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# SIX STRING SOJOURNER

**Sharon Isbin has circled the globe expanding the reach, reputation, and repertoire of the classical guitar**

BY MARK SMALL

**L**ike a long-distance runner, classical guitarist Sharon Isbin sets her sights on mileposts ahead and after passing them, moves steadily toward the next. Her course has brought her to performances in the world's most iconic venues (including the Obama White House), and collaborations with distinguished composers and conductors as well as performers from a multiplicity of non-classical genres. Her discography spans more than 35 albums, with two entries netting her Grammy awards. Isbin summited a new peak last summer when she received the Artistic Achievement Award from the Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) and was named its 2023 Hall of Fame inductee—two honors bestowed on the brightest lights in the classical guitar firmament.

In presenting the award at the finale of the GFA's 2023 convention in New York, marking the organization's 50th anniversary, artistic director Brian Head cited Isbin's "transformational contributions to the world guitar community and artistic excellence" among the reasons she was chosen.

Antigoni Goni, a former Isbin student and now colleague, speaks in personal terms of her teacher's indelible influence on her. "Sharon takes a deep breath and dives fully into every challenge without second thoughts," Goni shares. "Not because she feels superhuman—she once told me she feels very human—but she knows there are no second chances. For me as a young aspiring guitarist in my early 20s, being around her energy was simply incredible."









One of Isbin's many crossover collaborations was with rock guitar hero Steve Vai.

The week after the GFA event, when Isbin was in Massachusetts as a guest artist at Boston GuitarFest, I met up with her for a conversation about her groundbreaking career as a performer and teacher.

#### CLASSIC SOUNDS AND NEW REALMS

In her concert the night before the GFA awards ceremony, Isbin spotlighted repertoire spanning her career and musical proclivities, juxtaposing audience favorites by Enrique Granados, Agustín Barrios, Antonio Lauro, and Francisco Tárrega with lengthier, listener-challenging works by Leo Brouwer and Tan Dun.

"The program was a retrospective of music I'm often associated with," Isbin says. "I chose three pieces by Leo Brouwer, including *El Decameron Negro*, which he wrote for me. That one marks a seminal moment in both of our careers. The two other Brouwer pieces rounded out a representation of the three compositional style periods in his life to celebrate his upcoming 85th birthday."

Another highlight of Isbin's GFA concert was Tan Dun's "7 Desires," a solo work the Chinese composer derived from the themes of *Yi2*, the concerto he penned for her in 1996. The 11-minute piece finds common ground between playing techniques of the four-stringed Chinese pipa and Spanish flamenco guitar. Juxtaposing rapid-fire tremolo passages and percussive slaps with introspective melodies demanded much from the player, and Isbin carried it off flawlessly.

Isbin is noted for her onstage charisma and playing with precision, variegated colors, and heartfelt expression. At her GFA concert, she drew the audience inside the music, reveling for long stretches with closed eyes, holding listeners enraptured until the final notes faded. After sitting motionless—sometimes for 15 seconds—she slowly lowered her left hand from the guitar neck, opened her eyes and smiled, gestures that assured the audience it was OK to exhale and applaud.

Isbin believes blending staples of the repertoire with sometimes abstract contemporary compositions is an effective way to introduce listeners to new and unfamiliar musical territories. "You've already won them over with music that's accessible," she says. "Pieces like Brouwer's 'La Espiral Eterna' or '7 Desires' give the audience a chance to go to a new realm. Once they're with you, they will trust you on this journey."

#### EARLY BREAKTHROUGHS

Isbin's musical peregrinations started when she was nine years old. Her family was living in Italy then, and she began guitar lessons with local teachers. Years later, Andrés Segovia, Oscar Ghiglia, Rosalyn Tureck, and other luminaries mentored her. The promise of a bright future was apparent well before she earned her bachelor's degree at Yale and master's at that university's school of music.

Isbin suddenly appeared on the radar of the classical guitar community after winning





Clockwise from top left: with Nancy Wilson from Heart; with Joan Baez; at Carnegie Hall with Sting; post-White House performance with the Obamas

the Guitar Society of Toronto's competition in 1975. She took first prize in a field where the finalists were none other than Manuel Barrueco, Eliot Fisk, and David Leisner, all of whom went on to establish illustrious careers.

"I was only a teenager then," Isbin recalls. "I didn't enter thinking I would win. I did it for the experience and got lucky. Many things evolved after that."

One important connection forged at the Toronto competition was with Cuban guitarist and composer Leo Brouwer, who played a concert and caught Isbin's attention with his fresh and exotic music. He too noted her formidable abilities and they became acquainted. After recording two of his pieces on her 1978 debut recording, *Sharon Isbin: Classical Guitar*, she sent him the album. Then, in 1981, out of the blue, she received an envelope from Brouwer containing the three-movement suite *El Decameron Negro* with a dedication to her. Today, the piece is a key part of her legacy and a standard of the repertoire.

Isbin won two more international competitions before completing her college studies and launching her career in earnest. Like many others, she has furthered the goals Segovia long ago envisioned for the guitar. They included elevating it to the status of a classical concert instrument; commissioning contemporary composers to write for it; and establishing guitar performance curricula at conservatories, colleges, and universities.

"I feel Segovia's dreams have been major inspirations in terms of working with composers and reaching out beyond the guitar world to get those who never would have written for the instrument to write for it," Isbin says. "It took ten years of twisting John Corigliano's arm to get him to write a guitar concerto for me."

#### MENTORING THE NEXT GENERATION

By 1989, in addition to her touring and recording, Isbin became the founding director of the Juilliard School's guitar department. In 1993, she took on directorship of the summer guitar

program at the Aspen Music Festival and School. More recently, she instituted a doctoral program for guitar at Juilliard. Her student Alberta Khoury of Australia became the program's first enrollee following a rigorous vetting process in which Juilliard's doctoral committee selects four or five candidates across the spectrum of musicians.

Through the years, Isbin has helped countless guitarists hone their skills. Remarkably, four former students, Antigoni Goni, Kevin Gallagher, TY Zhang, and Bokyoung Byun, have won first prize at the GFA competition. At this year's contest, her current student Alan Liu took third prize.

"It's been gratifying to see students grow, find their inner voice, and develop the maturity and musical values that can carry them forward in the future," she declares. "The things I focus on include teaching them to use color effectively and to have an arsenal of articulations and nuances that can enhance and express the music."





TESSA SEVERINS

## WHAT SHE PLAYS

Sharon Isbin plays a 2010 Antonius Müller cedar double-top guitar, with a standard 650mm fingerboard scale. Her string choices are Savarez New Cristal Blue (high tension) for the first, New Cristal Red (normal tension) for the second, and Alliance Red (normal tension) for the third. She uses Savarez Cantiga Blue (high tension) polished basses for the fourth and fifth strings, and an unpolished Cantiga Blue for the sixth. —MS

This was readily apparent in her interactions with students in master classes at the GFA and Boston GuitarFest in June. Isbin encouraged the players to try fingerings they hadn't considered to unlock the guitar's colors. She had them experimenting with various approaches to vibrato, adding slurs in the left hand, moving to higher or lower neck positions, or employing campanella in short scalar passages, resulting in fretted notes and open strings ringing together. She picked up on minute fingering problems some players seemed unaware of and demonstrated solutions to polish their performance; she instructed them on shaping phrases with dynamics when ascending or descending to a target note, and on varying timbral colors upon section repeats. These classes provided a glimpse inside the tool kit of expressive devices she uses to craft finely honed interpretations.

"Something I find so special about the guitar is the possibility of an enormous palette of colors," she remarks. "A lot of players don't make use of them, but if you do, it opens up an extraordinary sensory world and you are complementing and engaging the music you are expressing."

## NEW COMPOSITIONS AND CROSSOVERS

Along with the pieces by Brouwer and Tan Dun mentioned above, many contemporary composers, including Richard Danielpour, Lukas Foss, Joan Tower, and Joseph Schwanter, have dedicated pieces to Isbin. On the list of 80-plus works composed for her is music for solo guitar and guitar in combination with other instruments or voice. The inventory includes at least a dozen concertos, many of which she has performed with more than 200 orchestras across the globe.

In January of 2024, Isbin will premiere the *Miami Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra* by composer Karen LeFrak. "It's in a Latin-pop style that utilizes Cuban and other Latin American rhythms, combining them in a way I love that will have popular appeal," she says. "I premiered the first movement on the lawn of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., with the National Symphony Orchestra. We are still formulating plans to record it."

Isbin frequently ventures into other forms of music in collaboration with celebrated artists working in jazz, pop, rock, folk, bluegrass, film, and world music. Her first crossover project, *Guitarjam*, was a trio she formed in 1984 with jazz guitarist Larry Coryell and multifaceted Brazilian guitarist Laurindo Almeida. Since then, a short list of her fellow adventurers onstage and on record includes

rock guitar heroes Steve Vai and Steve Morse, Brazilian percussionist Thiago de Mello, banjoist Alison Brown, fiddler Mark O'Connor, and vocalists Joan Baez, Nancy Wilson, Sting, and Josh Groban.

Perhaps her most audacious project is Strings for Peace, with Indian sarod master Amjad Ali Khan and his sons Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash, and tabla player Amit Kavthekar. Amjad Ali Khan composed and/or arranged ragas for the group's eponymous 2020 album and tours, and Isbin successfully set about adapting her musical voice for a dialogue in a non-Western musical vocabulary.

"Each crossover project has required a different focus stylistically, and I apply myself 1,000 percent to absorbing as much as I can to be in the right time zone and solar system when I play with these amazing people," Isbin says. "I wasn't expecting these projects; they

**'Something I find so special about the guitar is the possibility of an enormous palette of colors!'**

**—SHARON ISBIN**

landed in my lap. If I am moved by another artist and their work and am asked to play with them, I will do anything to meet them on that level to create something new that's inspiring for us both."

#### FORGING AHEAD

While Isbin has covered much ground geographically and stylistically, she's maintained the edge in her playing. "My hands are actually faster now," she says. "I've found ways to increase technique, and I love the challenge of trying to become better tomorrow than I was yesterday. I've played some of the music I presented at my GFA concert for a long time and approached it with totally new ears, seeking new nuances. I find new things all the time, and that's what keeps the music fresh."

When asked about sustaining the con brio tempo of her long and extraordinary career, she reveals that she is modifying the pace. "I don't

feel the need to always race around the world playing in this country one day and that country the next. I've done that all my life. I've learned the value of getting eight hours of sleep, which enables me to focus with even more clarity on the tasks at hand," she says.


Isbin has always been health conscious and was wearing face masks on flights long before the pandemic. Consequently, she hasn't had a cold in seven years and never got Covid. She also enjoys exercise. "One advantage of being from my generation is that I've learned to love physical activity and sports," she con-

tinues. "I love cross-country skiing and jogging. Rigorous exercise in the outdoors makes me feel like I am still 23 years old. I have that energy."

That energy continues to drive Isbin forward. "It feels like I am still riding an incredible magic carpet through the air, being fascinated by new discoveries along the way," she reflects. "I don't have any physical ailments. As long as my fingers work well and I stay totally healthy, it's possible to find a remarkably long trajectory ahead for the things I'm passionate about." **AC**

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