Wynne Leon (00:02)
Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that celebrates how we inspire others by sharing our stories.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, I'm with author and educator Nancy Shear We talk about Nancy's fabulous memoir, I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms, and we have a fantastic conversation about how sneaking in through the back door of the Philadelphia Orchestra opened so many fascinating doors in her life. Nancy was a teenager when she first went to the orchestra and knew she had to find a way to hear more.

She tells some amazing stories about her determination and how it led to landing the job as the assistant librarian to the Philadelphia Orchestra at age 17. We get to ride along with Nancy to meet all the incredible people she got to know, such as the wonderfully charismatic conductor Leopold Stokowski, who starred in Disney's Fantasia, and the incredible cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich.

Nancy lets us in on so many fantastic aspects of the workings of an orchestra, and I revealed some of the ways her book changed how I listen to a performance. Her nerve, grit, and storytelling will leave you amazed and inspired. I know you'll love this conversation with the delightful Nancy Shear

Hey Nancy!

Nancy Shear (01:52)
Hi, Wynne

Wynne Leon (01:56)
It's so fun to be with you and to meet you. was reading your book at Christmastime and it had so many insights about music that when I found myself at a Christmas concert, I just was observing so many things that I hadn't focused in on before. Like the tuning of the orchestra, the way they bowed and more. it just really...

It just really deepened my ability to listen and my interest. was so, it's so such a neat book.

Nancy Shear (02:26)
That's beautiful. Thank you for telling me that because that's really why I wrote it. One of the many reasons was just to enable people who want to listen differently, want to have more insight, want to know what's going on and why it's going on. ~ But also, and I really mean this from the bottom of my heart, that if people don't want to listen that way that carefully and they just want to go into the concert hall and have a good time, that's fine too.

Wynne Leon (02:54)

Right? Right? It's a wonderful experience either way. So, you know, this book, I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms, is such a wonderful book about your life working in and around orchestras since you were a teenager and this fascinating cast of characters that you worked with. Can you give us the elevator pitch?

Nancy Shear (03:20)
I was very young and someone gave me a ticket to the Philadelphia Orchestra. And I went to that one concert and I was overwhelmed with the beauty of it. Just listening to that incredible, this was the Philadelphia Orchestra no less. And listening to that was one of the great experiences of my life. And I decided to go back and I didn't realize that I didn't have the dollar and a half. That's what the cheapest ticket was.

and they started to give me passes, the woman at the box office. And I ran out of luck after a little while and I found the stage door and I stood there for several weeks on Fridays just to see if I could get into the concert. And what that led to was my meeting Eugene Ormandy who was the music director of the orchestra, going backstage.

finding the route where I could bypass ticket takers and sneak into concerts. And I went backstage and I met all these fabulous people. They trained me in what's called orchestra library work, which is the preparation of scores for the conductor and parts for the orchestra. And that was it. And that led to a 60 year

career in music. So by sneaking in, by not having the money to go into the, to buy my way properly into concerts, it led to a beautiful career.

Wynne Leon (04:55)
Right. Well, that's fascinating to follow that thread because, you know, had you gone in the front door, you wouldn't have gotten that experience, right? You had to go in the back door to get the behind the scenes.

Nancy Shear (05:09)
Yes, and that's one of the things that I really want to talk to young people about, and I'm hoping at some point to reach a young audience, because a lot of young people might think that because they or their parents don't have money, that there are doors that are closed to them, which is true, but there are ways to get around that. And if you have no choice, then you make a life.

and money is not necessary in my case, I think it would have been detrimental because not having the money led to my going backstage and meeting all these people and eventually working in music.

Wynne Leon (05:49)
Right. And this door theme is so good because, you know, back doors, doors that are closed. mean, we could we could we could plumb the depths of this analogy. But what's

so fascinating to me is, you know, we're talking about when you did this, it was the early 60s. I would imagine many of your friends were succumbing to Beatlemania and here you.

Nancy Shear (06:15)
trying to remember, Beatlemania was what? Was right about the same time. You're absolutely right. But it was after Elvis. And just today, ~ just thinking about our time together, I thought, where is my Elvis LP? Elvis's Golden Records. And I've got it. It's right across the room. I found it today.

I didn't know about the Beatles while it was happening. I wasn't really a television watcher. And I remember my friend Shelly came to my home and started talking about the Beatles. And I said, are they insects? What are they? And I remember this vividly. And she said, no. She said it's spelled B-E-A-T-L-E-S like beat, the musical beat. I said, ~ So I listened to them.

And you know, it was okay. was nothing that to me was life changing. But decades later, I don't remember what the impetus was, but I listened to the Beatles and it was just phenomenal. And I realized at that point, this too was great music, great music. And what the Beatles did was so revolutionary and so wonderful.

and just taking music on several different paths. But I came to that much later. When I ~ was 16, 15, 16 years old, it was classical music that I really, really needed. I needed it and I loved it.

Wynne Leon (07:56)
Yeah, yeah. Well, and one of the things that I love about the book is the way that you listen and describe music. There's a passage that you write after one mat tinee that you attended and you say that the music was more powerful than anything I've ever experienced. The music expressed joy, sadness and longing. And there's another passage that if you'll humor me that you

quote and it was with the Maestro, Stokowski that later in his life and you said you were describing an evening with him and you said one evening I saw how his imagination translated from one sensual context to another after dinner we sat next to each other at the table in front of the window watching a blazing sunset burn itself out he stared at it for a long while then

without looking away, finally spoke. You can do that, he said quietly, through sound. Goosebumps erupted all over my body.

Yeah. So tell us why you think classical music matters, still matters.

Nancy Shear (09:15)

I to answer that, and I hope I'm not being kind of glib or hallmark card or whatever, but I think classical music still matters, but you can ask why a flower matters or why that sunset matters. And the answer is truthfully that

because it elicits a response in us and something happens within us when we see something that we consider beautiful. And that's why, and yes, I think beauty still matters in this battered world and this difficult world, it matters. Now, everybody has to find their own source or not, but sitting next to Stokowski and

And watching his face looking out, and this was in the south of France, it was a Christmas time, 1974. And watching him looking out that picture window at this spectacular piece of nature and having him say, can do that with sound. was just tremendous. of course I thought, yeah, blaring brass and

and woodwinds and you said to him something ~ about brass and he said very quietly, no, strings. And that again, was a different, it was a way of using tonal color to not approximate, but to relate what that sunrise or sunset was doing and the response that it elicits from us.

So I think anything that holds beauty and awareness and helps us express ourselves and our humanity, yeah, it matters. I think it matters maybe more today than ever.

Wynne Leon (11:25)
You right, right? I mean, it seems to me, mean, what seems to be touching on is that feeling of awe.

Nancy Shear (11:33)
That's beautiful, I like that. Yes, you're absolutely right.

Wynne Leon (11:36)
you know, and whether it's in an orchestra and it's that shared communal sense of awe.

Nancy Shear (11:43)
I hadn't thought of that word and you are absolutely right. Thank you for that.

Wynne Leon (11:49)
And I love the way that you describe Leopold Stachowski because you write a lot about him. was, can you tell us, just give us a little encapsulated bit of his history because ~ he was not the conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra when you first started, but you had many, many interactions and stories.

Nancy Shear (12:16)
Being born and raised in Philadelphia, he had left around 1940. So it was almost 20 years later that I became very aware of the orchestra, but I was super aware of him because in

Philadelphia, he was as close to the King of Philadelphia as anybody ever was. He had brought the Philadelphia Orchestra to

to world global prominence through Fantasia in 1940. And a lot of people still have seen that movie and ~ they remember not just the music, but Mickey Mouse walks up on the podium and he tugs at Stokowski's the leg of his pants. And he calls something, Mr. Stokowski, Mr. Stokowski and Stokowski.

bends down and says, hello, Mickey, and shakes hands with Mickey Mouse. Well, not many conductors were willing to do that. I could never picture someone like Toscanini, know, this great dignity. And Stokowski had tremendous dignity too, but there was a part of him that was concerned and that related to everybody and cartoons and whatever the popular

life was at that time. And that's all in his music too. That's one of the reasons that it appealed to the masses. The people who went to see Fantasia didn't just remember him and Mickey Mouse, but they remembered the music. And that film opened the world of classical music to a lot of people. But Stokowski was really like a god and he held himself that way. But for some reason,

He fascinated me and I really, I really wanted to get to know him. And it was all very innocent. He just fascinated me as a person. And I waited outside the Academy of Music in Philadelphia for him to arrive for a rehearsal. And it was a February day, it was freezing cold. Finally his car drove up and he was extremely tall and he was dressed in this

long black coat and he had white hair that was swept behind his ears and a very heroic profile. He was awe-inspiring, but it didn't stop me. And I ran after him and I said, may I come into your rehearsal? I didn't know. no, actually I didn't know. No one was permitted in that rehearsal. Not the Philadelphia Orchestra staff, not the families of the players, no one.

But I thought, why not try? And I remember I ran after him and I said, may I listen to your rehearsal? And he said, he took me into the entranceway and he said, you may come with one condition. And I said, what is that? And he said, you must come back after the rehearsal and tell me your impressions. So there I was. I was the only person in a hall.

that seated almost 3,000 people and I'm sitting there listening to Leopold Stokowski conduct the Philadelphia Orchestra. Doesn't get better than that, you know?

Wynne Leon (15:47)
No, no. And from there, your relationship with him just deepened and you tell so many great stories. mean, and it's even they're just legendary. Like, you know, he played poker with Rachmaninoff and you also, you know, knew cellist and Conductor Rostopovich and writing and sending letters to defend.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. I mean, these are just incredible stories that you tell. You have a story that I'd love for you to share about Rostropovich who you call Slava, right? Saying goodbye to Shostakovich when he leaves the Soviet Union. ~

Nancy Shear (16:31)
Yeah ~

Yeah, that was told to me. We all used to, after...

After Rostropovich's concerts, he didn't like to be alone. And that kind of excitement would continue at his apartment, which was right around the corner from Lincoln Center. And he'd say, after all the well-wishers and the autograph seekers everybody had left, he'd look at a couple of close friends and he'd say, children, you come vis me.

because he had this heavy Russian accent. And we'd follow him around the corner and we'd go up to his apartment and there was a lot of, it was kind of alcohol soaked and it was fun. And story after story after story. We all had good stories, but he told them very dramatically and he told...

one about the great, great Russian composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, who was in a way like a father to Rostropovich and composed a number of works specifically for Rostropovich, who was a great, great cellist. Rostropovich had defended Solzhenitsyn and he knew he was probably going to be banned from the Soviet Union, which is exactly what happened. He paid a terrible price for

supporting human rights and artistic expressiveness and freedom. What a lesson. And he told us this great story that Shostakovich was quite ill and Rostropovich and he knew that Rostropovich might not return to the Soviet Union for if ever for a very, very long time. And they were saying goodbye to each other and they were both sobbing and they had their arms around each other.

to ~ calm Shostakovich down and to comfort him, Rostropovich said, I play all of your symphonies. I play your symphonies all over the world. And through his sobs, Shostakovich said, do the fourth first. It was this little bit of practicality that was just so touching and funny.

And funny. Yeah, but the Fourth Symphony also was the one that Shostakovich composed. was very heavily influenced by Mahler. So there was a lot of human emotion in that and individuality and expressiveness. That's what the Soviets did not want. So that was yet another reason why, you know, that was that was the symphony that

would have been most difficult and most personal for Shostakovich, more difficult to take out to the masses. So I think that's another reason why he, but it was so charming, do the fourth first.

Wynne Leon (19:48)
bringing that story full circle in that idea of artistic freedom and human rights. ~ Wow, amazing.

Nancy Shear (19:58)
We need some heroes today, you know?

Wynne Leon (20:00)
Right, right. Well, I would say, I mean, people who follow their thread and that's what you're reading this book and watching how you did that is amazing. mean, from your pull to sneak into the orchestra, to getting a job with the orchestra at age 17, ~ you flew off to Moscow to check on Rostropovich after he wrote that.

Let it in defense of Solzhenitsyn One of the other stories that I love that you did is you followed the kids from the International Youth Orchestra, you know, to find out who their leader was and to get a job with them and then travel, you know, with that was a great opportunity for travel. You know, creating your career as a broadcaster. mean, it's stunning. And at the end, you know, in the acknowledgments, you write.

Many friends and colleagues have asked if it has taken courage for me to live the life I've Surviving a troubled family, sneaking in where I didn't belong, starting and maintaining careers in New York City, taking constant risks. I've told them, I never thought much about the fear because I was compelled to do those things. I was more concerned about not doing them, not having a productive and interesting life. What did require

courage was writing this book. And so can you tell us more about how'd you find the courage to live this life, whether it's writing the book or all the threads that you followed?

Nancy Shear (21:41)
When I look back on all this, ~ none of it took courage except for writing the book, and I'll share that with you. ~ to go backstage, I was desperate to hear the concerts. Desperate. So going in through the stage door and sneaking in, what did I have to lose?

At one point, yeah, I got frightened. I my God, what if the usher calls the police? What if he finds out that I don't have a ticket and they call the Philadelphia police and I get arrested? I mean, a kid will think, a young person will think about this, but I was desperate to get in there and I did and it worked out beautifully. Going off to Russia was really,

My mother was terrified that she would never see me again. This was 1970, was December 18th, 1970. I think it was a couple of months earlier, they had the Leningrad trials. And this is, I remember correctly when a group of Soviet Jews tried to or planned to hijack a plane to go to Israel.

It was related to that. And here I was, a Jewish, young Jewish American, and it was the height of the Cold War, Brezhnev. The relations were horrendous between the Soviet Union and the United States. And it was freezing cold. It was December. ~ Russia, we're talking about Russia, you know, which was one of the reasons that I wanted to go. This was a fabulous adventure.

And I was looking for somebody I cared deeply about. Rostropovich was a Soviet dissident and nobody knew in America whether he was dead or alive. We didn't know what price he was paying for being this defender of human rights. Could have been pretty bad. They could have sent him off to Siberia and it was bad for him. But so I decided I was gonna go find him.

Wynne Leon (24:00)
And you did, which.

Nancy Shear (24:01)
And

I did, I did find him. Yeah, but I really think and you know, as far as sneaking into concerts, I want to make something really clear because I don't want people to think, oh, she cheated the Philadelphia Orchestra out of the cost of a ticket. I didn't have that money, period. So it wasn't a question about sneaking in. I couldn't pay the price. So the seat was going to be empty anyway. I didn't have the money.

So I figured if somebody was there and they sat in it, so much better for everybody. If it'd always be more full, everybody would win. But it wasn't like I made a choice not to pay. I couldn't. So all of these things, it was just part of life and I didn't see any reason not to do them. And I think the great lesson is, if you can,

I'm not talking about making stupid choices, but if you can live a life of courage and meaning, that's the reward. The reward isn't what you can buy, at least, unless it's an airplane ticket or something. I never figured out a way to sneak on to an airline. I could get into the concert hall, I couldn't sneak into an airline.

Wynne Leon (25:23)
And today, but you figured out other ways to make that travel work. Yeah. I mean, and and when you got a job with the Philadelphia Orchestra, you figured out how to get into those spaces, you know, responsibly. So it's not that you snuck onto things for just the thrill of it, as you said.

Nancy Shear (25:43)
But you also mentioned the International Festival of Youth Orchestras. And the story was that I was in London, I was on my way to visit Stokowski, I never sat in hotel lobbies ever. I was always out doing things. But this one time I was sitting in the lobby and a voice came over the loudspeaker and said, well, all members of the International Youth.

International Festival of Youth Orchestras, please come to room 12. Well, what musician is not going to go up to see what it's all about? Why not? So I took the elevator up and I think, and I went to room 12 and when I opened the door, all these, were about hundred young people tuning their instruments. And I was, I saw an opportunity. Right. So I went over to one of the kids and I said, who's in charge? And they pointed to

a lovely woman, name was Nicola Wallace, I remember. And I walked over to her and I said, do you need an orchestra librarian? And she said, I said, I worked with Philadelphia. She said, when you get home, send me your resume. She gave me her card. Three summers, I was in England, Scotland and Wales and had a fabulous time and met some of my closest friends. One after all those years.

~ I'm still in I just talked to her yesterday. I'm in very close touch There's a lesson in that

Wynne Leon (27:13)
That is. Well,

we circled back to the door. You walked through that door. mean, I think, you know, your contention that it didn't take courage. You're walking through doors and answering the knock of opportunity when it happens. It is a a courage in and of itself.

Nancy Shear (27:36)
Yeah, but again, think why not? What is to lose? What is to lose? You know, we're all human beings. was walking into a room of human beings and that is not, don't see where that takes a lot of courage. There's nothing really to be frightened of. Let's take worst case scenario. Somebody would say, I'm sorry, you are not authorized to be in here. Please leave. So I'd leave. I'd be no worse off. But I think to take advantage of.

and have your imagination perceive these opportunities and to take advantage of them. Why not?

Wynne Leon (28:12)
Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So, but you were gonna say more about the courage to write the book.

Nancy Shear (28:19)

Yeah, that did. You know, ~ when I was growing up, there was a tremendous stigma about mental and emotional illness. And my mother was profoundly ill and ~ it affected my life to this day. You know, I was an only child and children of

compromised parents, whether they're alcoholics or whether they're mentally ill or whatever the problems are, ~ it changes the shape of not only your life, but who you are. ~ So that was a big secret in our family. And it was a secret I kept even from my friends didn't know or neighbors didn't know, members of the family did. But for me to ...

be the holder of family secrets and then to release them, that's where the courage really came in. And to face my own fears and my own feelings about my family, my father was very abusive and very difficult. And to put that out into the world ~ and you feel things when you're writing about them, it generates a lot of the original emotions.

And that can be very scary stuff. So that did take a lot of courage. And I'm getting emails and letters from people who go to my website and talk about their experiences too as children. One or two of those two people had alcoholic parents and it was a real meeting of the mind and the heart.

Wynne Leon (29:49)
Raries, right?

Nancy Shear (30:15)
So yeah, writing the book, writing the book was not what people think. They think it's a release and it's therapy. One author friend of mine said, well, it'll put you into therapy. It's not therapy on its own. But I wondered, didn't, I mean, I'm not being morbid, but I really didn't want to die with the information that I had accumulated all these years about, mainly about

people and humanity and most of all about my beloved classical music. So I had to write this book. had no choice.

Wynne Leon (30:53)
Right. Well, we love the choices that you share with us by writing the book about the choices you made all through your life. And I think they're courageous. I think they're delightful. This book is just so much fun to read. as I said, it deepened my appreciation for so many things, music and opportunity.

Nancy Shear (31:19)
Well, thank you for that. That's the best reward I could have had from my...

Wynne Leon (31:24)
Thank you, Nancy. Is there anything I should have asked that I didn't ask?

Nancy Shear (31:29)
no, think, you know, the only other subject was moving to New York. I really, just, you know, put one line in the book about that. That wasn't the story that, you know, I may write a sequel and talk about moving to New York.

Wynne Leon (31:44)
Yeah, I think because you cover, mean, in detail, of life up until your early 30s.

Nancy Shear (31:51)
Right, I was 34 when I moved here.

Wynne Leon (31:54)
Mm-hmm and so great well if you do that we would I think it'll be a wonderful book and you have so much other of your productive and and meaningful life that

Nancy Shear (32:04)
Thank you so much. No, you covered all the bases.

Wynne Leon (32:07)
~

great. Thank you, Nancy.

Thank you for listening. Our music was written for us by the incredible duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration see avitiva.com A-V-I-T-I-V-A dot

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