

Penn South Archive Project

Witness: Serena Jost

Interviewers: Christiane Bird, Silvie Bird, John Harris

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Silver Star performed by Serena Jost (Cello + vocals)

simple beauty black and white
open eyes closed at night
warm hands cool breeze
same branch new leaves
simple beauty black and white

gentle motion grey blue green
magic water in a dream
lifted spirits pale moonlight
gentle motion grey, blue, green

[bowed cello]

see the world touch the sand
soft and new old and kind
catch the wind be at rest
make a wish take a breath

Christiane: Thank you, Serena. That was so beautiful.

Serena: Thank you.

Christiane: And thank you for welcoming us into your apartment and for agreeing to take part in our project. Thank you. Really glad to be here.

Serena: Thank you. I'm so glad to be here, too. And I'm going to send my cello down for a second because that'll make it a little easier.

Christiane: Great. Can you start by introducing yourself and telling us what apartment and building you live in?

Serena: Sure. My name is Serenea Jost and I live in building 3B apartment 5A

Christiane: And when did you move into Penn South, and who did you move in with?

Serena: In 2004. My partner, Dan Machlin, was called. You know, when you get the letter [laughter] he was called and we came and we looked at some apartments. So we moved in. I think it was about August, you know. so we've been here since then.

Christiane: And he, he grew up at Penn South, right?

Serena: He grew up over across the way here and his father still lives there and he had two siblings, so they were a family of five living there. And, you know, I think they loved being here. They had moved from Greenwich Village actually to be in Penn South So and then, you know, he went to college and he swore never to move back, all of that. And - - but then we lived in Brooklyn for a long time, so and that was wonderful. But then we got the opportunity to live here.

Christiane: Where were you living before in...?

Serena: In Brooklyn?

Christiane: Yeah

Serena: In Fort Greene. So and before that in Park Slope, actually. So we lived. We met when we both lived in Park Slope, and then we moved in together in Fort Greene which was fantastic neighborhood, you know, really nice mix of people at that time in the nineties, I mean, sorry, in the 2000 actually late nineties. Yeah.

Christiane: And how did your life change when you moved into Penn South?

Serena: Well, gosh, in so many ways. First of all, we got this really beautiful apartment, which was... the apartment we lived in in Fort Greene was it was a little rough, you know, like we learned the recipe for keeping rodents out of your apartment. There were these holes and all these visiting creatures. So when we got to Penn South, the first thing that we noticed was everything is so well taken care of. If there's any maintenance issue basically that's dealt with day of or pretty much quickly. So we felt, you know, just very well taken care of, I think, living here. So. Yeah.

Christiane: And how did your work change at all, as a musician?

Serena: Yes, yes. I mean, so I was well, you know, in music you -- at least for me, when I first got here, I did a lot of side jobs and I worked in Midtown as a temp for three years at the Carnegie Corporation, which is like a foundation, you know. And I did a million different kinds of jobs. And I worked even when I first moved into Penn South, I still worked for like a German news agency in their archive. But what happened is by living in Penn South... the music that I make and the money that I earn from music is like enough to live here, you know? So between the two of us, it really changed it because I always had these side jobs and instead, like I think music, it could become my focus sort of more easily, you know, something like that. So and then, you know, also, I mean, weirdly, actually, you know, when we lived in Brooklyn at that time, so much was happening. in Manhattan, I would always commute to Manhattan. And now that we live in Manhattan, most of the things I do artistically are out in Brooklyn. so I'm always going back and forth.

Christiane: Things change.

Serena: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christiane: And as a musician, was that an issue when you first came here figuring out when you could play and not disturb neighbors

Serena: Definitely, definitely. Like, as you know, it's a wonderful, they're wonderful buildings, but the walls are constructed in sort of in a thin way, so it's not like a, you know, pre-war building on the Upper West Side where you could make music at two in the morning. It's really like people and you have to be respectful of your neighbors. And some are, shall I say, more sensitive than others. So so you kind of have to find your rhythm with your neighbors. And I asked someone, an engineer, a friend of mine, I said, What do you recommend for soundproofing in this apartment? And he looked at me. He said, Make friends with your neighbors. That's the method. So, you know, so so basically my I used to play a lot at night or write music late into the into the night. But I don't do that as much here. And there's one room in this apartment where I can do that, which is the kitchen. We left the original structure here and it doesn't have adjoining walls. So if I'm working on guitar or something, I can do late night sound in the kitchen, you

know, sort of low level, right. So so there's I think that's true of not just the musicians, right? Like just respecting sorry, respecting you know, people I don't know, you're just living together, everybody. A lot of people living together. Right.

Christiane: Right. Right.

Serena: But the advantages are also that, you know, just having a big, clean, inspiring space, You know, that's a wonderful thing about living here.

Christiane: Right. Right. What about your beginnings as a musician? Were you musical as a child?

Serena: Yeah, I always was. I have some vivid memories of, you know, like, I remember when we first got we were we were singing, like, in kindergarten. I remember you could be you could audition for the part of these three butterflies and red, yellow and orange. And I and I remember kind of knowing, like, I want to be this red singing butterfly. Like, I don't know why, but I just did. And then we did Orff Did you know about that? Orff instruments they are those large wooden xylophone type of things? And I definitely loved, I always felt great expressing myself through music, you know?

Christiane: And was your family musical?

Serena: Yeah, Yeah. So my father played the violin and he loved to play the violin. And we had family music, like, a little bit, I guess you could call it quartet, you know, because I had two brothers and they were in violin. My father would jump over to Viola. I would play cello and, you know, some of some of it was really great to do, but we weren't like a you know, he wasn't a conservatory guy, my father. And so it was kind of casual. And one of my brothers was less had less of an aptitude for music. So then it kind of shrank to trios where I would do duos. But there was music in the home. We didn't have much pop music in our lives at all, like it was classical and jazz. And we went to tons of classical music concerts also at Michigan State University, where, you know, in East Lansing, Michigan, where I grew up. And I have my most vivid musical memory of transformation or something, or was we went to this concert and then everybody the concert was sold out and they had the kids go They put them under the grand piano on stage as a place to sit.

And I remember hearing this concert from underneath the piano, and it was very transformative to me to, you know, just to understand like, there's this huge world of sound.

Christiane: Wow.

Serena: Yeah. Yeah.

Christiane: And how old were you then?

Serena:) Maybe like seven or eight. And I and it made such an incredible maybe a little older, but I think something around there and it just I think it was, you know, the majesty of that experience. It really transformed me.

Christiane: Wow.

Serena: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christiane: Your father was a professor?

Serena: Professor? Yeah. At Michigan State plant biology professor.

Christiane: And your parents are both from Switzerland?

Serena: Yeah. Yeah. So my parents came and they were going to stay for one year on a fellowship, you know, but that turned into life time and we grew up speaking Swiss-German in the household and we had, you know, not a lot of it was definitely a European household with like mealtimes and like, you know, waking up on Saturday mornings and working. We're not like cartoons. We had no TV, so we were in a certain like in a way, we were in this bubble, you know, But we did a lot of work and a lot of manual things. Like I'm because of my childhood, I'm able to like, fix motors and do a lot of things that, you know, just self-sufficiency was sort of like the the entertainment. And then my mother was - is she is alive and well And she's a potter. So we had in the kitchen, part of the kitchen was allocated to she didn't love domestic arts. So part of the kitchen was allocated to a potters wheel So there was cooking on one side and the clay station on the other. And that's another memory. I have a lot of spending my just my formative like as a kid, just being at the, you know, playing with her, making pots.

Christiane: Wow. Wow.

Serena: So, we had a lot of creative things happening.

Christiane: Yeah, a lot of creative stuff

Serena: Oh yeah and the no TV thing is really like you know, we had to entertain ourselves and, you know, we got into, like, old fashioned trouble, like climbing neighbors roofs and things like that.

Christiane: And when did you start playing the cello?

Serena: In fourth grade in the public school music program. So I'm a big proponent of public school music programs. And it was a, you know, loosely Suzuki affiliated. This teacher, Jean Wilson, she was very enthusiastic. And you got to choose an instrument. And so that's how that happened.

Christiane: And were you attracted to the cello?

Serena: Absolutely. Like I liked - I knew it right away. The size and I just knew, like my brothers and my father had the violin thing, and I just knew that's the one for me, you know. And I think I mentioned I had - I have a very vivid memory of my first note, like playing the note and the total disappointment I had with the sound because I had heard someone else play it and I couldn't believe, you know, so like, I couldn't believe that it sounded like I'm like right away I knew like, I want to make it better, you know, because I was so I was so appalled at how it sound. And then I had to at how it sounded. And then I just I was like, oh, I can make this better. So that was kind of how it started.

Christiane: Challenge, right from the beginning

Serena: Yeah, yeah

Christiane: So then you played in a school orchestra

Serena: Yeah, and then like, maybe in middle school I got some private lessons it was pretty casual and I was singing in the choirs and I was like, in the musicals sometimes, you know, and, but then I yeah, I got, I think I wasn't like music. I wasn't one of those kids who only had music as a focus. But I was - and I was into my academics then I had other things happening, you know, where I just I wasn't like a mono focused person, you know.

Christiane: When you went to college, did you decide to study music then, or was it a broader - -

Serena: Well I went to Earlham College first for a couple of years, which is a Quaker school in Indiana, and then I didn't, I couldn't commit to anything really like in terms of majors, I never knew what I wanted. I was interested by everything. But like the idea of committing at that age felt to me like it would be what I had to do for the rest of my life, you know? So it was sort of too much for me, but I was I had a music minor and I was part of the freshman string quartet, and I qualified enough. I got free lessons like I because I was just, you know, whenever they thought I had potential or something. So and the big thing at Earlham actually, like the music that I was involved with was nice. But one thing that really changed me there was they had a music library and, you know, I went there not knowing pop culture. Like I really I knew the Beatles. Maybe people made me some mixtapes and things, but I didn't know pop culture. So I remember people playing someone like Neil Young and I thought it was appalling, like, which I don't think at all anymore, But I did. I wasn't used to those kinds of sounds. And they had this music library and I went downstairs and there were all these bins of records and I started pulling out records and I would just take whatever looked good to me. So I found like Einstein on the Beach there, Philip Glass. And I found other really obscure like Edith Sitwell and like people, you know, I found these obscure recordings and I was, you know, it kind of woke up my weird and I was like, oh this is what I'm into.

Christiane: Wow, interesting

Serena: Yeah, yeah, yeah Lucky

Christiane: So after college did you I don't know what, what was your next step after

Serena: Well, I, I transferred from Earlham, I went on an abroad trip and then I kind of couldn't return to school. So I took some time off and I did community college, and I did a lot of art making during that time, like printmaking primarily. And I loved that. And then I kind of honestly just sort of by hook and by crook, got a degree and it was a humanities degree with a focus on art and philosophy. Those are my interests and music was there, but it wasn't like I was, I was singing with friends a lot, but I wasn't, I wasn't pursuing a career like I was. I

was one of those people, or I am one of those people who it took a long time for, for things to foment for me. Like I didn't know exactly what I wanted. I have broad interests. I just I don't know. I had to be in the process of discovery for quite a long time. And I think that's okay. You know, like knowing what you want is great, but if you don't have a track if you don't, maybe it's not time.

Christiane: Right, absolutely

Serena: So then I came to New York and I had my cello sent here, and I was living in the East Village, which was like, quite risky at that time. I was living above a bar called the Village Idiot, and it was a scene and I, I had my cello sent to this place in Brooklyn, and somebody stopped by that loft there and said, Whose cello is that? And that's kind of how I got started.

Christiane: Yeah, yeah, I want to return to that. But before that

Serena: Yeah

Christiane: you told me when we met earlier that you were in Africa for a while and then you went to Switzerland where you worked as an au pair and how that, Yeah, the whole experience kind of transformed your way of thinking. about where you wanted to go.

Serena: Yeah, so I went to Africa with Earlham College and it just pretty much blew my mind to I was there for four months and it's just a really different cultural experience, you know, than I was used to European culture. And it was such a big experience in a way, like I couldn't go back to the classroom or something.

Christiane: What African country?

Serena: Kenya and Tanzania and, you know, it was like it was it was also made me so aware of like my privilege within the world, you know, like I always felt that I was poor. And when I was there, everything I had like a backpack, anything that I had a watch. It was all really valuable. And I didn't understand that, you know. And then when I went there, I was kind of realizing, Wow, I have so much. So it was it was amazing. Esthetically, you know, it was really amazing to be there. And I like the people

in those countries. I mean, but politically, it was like, you know, a lot of stuff happening.

Christiane: Right

Serena: And so then I went to Europe because I got an au pair job and the job was started in Switzerland, but it was primarily in Germany with this opera singer and her French filmmaking husband. And so I lived there for two or three months. I think with her mostly he would come to visit and I think I got the theater bug there also because she would go to the theater and I was taking care of this one and a half year old child and not enjoying that and being 20, you know, and then we would go to the theater and I would see the stage sets and everything. And I was so into it. And it was also good for me to be there. It was a hard job. Like, I don't, I don't know. It's really hard to be 20 and being an au pair. It's just it's not great, you know, Not for me anyway. But it did because I grew up speaking Swiss-German dialect. That period in Germany was actually very good for my high German. So so I, you know, I made it through and then I just so I guess, like, you know, if you get off the beaten path, like it sounds like a great idea to do that. But when you do that, actually you're sort of without your toeholds anymore. And if you get out of sync with your your school class or whatever. So it doesn't make things easier for you, at least it didn't for me. So it took longer to come together. And then I did like waitressing and I just I lived in group shares, like in Michigan. I had to find my footing, you know, And now I think, like, I don't know if you have that patience for yourself when you're a young person because you can't see it. You know, you feel so much pressure, but now I would say, wow, that wasn't that long at all.

Christiane: Right.

Serena: You know, so...

Christiane: Interesting.

Serena: Yeah.

Christiane: And the couple who you lived with, the opera singer and the filmmaker, they were they were pretty well known people.

Serena: Yeah, Audrey Michael was the singer and she sang, you

know, all over the world and in Europe. And the filmmaker was this person named Claude Goretta And he made like famous films that, you know, won prizes in Europe. And he was just towering sort of pile of a man. And he was always in his in his world of ideas, you know, And I think even though I didn't have an artistic job with them, it planted something in me like, you could do this if you want to, you know, so

Christiane: And so then, not that long afterward, you decided to move to New York., is that right?

Serena: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, again, like, I didn't know where to go. I was paralyzed with indecision somehow. And this friend of mine turned out, wrote on a piece of masking tape, an arrow, and it was a sign, two lines and a little arrow tip, and it said East. So that was like. That's like how I came east. yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, and, and I came here and I. I don't know. I worked as a sculptor's assistant, you know, I knew a family friend who knew somebody. You know, like a lot of people come to New York. I did a mixture of jobs, you know, I didn't sleep that much. You know, I just tried, like, a lot of things kind of, you know, and and I lived in a - my friend had a room. It wasn't really a room even. It was in the East Village, and it was a little loft bed above a desk. So I slept there for \$250 a month. That was it. [laughter] and I had a little suitcase. You know, that's like how I started.

Christiane: You began telling us before about the cello got sent to the wrong address.

Serena: Yeah.

Christiane: Tell us more about that

Serena: Well, the cello went to this painter's house and then this woman who lived in Brooklyn who was like, really into Victorian things, saw the cello and said, Whose cello is that? And her friend was this woman, Melora, who was forming a cello band. And so they said, Hey, there's somebody with a cello. So the person called me, she called me and she said, you know, do you want to come to rehearsal? And so I said, Yes. And even though I had no idea what I was getting into and they gave me a pick up for my cello at the rehearsal, which I had never plugged in, it was three cellos. I mean, I was I had I was just open, but I just went sort of headlong into it, you know, I didn't

think like, this is my destiny, you know? But I just I was open to having the experience, you know?

Christiane: And were they playing music that you felt you connected with or you knew?

Serena: Yeah. I mean I think for me it was really new not to play orchestra music or even folk songs or something. So it was originally, you know, music that was composed for a band. So I think I was into it. It was kind of like chamber music really. You know, we happened to have pickups, but it was chamber music. And then I played with that band Rasputina for three years and did a lot of stuff with them, you know, And they became like a kind of an IT band. but it was also for me, I think, you know, I think for me it was like I was a rookie and I had no idea about band dynamics or anything. and then as I began to realize, like, I kind of want to do my own thing, which is you couldn't do that. You know, each project, whatever, often led by the leader or something. So, you know

Christiane: yeah.

Serena: So and I was playing with, I started playing with other people. I had people who would sort of mentor me, really nice people sort of help me out, you know, And I played with, you know, other people as a cellist, you know, And then and then at some point I was playing with this band, Rex, and they, I loved playing with them because they were a great band. And then we did a six week national tour opening for The Swans It was hardcore. I mean, you know, everybody was very thin by the end and, and we played. And then I think what I realized in that band was like, I need to do my own thing. So I started writing songs, and that's how that came to be.

Christiane: Wow. So that was a new avenue for you, right?

Serena: Yeah. Yeah. And it was also like, you know, there's something really satisfying about making, even if it's not particularly good. Making your own thing means a lot, you know, doing your own, having your own exploration, you know? And so I wrote, you know, songs and I think like, I think I was started to like, I don't know if I have found a style really, but I think that everybody has, when they start doing something, have like hallmarks of their kind of core identity, like whether you're a writer or a painter, there are certain kinds of marks

or a certain way you see light or you write in a certain there's often the seeds are right, like they're there from the beginning, I think, you know, so that's kind of how that started.

Christiane: So you kind of do what you wanted to do in the songs right from the start, would you say, or...?

Serena: Yeah, I mean, there's technical ability, first of all, singing and playing the cello together is not the easiest thing to do. So it took me a couple of years to learn how to do that.

Christiane: Yeah

Serena: But I didn't play guitar really at that time, you know, and I kind of... like, I don't know what it is. It's like some drive or something that leads you to do something that is beyond like a logical explanation. Like you just feel like you have to. And then I think as you do it, you know, hopefully you develop like an editor's eye and you start to say, This is worth keeping, or this I could get rid of, or this I could change, you know? So I think that's like what happens when you have a practice of any kind. You become you become more nuanced, you know, and then and because you're doing it, you have more ideas too. So, you know, I also I mean, I think I don't know if I can segue into this, but like I was very influenced by the poetry scene because Dan, my partner, is a poet and went to tons of poetry readings. And the first couple of years of going to poetry readings, honestly, I felt like, What is this? I don't even get this. What is this? I was sort of... but I kept going until it kind of broke through the membrane, you know, And I started to understand the differences between what people were doing. And so the poets have a very big influence on me in terms of not necessarily being narratives, you know, like I can write a country song with a story about what happens to my truck and the girl that I found. But like, you know, there's also non-narrative, like the way you would go to an art museum and look at a painting or an installation or a sculpture that is pieces of things that are coming together that don't tell like a story per se, you know

Christiane: Right

Serena: But more like a metaphysical realm that you're exploring. So the poets really influenced my sense of language,

I would say.

Christiane: No, that's interesting. And do you collaborate with Dan sometimes.

Serena: I do, Yeah. He's amazing. You know, we sort of have a shorthand because we know each other well and we collaborate. Sometimes he sings like we do a gig together and he'll sing. He sings beautifully, like backup vocals or even takes the lead sometimes. He grew up playing flamenco guitar, so he's a nice musician himself. And we did a collaboration very out of the box type of thing called Above Islands, where we I think we made these sketches and we were going to turn them into official versions of the song, and then we released them as sketches and they were a combination of poetry and music, and our roles were totally fluid. So I could be the poet and he could be the musician or, you know, and some of it was kind of like almost more like sound art or something. And now we have written songs like we've written songs for people's weddings sometimes.

Christiane: Nice

Serena: Yeah and sometimes like, you know, he's an interesting if I give him something I'm working on, like to check out, he has an ability to zoom out and he has like the editor's eye, but he's also just a great writer so he can call attention to like maybe what's working or what's not working sometimes. And he gives me his stuff to read over also So we have like a back and forth

Christiane: Good team together. Yeah. So and after you started writing your songs, you just I imagine you were just doing that at home initially. It must have been a hard transition to then go in front of an audience, I would imagine.

Serena: Yeah, I mean, I did like I wrote the songs and I remember my first gig, like I had asked my friend Tony is how many songs do I need to have to play a show? And he said, Well, at minimum seven. So I came up with the seven. I think one of them was a maybe a cover song of Lucinda Williams song or something. And I basically survived the gig. I mean, there was no glory. There was like just trying to get through each song without falling apart. And maybe I did fall apart and it was like, A lot of performing is learning on stage and it's messy, you know, and it's happening. If you stumble - you stumble and

you get better and better at like recovering yourself or being grounded when you start or knowing how to drop into the heart of a song, you know? But it takes years you can be, you can play the music or the song at home. But to be a performer of it is... it's a whole other area, right? You know? And it's not just me or a performer. It's not me. It's me and the audience

Christiane: Right

Serena: So whatever happens, happens because of the exchange that's going on. And also the, you know, the room and the ether. because of the exchange that's going on. And and also the, you know, the room and the ether. Because sometimes you catch a wave and maybe sometimes you don't. And you kind of have to go with whatever's happening, you know.

Christiane: Were you in situations where people were walking out?

Serena: Yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah. Like early on, like I'd play a small room, there wouldn't be a lot of people, let's say there were like ten people and three of them walk out. You're, you're dying because you're watching that and you know that maybe, you know, you're not much past just the survival mode, but there's no way around it. So part of you has to be kind of out of your mind to keep going. But that's just the way it is, you know? And I mean, there may be people who are, you know, maybe more. There may be people who are more trained than I am or more just having innate confidence. But I had to find it like, you know, it's like climbing a rope ladder, swinging the whole time. And then when you find that thing, when you catch those waves in the audience, then it's like this amazing thing because then it's not just it's not about me. It's not about me anymore at all. It's about the song and about the shared thing that we all found together, you know?

Christiane: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Yeah. And now you have your own band, right?

Serena: Yeah. Yeah, I, you know, I'm really lucky. I have people I've been playing with for over ten years. They are near and dear to me, and we appreciate each other's creativity a lot. You know, And they're incredible players and also great people, which is very important to me.

Christiane: Do you arrange the music for the rest of the band or how does that work?

Serena: I'm just going to take a sip of water

Christiane: Sure

Serena: So I guess the sort of broad answer to that is no, I don't arrange it. I make songs that have forms, you know, that have formed chords or whatever areas. These areas of the song. But I give them like when I come to rehearsal or something, I'll give them an idea of what I imagine maybe I might play it for them and just let them do whatever, but I might give them an idea about a texture or a color or a time. Like I might say, you know, this isn't here. This isn't in this place. This is in another place, you know, or this is in, think of this song is being like from the 1930s or something or whatever I'll give them something and then they, they come up with things and it's sometimes it's like there's that sense of loss I have because I have the original songs just like tiny little baby thing that I made. And then I put it into the fire, you know, and it has this transformation.

Christiane: Wow.

Serena: Then what happens is because we've played together for such a long time, you know, they'll do something that inspires me or just makes me change something that I'm doing. So there's like a, you know, a give and take and then the other thing I've been experimenting with recently, so it's not like everyone has a fixed part or something like that. I'm not that interested in that repetition or execution of a part that doesn't interest me. But like, I'll do stuff where, you know, my guitarist will play something one way and it'll be amazing. And the next time he takes the solo, it's ragged and wild and falls off the rails. And I love it because I want him to take those chances. And then the other thing we've been doing, I've been doing is having we're recording this way and we're going to perform this way too where instead of just like a quartet of a band do duos and trios because you behave differently. where instead of just like a quartet of a band do duos and trios because you behave differently. Like sometimes I do a duo show with my bassist, Rob Jost and when you play just two of you, you do different things than you would do if you were in the band, full band or something, you know? So I guess what I'm trying to say is that I

like to keep it fresh and like a little bit unpredictable, you know?

Christiane: Yeah, you never really know what's going to - -

Serena: Yeah. Yeah. And actually, I think that's why they enjoy playing with me too, because I want them to be the, the most of themselves, you know? That's like my hope. So yeah.

Christiane: So they also probably play elsewhere or have their own bands

Serena: Yeah, I mean they, they're working musicians. Julian Maile plays Losers Lounge. He's like one of the main people in that band. He is incredible. He plays other kinds of bands too. My bassist, Rob Jost, was the bassist for Dear Evan Hansen and plays on Hamilton and just plays everything jazz, you know, songwriter's, classical. He's a very working person and the drummer right now is a person, Konrad Meissner. He plays with a lot of people. The Silos and the other drummer that we've had for longer is Robert DiPietro, and he's an amazing musician who also plays Brazilian music. So they're all very versatile.

Christiane: Was it hard to find them to hook up with them?

Serena: Yes, I mean, before that Julian has been with me most of the way, actually. And Julian is kind of my you know, he's I don't know. I think we have an affinity there, risk taking affinity or something that really works. But I had other people I enjoyed playing with other people. But I think it takes a while, at least for me to to acknowledge who, what people working, what kind of players. You can have a great drummer who's a certain kind of drummer who isn't right for my music, you know, And then... or you can have people who are very invested and involved in being cool. And I guess when I was younger that was more of an issue. But I I would feel insecure around people who I don't know. You know, I guess what I'm saying is you want to find people that you trust who like you innately and who you like innately. You know. And so there's somebody for everybody, but it's just like you have to find the right. So I feel like it took me like more than five years to settle in, you know? And now I feel like it's like having a family, you know.

Christiane: It's like a relationship.

Serena: It is a really important relationship. Yeah. And there's so much respect. I think, and I feel like I grow I grow through working with because they're all such incredible musicians, you know?

Christiane: And can you tell us some of the some of the places you've played?

Serena: Yeah, yeah. My favorite thing is small listening rooms in New York like Barbes in Brooklyn which you know about and that's a fantastic venue and The Owl which is another great venue run by or are owned by Oren O'Blivion an amazing musician so like I said, musician owned venues and I mean I have played and I will sing, we sold out Joe's Pub,

Christiane: That's great

Serena: Yeah, it's great. I haven't played there recently, but I love Joe's pub, you know, but you know, I have also done like house concerts, like people's living rooms, and that can be really profound also. Like on tour, you know, I've done those types of things. Like one time I played a village in England and my friend was British and we were on tour together and the village is like two hundred people and I think 150 of those people came to the house.

Christiane: Wow.

Serena: So that's a pretty nice, you know.

Christiane: A totally different kind of journey.

Serena: Yeah. I mean, I really appreciate bigger venues. I've performed at PS 1 before and, you know, I do appreciate it, but bigger or more, more reputable doesn't necessarily mean better, you know.

Christiane: You might play differently too.

Serena: Yeah. It's a different performance, you know? I think, I like to, like I said, I really enjoy the smaller listening rooms because I feel like we're in a ship and we're going somewhere together.

Christiane: Great. Great analogy. Yeah. You've also recorded some CDs, right? And one of them you recorded very near Penn

South, at St. Peters Church Can you tell us something about that and how that came about?

Serena: Yeah. So I had this out of nowhere, vision that I wanted to make a recording in a non-commercial space. Then I thought it should be a church or synagogue I went, I started to have the idea and I said, I want to do a solo cello, live cello and voice recording. And so I went to Jersey City to look at a church. In Hoboken, I think, and I went to this place in Brooklyn, like somewhere maybe by Ditmas Park But I kept looking and looking, you know, it's like, this isn't it, This isn't it. And finally five blocks away from our house. You know, I found this St Peter's on 20th Street, and I went in there and I found the I guess he's a pastor or minister. His name was Stephen Harding at the time. And I said, you know, I want to do this thing. Could I? Maybe. What do you think? And actually, I have been going down to that church with Garbo our beloved dog, and so I kind of knew the environment already, but I'd never been inside. And so he took me around and he said, Come and look at it. He was very open. And I sang a note and I was like, This is it, you know?

Christiane: The acoustics must have been -

Serena: Yeah, amazing And the reverberation it's not just a space, it's a space from 18... 1838 I forget, we'll have to clarify that. But I think it's 1838, 1848, 1848 I think it is, the cornerstone when I recorded there We had eight microphones set up, just me on the stage, I guess you'd call it, and it's not just, we recorded for two days and it's, the sound and reverberation of the church. But it's not just that when I was in the church, I was singing across the space into the upper, the upper balcony there and I could feel the people who had been in there all those years.

Christiane: Wow

Serena: I could feel like all the and it sounds whatever it is, I just know that I sort of experienced there have been so many people coming over decades for 100 years more to this church. So it was also kind of one of these experiences where it was I don't know something was happening that was sort of beyond my thing So it was very special.

Christiane: Yeah, also, I would think a kind of a spiritual feel

also

Serena: Yeah, definitely, definitely. And then on that album, Up to the Sky, like some of the songs were written and some of them were improvizations that happened spontaneously in space, and I didn't plan for any of that.

Christiane: It just came just to you

Serena: Like I had almost like just through me or something. Like I didn't really do it It felt like, you know.

Christiane: There was no human audience, no present day audience

Serena: There was an engineer and one of the days there was a videographer, this woman, Marie Le Claire, who's really wonderful but there was no audience. Just at the end of the second day, Dan came with our dog Garbo, and she came into the church, which gave me great pleasure. And she really loved it. She came running down the aisle. So and I think, you know, it was really a special time because of the person who ran it and everything. But it's nice to think of going to a place where other, many other people have been before you or, you know.

Christiane: Yeah. A place with a lot of history.

Serena: Yeah and people come, you know, whether you are subscribing to Christianity per se, which is maybe not where I'm coming from, there is still godliness in the space. So that's very nice.

Christiane: Yeah. And you'd also mentioned your earlier recording, The Bird Will Fly?

Serena: A Bird Will Sing

Christiane: A Bird Will Sing. Didn't get it quite right.

Serena: Okay. Yeah.

Christiane: that was an unusual kind of coming together of things too Can you tell us something about that?

Serena: Yeah. So that was my second album and I wasn't sure about who to have I wanted to have a producer and I wasn't sure. And I interviewed three different people and they were all like,

you know, it's going to be a big undertaking because it with the band in a recording studio with a producer. So you could see like the budget is like starting to climb. So, I ended up choosing Anton Fier. Who has departed now, but an amazing drummer and producer who had the Golden Palominos and other projects, The Feelies and a really incredible force. And I knew I wanted someone with an aesthetic, like it had a stamp. I wanted some kind of mark on the album. And Anton was really wonderful, challenging to work with, very, very insightful person, but also quite tough and hard. So that was but also equally kind. So I learned a lot from him. He sort of was like kind of took me under his wing and I would spend hours in his apartment. He lives like in a basement rehearsal space, and would we would talk a lot. And then I did a Kickstarter to raise money for it, and I raised \$10,000.

Christiane: Wow, great.

Serena: Which is how I was able to pay for it. So that was a really big production, you know?

Christiane: Yeah. And you've also done some recording here at Penn Self right? How do you do that?

Serena: So earlier like a couple of years ago I had like just a really cheap microphone and it would just record whatever and sometimes, you know, things that you're sketching or you're not doing an official official recording can be... has a certain charm to it, like sketchiness But then during the pandemic I bought a microphone from Lawson microphones in Nashville L47FET, which is an incredible microphone and great for the cello and the voice. And so I've been recording here. I've built, you can see it in the hallway, if you went back out I built out of - - we did the initial recordings for the new record in a studio at Studio G in Brooklyn. This guy, Rich Bennett and it's a fantastic studio, dream studio. But it's also, you know, a lot of money. So I have the microphone and I built out of wardrobe racks From, you know, like from Amazon like these. They come in sections and it would be a wardrobe track that would might be about 50 inches tall. But I bought an extra one, so I made a tall, I'd extended the length of it and I have, from B&H actually, I have these blankets, you know, that I made. And so I have a little it's collapsible. The whole thing can collapse into two bags for apartment storage. But it's - you can assemble

it right here in this spot where I'm sitting basically. So I have a little vocal booth, which is what I'm doing now.

Christiane: Wow. Yeah. So do you generally record both the cello and the singing?

Serena: Yeah. Yeah, I'll probably. I mean, I may - - I could do the cello here, but I may do the cello back in the studio just because someone else can handle the controls and stuff. But doing the vocals here, you know, I sent a vocal test, to my engineer. I said, What do you think of this? And he's like, Sounds great. So, now it's just a matter of like, you know, making sure that I'm not doing that in the middle of the night for my neighbors. But it's nice to have something at home. And Dan and I do record here sometimes too, and sometimes I've had people over to do some recording, you know.

Christiane: Some of the people who are guest artists with your band maybe, that come record here.

Serena: Yeah, they could do that. And sometimes I have like I have other friends who I like, I have some people that I play with my friend Dimitri, who's a guitarist, and we just kind of play totally free form with no, no song. Like whatever happens. So somehow we record that, you know, see what happens.

Christiane: And you teach students here at Penn South?

Serena: Yes, I do, yeah. Yes, it all happens right here. So I have students, mostly two days a week and and voice students and cello students and some songwriting people. And they come here, which works out great for me because I don't have to carry my cello. And also, it's a nice place to have a lesson.

Christiane: Yeah, are they kids? Are they adults or?

Serena: They range a lot. I had a 9 year old here a month ago and a 79 year old here two days ago.

Christiane: Wow. 79?

Serena: 79! And you know it's happening.

Christiane: Is she a cello player?

Serena: She's a cello player. She's a new cello player. She

played, I think, a little saxophone online during the pandemic, but she had no musical experience. She is very committed. She bought a cello. She didn't rent it. She bought it. And she's, she's doing it. And she's really consistent. And she comes and, you know, I think, you know, it's great to have innate gifts. Like that's a really nice thing if you have innate gifts. But the other thing is just putting in time and if you put in time, you will move forward. It's just how it works, you know?

Christiane: Yeah, so do your students inspire your songwriting or your music in any way?

Serena: That's interesting. I think. I think they make me aware, like if I'm doing demonstrations or something on cello. I'm aware of the clarity with which I'm giving them something. So if I'm not so I think it helps me try to be clear vocally. I think like the voice students I might like, for example, I might come up with an exercise or something or come up with something to sing for somebody to help them with a challenge they might be having, or to come up with something sort of simple that is doable because you want people to meet with success. So I think sometimes to answer your question, sometimes I've learned from my students that doing something sort of with clarity but kind of quickly, like not overworking something can be really valuable. You know, we have you have a first, you know, what Allen Ginsberg said, like first idea, best idea First thought, best thought that type of thing.

Christiane: Yeah. And how about Muciscans who've influenced you either as a songwriter or as a cello player?

Serena: Yeah, a lot of people So I grew up with a lot of classical music and I loved like all the Beethoven quartets and I loved people like Erik Satie and I loved I learned to love and love like Philip Glass or people, really wild people like Martin Feldman you know, who might play the same note for 8 minutes. Like, that's interesting to me. and then in songwriting, I think there's so many incredible songwriters In my car I listen to satellite radio and there's this great, like country station that plays all these old country. Some of the songs are so incredible, you know, I love those. And then I also like people who are like, Arthur Russell was a big influence on me as a cellist singing singing cellist and incredible musician like an absolute genius and free, you know, so free. So I feel like he

kind of green light lit for me, like, I can do whatever I imagine, you know. And then sometimes it goes the other way, Like I brought, A Bird Will Sing to rehearsal. Once, that song. And my bass player said, You know, this reminds me of a Judee Sill song. And I said, Who's Judee Sill? And then I went home and I listened to Judee Sill and like, she's absolutely one of the most brilliant favorite songwriters. Do you know who she is?

Christiane: No I don't

Serena: Oh my God So she's just incredible. She had a very dynamic, let's say life very hard life, but she she's incredible songwriter. And then there are people like musically, like Caetano Veloso or Chico Buarque, like Brazilian people. So I don't limit myself in terms of genre at all, you know? And I even like whatever I think Katy Perry's great, I think that there's a lot of things that can be good, you know, and I guess it's like I was very influenced by there was this place called CB's Gallery on the Bowery, and there was a music scene there, I'm also really influenced by my peers, and that's where I met a lot of people. And then we all ended up kind of at this place called the Living Room. And every night at the Living Room. There would be all these great acts. And so I would go for many days a week and just be steeped in my in the influence of my peers. You know, I guess that's the most direct influence, right? The people around you.

Christiane: Right. Sure.

Serena: You know, and then and then I think I'm also influenced by visuals, things dance. I love dance. And you know, fine art. I mean, visual art. So I'm kind of broad and culturally influenced by a lot of things.

Christiane: Yeah, you're pulling a lot of different things into your work.

Serena: Yeah

Christiane: Another very interesting concert you arranged was the 50 cello concert on Governors Island. Can you tell us about that? That's certainly...

Serena: Another act of irrational madness. Like, why would you do that? So I had this person I was playing with named Matthew

Robinson He has a band called Opal Onyx, and it's a very interesting project. And he and I were playing together and we came up with this idea to have 50 cellos on Governors Island. So I was on the phone a lot and emailing people a lot, and we created so we didn't really have a rehearsal. So we created cells of music that were and they included all, I had students, some of my students playing. So it had to be certain things had to be playable for more beginners and some things were more advanced. So we had like these blocks of information that we had like four sort of different tracks you could be on. And then we, you know, we were there and then it was like, I think we conducted I can't remember exactly, but we, we called the change So some would be playing and playing this wave of sound and then we would shift and then the people who could would take off and do more elaborate things. So it was beautiful. It was on a hillside with the fort in the background.

Christiane: Wow. Sounds great.

Serena: Yeah.

Christiane: So did somebody film it or any?

Serena: We have some footage old footage of that somewhere. I'm not sure, but you know, it was I don't know. It's just like sometimes it's nice to do something that you wouldn't normally do

Christiane: Really different

Serena: Yeah, yeah, yeah,. It would be fun to do that you could do it in whatever in Manhattan somewhere if you wanted to, I guess.

Christiane: And what are you working on now? Or what's your next project?

Serena: Okay, well, I mean, I'm finishing the recording, finishing in the recording, and then I'm working on this thing called Bloom, which is a staged choreography of song where I'm taking my songs and giving them more context with movement and visuals. And I have the work-in-progress date set for the end of March, which is, you know, I'm in the dark, so I'm doing this thing. I have this idea to do this thing, and I don't yet know how I'm going to get there, but I have a date. So that's like

part of how I'm going to get there and, and I've been doing movement stuff. I did a workshop with Meredith Monk in December, and this woman named Ellen Fisher, who was just amazing movement person. So I want to create gestural movements to go with the music and it'll be, you know, kind of a staged theater piece and it's sort of a, like I would say it's a it's less of a narrative. There are questions that are going to be raised, but it's sort of a metaphysical story of these songs and some considerations, you know?

Christiane: Yeah, yeah.

Serena: So and The Bloom, I think. I mean, The Bloom is just that. What is a bloom, right? It's that emergent moment of beauty. What happens before that? Like the ground lies fallow and then this thing comes and then it goes, right?

Christiane: Wow. That's beautiful.

Serena: Yeah

Christiane: And this is the first time you've done something with movement and dance, right?

Serena: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I'm... I don't know. It's just like one of those things. I just had the idea, and I'm figuring out how to get there, and I have a work in progress date and applied for some grants, so I'd like to have it in a theater in the fall. But, you know, like when you do something, it's just like you can't know where you're going exactly. So you just like put to the next step and see where you end up. That's kind of where I am.

Christiane: It sounds amazing, but also terrifying.

Serena: It is a little terrifying. It is a little terrifying because, I mean, in order for it to work, it has to fail in certain ways. You know, like in order to try, you have to try stuff. And it's a sorting out process. And it's again, it's not that different than like stage learning to be on stage. I have to try it in real time. It's an idea, but I have to try it and we're going to do a version of it right?

Christiane: Right. Yeah.

Serena: You know what I mean So I think what's like scarier to

me than figuring it out is having the idea and not doing it. that's like, worse, you know? you know? and then it's not like I'm flying without a net here. I mean, I have my band. We have a relationship that a lot of, some of the music is music that is already songs that I have. So, you know.

Christiane: You have a base at least.

Serena: Yeah.

Christiane: Has there ever been a project that you've embarked on that you felt was a total failure when you....

Serena: I mean, definitely those early gigs sometimes, like I'd just come home and cry, you know, because it wasn't happening. But, but then for some reason, you get up and do it again, right? I've definitely had songs or things that I guess, you know. Yeah, sometimes things show themselves to not be workable, you know, like I might have a song that I think is pretty good or something, and then I go about it and it's just never happening

Christiane: Right.

Serena: And I've definitely made a lot of mistakes, I sometimes like, you know, feeling paralyzed during a show is a pretty profound thing. And you have to just stay there and keep going, you know, and some days, like, say, I pick up my cello or something, and some days I feel, yeah, you know, this is great. Like, it feels good. And some days I feel like I can't I can't find it today or I try to do like the things that will get me there. And that's true of singing also. Some days you might try for something and it's just not connecting and you know, you live with it.

Christiane: Yeah

Serena: But I think like artists have a weird thing where they, you know, part of you has to be like, totally You kind of have to be know what you're doing. And then the other part of you has to have no idea what you're doing and that you need both of those things.

Christiane: Like your subconscious, working with your conscious.

Serena: Yeah, and I think you have, I think you have that, you

know, you kind of live with that and it's like a little you have to kind of flow with it, right? You know and sometimes you're able to do it more and sometimes not, you know, I think if you didn't fail I mean, I have definitely failed like technically, emotionally, you know, sometimes like my vision is like no good for something or I think if you, if you didn't fail, it would kind of like indicate that you're you're not getting out of your knowable realm. You want to enter the part where you don't know you know.

Christiane: Which also reminds me, of your photography. That's something new for you, right?

Serena: Yeah. Yeah.

Christiane: You are a wonderful photographer. How did how did that start?

Serena: Well, thank you so much. I mean, basically started because I have a smartphone and because we would take always walks with our dog Garbo, and we would she kind of would affect the pace of the walk. And she and I would she was a quite incredible We would go on five mile walks all the time. We would walk down, you know, Ninth Avenue into the Meatpacking District, down into the village, and she was sort of reluctant to leave the radius. And then I would treat her on the way down but no treats on the way back. So I would rush her down, but we would see it was almost like being in a movie, like I would see everything going by or whatever. So she got me really attuned to my surroundings and I started taking photographs because I enjoyed it. And then I think, like anything, the more you start doing something, the more it creates awareness about where you are or those moments, you know. And I also think like, you know, speaking of failure, there is like you try for things and sometimes there's -- doesn't work or it's just not good, you know. So there's that. But I'm inspired by the city, you know, like there's so much and there's so many ways of seeing things like, I like that about this neighborhood. You're in the same place and you make the same paths and you see things very different day to day. I mean, you know what I mean? You have a dog?

Christiane: Yeah

Serena: Right? It's like especially with the dog. So and then,

you know. Yeah, just, just kind of evolved that way.

Christiane: And do you see a relationship between your photography and your music? Or there's things in common?

Serena: Yeah, like, I think, it's like framing things, you know, because deciding what you want to frame is a big connection. And some ways a photograph is a song cause it's a world or it's like a, I think both photographs and songs are kind of portals, you know?

Christiane: Yeah they transport you.

Serena: Yeah, yeah. You know, and, and it's, you know, it's also I also think it's that thing, that thing that we were talking about, which is that, you know, you're looking for something and then something comes to you and music is the same. Like, I might look for an idea, but sometimes it's inevitable that there's some idea that comes to me, you know, And I don't really I'm sort of, because I was here, it happened, you know, But it's like, it's around you. You know, I always think of, like, songs like being like birds flying by, they're going all the time. So, like, it's a matter of what if you engage with it, you know? And I think photographs are similar too right? It's sometimes, it's really physical. Like it's not like I'm walking down the street and I'm not looking for anything and it's like it's physical, Like my body goes first you know, just like that.

Christiane: Yeah, that's a beautiful description.

Serena: Yeah.

Christiane: So I think that's pretty much the end of my question. Is there anything else that you feel I left out or wanted to cover?

Serena: I don't. Think so. I don't think so you had so many great questions. Hopefully I didn't talk too much. It's just been talking and talking.

Christiane: John, do you have any questions? Additional questions from this our sound and technical director?

John: I don't know if you can hear me, but you mentioned earlier that there are certain imprints or maybe seeds of who you are but you mentioned earlier that there are certain imprints or

maybe seeds of who you are that later come out in your art, even if you're still a child or you're not even sure where your art is going?

Serena: Yeah

John: What are some of yours?

Serena: Oh that's interesting. Well, I think, it's - - I'm not sure if I have the right word for it, but I think mystical things are kind of within my access that I don't try for them or something, that they're kind of just there. And I can't, It's like an orientation, like a point of orientation. And I remember it as a kid, even just having, it's not quite seriousness, but it's like some kind of searching questing thing that's just there. And I think like also people will say, oh your songs are beautiful, you know, And I'm not trying necessarily always for beauty, but it's something, you know, I don't want to sound arrogant, but it's like some people have stuff that's really catchy or really exciting or really devastating or challenging or... and I think it's like hardwiring, you know, you're just, you have this you have an orientation towards things, you know. So I don't know if that answers your question, but so I think existential type of things, visual like images, nature and stuff, you know, that's just there.

Christiane: That actually reminds me of something you said when we met another time about your mother, like her initial reaction to your music. She sounds like she has a different orientation.

Serena: Very much. Yeah.

Christiane: Tell us about that

Serena: Like so she really likes upbeat light, you know, catchy music that is it's friendly, you know, And she doesn't - - I'm like, attracted to the weirdest chords and the darkest jagged. I'm really interested in those things. She and I are so different and she likes that feeling of happiness and well-being and like challenging, like darker music actually makes her feel not well, you know? And I think different people have different, like I have a cello student who absolutely hates jazz, you know, and it's like, wow. All of jazz?? But but she really likes Bach, like in her lessons. Like, so her orientation is like, she loves that. She - that's what makes her it feels good to her, you

know? And I'm interested in like, take me wherever I go. So I think, you know, I mean, and I did do that thing for my mother's birthday where I wrote her the song about butterflies with really friendly. And she like, it's a nice song. And actually it showed me like, I could write like kind of a friendly song, you know? So I don't know. I think it's I don't know. You think you have to value it. It's just like I think it's kind of who people are. Like, I don't know about you, but I love punk music, you know, like, and it doesn't seem like it based on what I do, but I really am interested in some of that, you know? So kind of whatever works.

Christiane: Absolutely Well, thank you so much. It's been a great interview. So interesting to hear.

Serena: Thank you to all of you for being here. yeah, I don't know when I can't wait to see how things turn out and everything

Christiane: Great thank you Serena.