Jennifer Freer: Wonderful.

Stefan Kirchner: Sometimes it might not be easy for the listener of a piece of music to understand what the artist actually wants to achieve. What idea they want to communicate. Did you have a specific idea in mind that you want an audience member to feel after listening to your music, especially to Arctica?

Lera Auerbach: I [00:22:00] think what's important is for the listeners to stay open. So it's not about forming something and giving it to them on the plate because I think such offering would not be well digested, but it's rather creating this experience and without actually bringing the person to the Arctic, but bringing an emotional journey. Raising questions, connecting on the subconscious level, on the level of memories, on the level of personal associations.

So I think it this, when the listener is in a way a co-creator listening as in the Arctic and everyone feels, it comes to the Arctic. Listening is a very creative process. So I think it's not so much as giving a specific message as to allowing people to be open to experience, to connect emotionally, and hopefully that experience in [00:23:00] turn will lead to questions, to more involvement, to more awareness, to the sense of wonder, because Arctic is a wonder, it's this





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miraculous fairytale type of miracle that we have as humanity, but unless we have a glimpse into this experience we are in a way..., It's a very enriching experience to feel to have a glimpse, to have a sense of this wonder of what is Arctic.

So I think it is just opening your senses and experiencing this journey and letting oneself to be intrigued by, to be curious, to be overwhelmed, to be maybe disturbed, but to have a strong, emotional connection to the process.

Jennifer Freer: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. I think, I think with music that the power of music is the connection that we can get to the emotions.

And I think that's something that [00:24:00] all the science in the world and all the numbers and statistics in the world cannot do. And that's why we need the art and the music and the literature just as you are doing. So our final question is, if you could share one last thought or important message about the Arctic ocean that you'd like others to really grasp on to from this episode, what would you like it to be?

Lera Auerbach: I think it's not just about the Arctic Ocean, but it's something that you feel very much when you are in the Arctic is that we as humans, we are part of nature. We are not separate from it. So sometimes I think we get carried away with romantic notions conquering in nature, of saving nature. And when you're there, you realize that no, [00:25:00] we are on the quest of saving humanity, because the truth is that nature will be fine, but we might not be part of it anymore.

So we are right now on this really life or death quest to save humanity by realizing that we are part of nature and also realizing that we are the only living being, the only animal that is constantly destroying his own habitat - and it cannot go on. So it's a very humbling perspective, but very urgent one.

And when you're in the Arctic, you feel with the melting of the ice, with the constant realization that everything will change, everything's changing, every moment you'll feel it, but in our everyday lives, we tend to get carried away with other tasks, with other things, and we forget the larger picture that we are right now on [00:26:00] the quest of safe humanity, not on the quest to save nature and nature will be just fine just without us.





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I would say that would be my message.

Stefan Kirchner: Thank you so much. I think this is a very powerful statement and a great way to end today's episode. In our podcast, we always try to show that people from any background or career or experiences can feel connected to the Arctic ocean and through your work, I think that's a wonderful way to show that they're all connected and we're all dependent on nature.

Lera Auerbach: Thank you. Thank you, everyone.

Thanks again for listening. You can hear more about Lera's stunning symphony number four, Arctica, on her webpage and a behind the scenes film on its production called The Human Journey is available to watch on YouTube. Links to both of these are in today's blurb.

If you liked this episode, please leave us a rating on whichever listening platform you're using. And, if you would like to share [00:27:00] your own ocean stories, connect with us using the hashtag #IfOceansCouldSpeak. This podcast was brought to you by members of the EU4Ocean initiative and was made by the, if oceans could speak production team: led by Penny Clark, co-organized by Arne Riedel and Anna Saito, and presented by Stefan Kirchner and me, Jen Freer. From all of us, thank you for listening.

