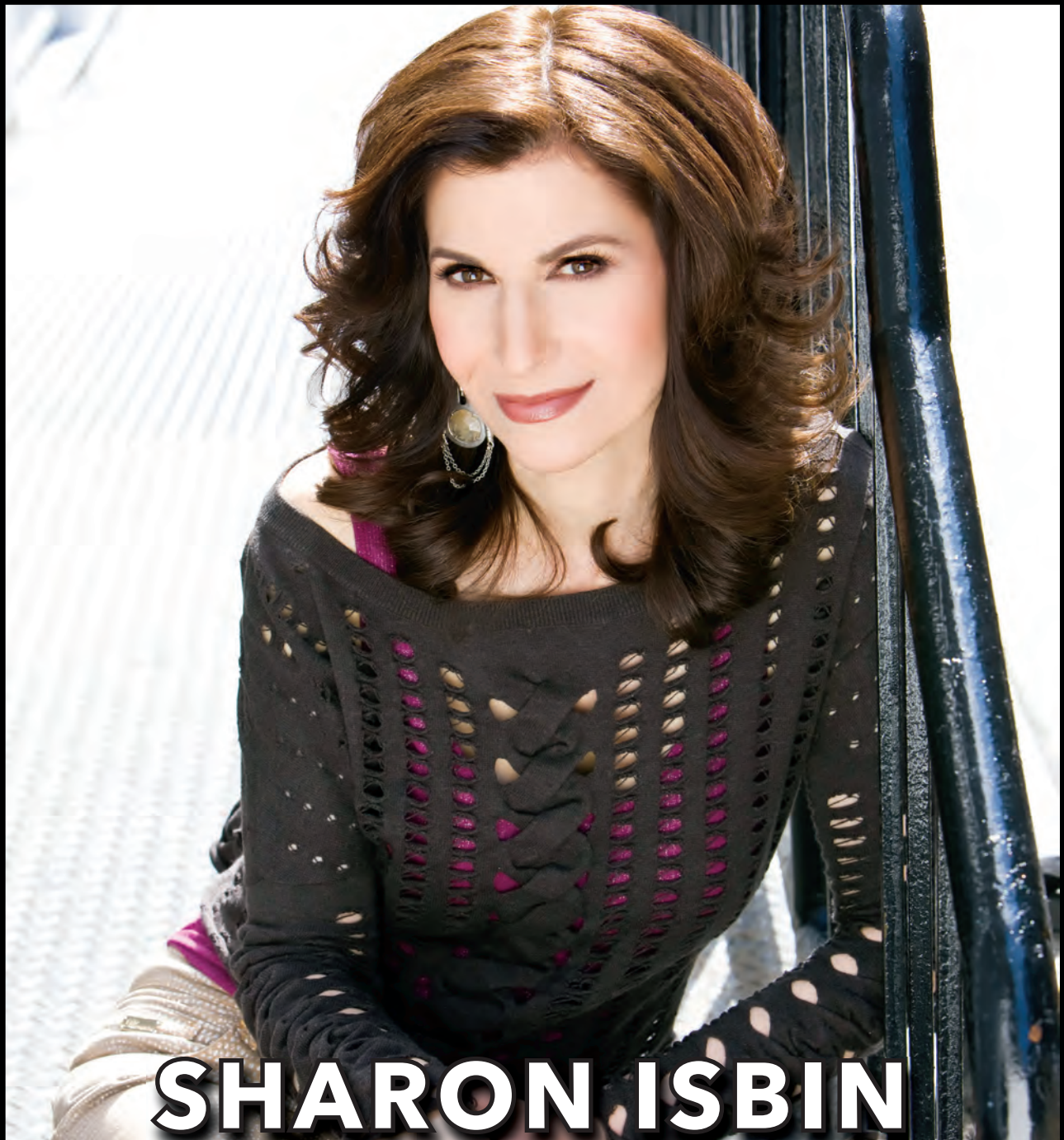


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# Soundboard

THE JOURNAL OF THE GUITAR FOUNDATION OF AMERICA



**SHARON ISBIN**

*Hall of Fame* Inductee

Photo: J Henry Fair

# Hall of Fame - Artistic Achievement Award

## MY TRIBUTE TO SHARON ISBIN, WITH AFFECTION AND ADMIRATION

By Graham Wade



Sharon Isbin began playing guitar at age nine. When her father, a professor at the University of Minnesota, took the family to Italy for a year's sabbatical, she commenced her serious guitar study with Aldo Minella. Later Sharon studied with Jeffrey Van in Minneapolis and Sophocles Papas in Washington, DC, and achieved a BA cum laude from Yale University and a Master of Music (MM) from the Yale School of Music. Sharon also attended masterclasses with Oscar Ghiglia for five summers at the Aspen Music Festival, and with Alirio Díaz in Canada.



Sharon at age nine, Varese, Italy.

Sharon appeared in England, performing her second recital at the Wigmore Hall, London, at age twenty-two, on October 27, 1978. She played a massively virtuosic program including Granados's *La Maja de Goya* and Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, op. 70. Sharon began after the interval with her own transcription of J.S. Bach's *Lute Suite No. 1* followed by Ponce's *Theme, Variations and Finale*, concluding with Albéniz's *Seville*.

Hugh de Camillis, writing in *Guitar International* (January 1979), commented:

Sharon Isbin has now joined that small group of musicians which make up the best in world class players . . . She has attained a high level of musicianship that matches the sound technique she has at her command: with so much ability her playing must create repercussions in the top league . . . Throughout the evening her superbly shaped and phrased performances were delivered as a series of eloquent musical statements. Her transcription of Bach's *Lute Suite No. 1* probed the depths with all the repeats explored for differences and ornamented in true style, delivered in a manner usually attained only by harpsichordists. Ponce's *Theme, Variations and Finale* followed with playing that ranged from the passionate to sheer bravura.



Sharon's second Wigmore Hall recital, October 27, 1978.

By 1978 Sharon had already achieved a formidable pedigree of achievements. In 1975 she won first prize in the prestigious Guitar Competition at *Guitar '75* in Toronto, and had broadcast throughout Canada and with BBC London on its world service. In September 1976 she was top prize winner in the guitar division of the Munich International Bavarian Radio Competition. Following her performance of Britten's *Nocturnal* in the final winners' concert, broadcast live throughout Germany, a critic wrote, "She towers far



above this new generation of guitar talent . . . Her playing brings to light the highest gradations of color and refined phrasing.”

By her early twenties Sharon was a seasoned recitalist who had been performing extensively for seven years. In 1974 she gave her first recital tour of West Germany and returned for three consecutive summers with additional engagements in France and Italy. In the summer of 1976 she was selected to play at the Strasbourg Music Festival, France, and gave masterclasses in Bourg Saint Maurice at the Festival Les ARCS.

As a prologue to glories to follow, Sharon recorded a solo recital in 1978 for the *Sound Environment* label. In April 1978 she received critical acclaim for her performance with the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis of the world premiere of *Concerto*



Sharon's first recording, 1978.

In 1979 she gained second prize in the Queen Sofia Guitar Competition in Madrid, Spain.

There is a special time in the lives of young guitar virtuosi for winning major awards in leading international competitions. Of this aspect, as we have seen, Sharon enjoyed an abundance. Youthful performers are most attractive to the public: they exact lower fees for recitals than more senior exponents, and their outstanding gifts refresh the contemporary scene, arousing hopes and expectations for a bright future. It is moving on from this preliminary era that is demanding and sometimes problematic. But truly great players, whether by accident or design, make the journey of transition to the level of bright stardom. Sharon's career advanced into the 1980s with a singular sense of momentum.

Sharon toured Europe, Canada, Japan, and Israel, performing with the Tokyo Orchestra, Paillard Chamber Orchestra, Jerusalem Symphony, and Spanish National Radio Orchestra. In the United States, Sharon toured with Alexander Schneider's Brandenburg Ensemble, performing to capacity audiences in New York's



On the cover, 1980.

Avery Fisher Hall and Metropolitan Museum, and in Boston's Symphony Hall. Sharon was featured with the Minnesota Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, New Orleans Philharmonic, and Ransom Wilson's Solisti, New York. Her triumphant progress also took in dozens of solo recitals worldwide. Over the busy years since the 1980s, Sharon appeared with some two hundred orchestras. She inspired many contemporary composers to write concertos for her including John Corigliano, Tan Dun, Aaron Jay Kernis, Joseph Schwantner, Lukas Foss, Chris Brubeck, and Christopher Rouse. Other composers who have dedicated works to her include Joan Tower, David Diamond, Ned Rorem, Howard Shore, John Duarte, Leo Brouwer, and Bruce MacCombie. Sharon up to the present has premiered over eighty original works written for her (see the complete list at the end of this article).



Sharon with Christopher Rouse and Tan Dun. Photo: Steve Sherman.

## MY TRIBUTE TO SHARON ISBIN: (cont.)

After age sixteen Sharon had no regular guitar teacher but attended masterclasses where possible with Ghiglia, Díaz, and occasional lessons with Segovia. While in college she began a ten-year study with the great Bach scholar and keyboard artist Rosalyn Tureck. This was to revolutionize how concert guitarists approached Bach with heightened awareness of historical interpretative problems, especially with regard to transcription and ornamentation. The scores of BWV 996 and 997 were published by G. Schirmer in 1984 in a superbly detailed edition, complete with notes and facsimiles of the original. A short preface laid down the principles of these transcriptions:

The Suites in this series, edited for classical guitar, are not arrangements. This edition preserves the original form of Bach's compositions. Structural elements are not altered for accommodation of conventional guitar techniques. Original embellishment and phrasing indications are reproduced as they appear in the most reliable manuscripts. These indications are scarce but valuable. They form the model therefore for the editor's recommendations, essential for carrying through the original intentions. Principles and application of embellishment in the edition are founded on historical performance practice. The lute and the harpsichord form the instrumental background upon which the performance style and sonorities are here based.

Rosalyn Tureck wrote a delightful encomium for Sharon when the guitarist duly recorded all four *Lute Suites* (available on Warner Classics Digital) in 1988:

Sharon Isbin's Bach performances are the product of great talent, impeccable scholarship and extraordinary instrumental techniques. She combines the sensitivity of the living artist with historical performance practices of the past—a notable blend which constitutes a rare musical experience for both an initiated and uninitiated listener.

A vital element in the career of all great players is the matter of recording. In this area Sharon is as prolific an artist as in her live performances. With some forty recordings since her first in 1978, it is estimated that Sharon's discs have sold over a million copies (see the complete list of Sharon's recordings below). It is a profoundly diverse catalog of achievements as Sharon's vision of the guitar progressed and she collaborated with a variety of guitar stylists. As the horizons of her artistry broadened, she was able to appeal to an ever wider audience.

The first Isbin album that I purchased was in 1984, *Sharon Isbin: Dances for Guitar, Waltzes, Fandangos*,

*Tarantellas* (Pro-Art Digital, PAD 191), a tastefully presented and marvelously performed long-player recording of many classical favorites.

These included *Fandanguillo* and *Fandango* by Turina and Rodrigo respectively, along

with compositions by Barrios, Lauro (including *Seis por Derecho* and *El Marabino*), Savio, Granados, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, etc.

In 1985 I bought a quite different recording. This was *3 Guitars 3* (Pro-Arte, PAD 235, recorded December 5 and 6, 1984, Hirsch Hall, New York). Here Sharon collaborated with the hugely versatile Laurindo Almeida (one of my teenage idols!) and the brilliant Larry Coryell, a celebrated leader in the jazz/rock fusion movement. The trio had come together inspired by Brooks Jones, director of the PepsiCo Summerfare '84, who on August 11 of that year featured a performance of the Rodrigo *Adagio*, arranged by Laurindo. The fascinating program of pieces played by the trio included the Rodrigo slow movement, and arrangements by Almeida of music by Nazareth, Manuel de Falla, Gnattali, and others. As Sharon commented in a discussion (available on YouTube) in July 1991, "This collaboration opened up a New World for me."

From these formative years Sharon continued her ascent to the pinnacle of guitar achievement. In 2001 she was awarded her first Grammy award, that prestigious accolade of musical success. In October 2014, Warner Classics released a 5-CD box set of her most popular albums entitled *Sharon Isbin: 5 Classic Albums*. Her latest Grammy for "Best Instrumental Soloist Performance" came in 2010 for her *Journey to the New World*.



*Dances for Guitar*, 1983.

On November 4, 2009, Sharon gave a recital for President Barack Obama, the First Lady, and three hundred presidential friends, a most appropriate engagement for the First Lady of the guitar, and Sharon performed superbly. (This concert is available on YouTube.)

I first met Sharon in the most delightful way at a masterclass at the Royal College of Music, London. I was seated in the front row when the great player entered, and the students became suddenly attentive: "Excuse me while I just kiss this gentleman!" said Sharon, and marched straight toward me. I stood up and she gave me a charming hug and kiss on the cheek before proceeding to the maestro's chair.



GRAMMY winner, 2010.

That I will never forget! Later we went with a few friends of Sharon's to dine at a very fine restaurant. In such a social setting Sharon fills the room with light, her ebullient personality, creating a unique atmosphere of friendship and togetherness.

As Sharon enters the Hall of Fame for the GFA, we congratulate her on her fantastic career of distinguished concerts, magnificent recordings, and sheer guitar artistry. Sharon is a prodigious talent, one of the great guitarists of our time. We thank her from the bottom of our hearts for all the joy and musical fulfillment she has shared with us over many decades.

## Works written for Sharon Isbin

\* World Premiere recordings by Sharon Isbin, see: [www.sharonisbin.com/music.html](http://www.sharonisbin.com/music.html)

### *Solo and chamber*

Laurindo Almeida: *Tremolo Melancolico* (gtr solo) - Brazilliance Music/Mel Bay

Laurindo Almeida: *Brazilliance\** (3 gtrs) - Brazilliance Music

Leo Brouwer: *El Decameron Negro\** (gtr solo) 1981 - Editions Musicales Transatlantiques

Alison Brown: *Regalito\** (gtr, banjo, bluegrass band) 2021

Larry Coryell: *PSP #1\** (3 gtrs) 1985

Larry Coryell: *PSP #2* (3 gtrs) 1986

Richard Danielpour: *Songs of Love and Longing\** 2014 (mezzo sop & gtr) - Lean Kat Music

David Diamond: *Concert Piece* (gtr & str qt) 1994

John Duarte: *Appalachian Dreams\** (gtr solo) 1996 - G. Schirmer, Inc

John Duarte: *Joan Baez Suite\** (gtr solo) 2002 - Mel Bay

Amjad Ali Khan: *Love Avalanche\**, *Sacred Evening\**, *By the Moon\**, *Romancing Earth\**, *Durga*, *Bhairavi* (gtr, sarod, tabla)

Bruce MacCombie: *Nightshade Rounds\** (gtr solo) 1979 - European American

Mark O'Connor: *Strings & Threads Suite for Violin & Guitar\** 2006 - Mark O'Connor Musik

Mark O'Connor: *Appalachia Waltz for Guitar & Violin\** 2009 - Mark O'Connor Musik

Ned Rorem: *Songs of Sadness* (baritone, gtr, cl, vc) 1994 - Boosey & Hawkes

Paul Schoenfield: *Three Fantasy Pieces for Guitar and String Quartet* 1985 - contact composer

Howard Shore: from *The Departed*, 2006 - South Fifth Avenue Publishing

- *Beacon Hill\** (2 gtrs)
- *Madolyn\** (2 gtrs)
- *The Departed Tango* (2 gtrs)
- *Boston Common\** (4 gtrs)



Gaudencio Thiago de Mello: *O Presidente\** (gtr, sop sax, perc) 1997 - GauPublishing  
 Tan Dun: *7 Desires for Guitar\** (gtr solo) 2002 - G. Schirmer  
 Joseph Schwantner: *Song of a Dreaming Sparrow* (gtr & str qt) 2020 - Schott  
 Joan Tower: *Snowdreams\** (fl & gtr) 1983 - G. Schirmer  
 Joan Tower: *Clocks\** (gtr solo) 1985 - G. Schirmer, Inc.  
 Steve Vai: *Blossom Suite* (2 gtrs) 2005

### ***Guitar and orchestra***

David Balakrishnan: *Darkness Dreaming* (2 gtrs, vn, cham orch) 2004  
 Chris Brubeck: *Affinity: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra\** 2015 - Brubeck Music  
 John Corigliano: *Troubadours (Variations for Guitar & Chamber Orchestra)\** 1993 - G. Schirmer  
 Tan Dun: *Yi 2: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra\** 1996 - G. Schirmer  
 Lukas Foss: *American Landscapes\** 1989 - Carl Fischer  
 Aaron Jay Kernis: *Double Concerto for Guitar, Violin and Orchestra\** 1996 - G. Schirmer  
 Ami Maayani: *Concerto for Guitar\** (1976) - Boosey & Hawkes  
 Bruce MacCombie: *Nightshade Rounds for Guitar & Strings* 1988 - European American  
 Enric Palomar: *Concierto de Granada* 2018  
 Christopher Rouse: *Concert de Gaudi\** 1999 - Boosey & Hawkes  
 Joseph Schwantner: *From Afar...A Fantasy for Guitar and Orchestra\** 1987 - Schott-Helicon  
 Howard Shore: *Billy's Theme\** (gtr, strs, rhy gtr) 2006 - South Fifth Avenue  
 Ivana Themmen: *Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra* 1981 - Lyra Music

### ***Arranged for Sharon Isbin***

Carlos Barbosa-Lima:

- Leonard Bernstein (suite of 9 dances from *West Side Story* for 2 gtrs)\*
- George Gershwin (*Jasbo Brown Blues\**, *Liza\**, *Prelude No. 3\**, *Rhapsody in Blue\** for 2 gtrs; *Rhapsody in Blue* for 2 gtrs & orch)
- Antonio Carlos Jobim (7 duets)\*
- Ernesto Nazareth (4 duets)\*
- Alfredo Vianna "Pixinguinha" (4 duets)\*
- 3 Folk Songs (vc & gtr): *Wayfaring Stranger\**, *Red Rosy Bush\**, *The Nightingale\**
- Solo works: Lecuona *Canto Siboney\** and others

Colin Davin: 2<sup>nd</sup> guitar to Lauro *Waltz No. 3 "Natalia"*

John Duarte: Albinoni *Adagio* (gtr & strs)

Gaudencio Thiago de Mello:

- *Varre-Vento\** (gtr solo) - GauPublishing
- *A Hug for Pixingha\** (gtr & perc) (gtr, sop sax, perc) - GauPublishing
- *Cavaleiro sem Armadura\** (gtr, sop sax, perc) - GauPublishing
- *Chôro Alegre (A Hug for Tiberio)\** (gtr & perc) - GauPublishing

Nancy Wilson (from Heart): arr *Dreamboat Annie\** (2010)

## *Arranged by Sharon Isbin*

Various, including for solo gtr by Granados\*, Naomi Shemer\*; voice & gtr: Brahms\*, García Lorca\*, folk songs, Ginastera\*, Niles\*, Villa-Lobos\*; gtr & str bass incl. Bottesini, Russian folk songs; assorted gtr & vn

## Sharon Isbin discography

*Affinity: World Premiere Recordings*, with Maryland Symphony; Isabel Leonard, voice; Colin Davin, guitar | ZOHO | 2020

*Strings for Peace: Premieres for Guitar & Sarod*, Amjad Ali Khan, Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash, sarods; Amit Kavthekar, tabla | ZOHO | 2020

*Souvenirs of Spain & Italy*, with Pacifica Quartet | Cedille | 2019

*Alma Española*, with Isabel Leonard, voice | Bridge | 2017

*Bach for Guitar: Lute Suites*, reissue of 1989 *J.S. Bach: Complete Lute Suites* | Warner Classics | 2015

*Sharon Isbin: Troubadour*, Documentary & Performances | Video Artists International | 2015

*Sharon Isbin: 5 Classic Albums*, compilation box set | Warner Classics | 2014

*Sharon Isbin & Friends: Guitar Passions*, with Steve Vai, Stanley Jordan, Steve Morse, Romero Lubambo, guitars; Nancy Wilson, guitar/vocals; Paul Winter, sax; Gaudencio Thiago de Mello, percussion; Rosa Passos, vocals | SONY | 2011

*Great Masterworks of the Guitar: Sharon Isbin*, 4-CD compilation | Warner Classics/EMI | 2011

*Journey to the New World*, with Joan Baez & Mark O'Connor | SONY | 2009\*

*The Departed*, Howard Shore score soundtrack | New Line Records | 2006 \*\*

*Rodrigo/Villa-Lobos/Ponce Concerti*, with New York Philharmonic | Warner Classics | 2004 \*\*\*

*Sharon Isbin: Artist Portrait*, compilation | Warner Classics | 2004

*Sharon Isbin Plays Baroque Favorites*, with Zurich Chamber Orchestra | Warner Classics | 2003

*Sharon Isbin's Greatest Hits*, 2-CD set | EMI/Virgin Classics | 2002

*Christopher Rouse/Tan Dun Concerti*, with Gulbenkian Orchestra | Warner Classics | 2001 \* and \*\*\*\*

*Dreams of a World* | Warner Classics | 1999 \*

*Ami Maayani: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, live concert recording, 1979, Jerusalem, Israel | Fons | 1999

*Aaron Jay Kernis: Double Concerto for Violin & Guitar*, with Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra | Decca/Argo | 1999



*Rodrigo: Concierto de Aranjuez & Latin Romances* (2-CD compilation), with Lausanne Chamber Orchestra | EMI/Virgin | 1999

*Wayfaring Stranger*, with Susanne Mentzer, voice | Warner Classics/Erato | 1998

*Journey to the Amazon*, with Paul Winter, sax; Gaudencio Thiago de Mello, percussion | Warner Classics | 1997 \*\*

*American Landscapes*, with Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra | EMI/Angel | 1995

*Black Topaz*, with Carol Wincenc, flute in *Snowdreams* (plus works by other artists) | New World | 1995

*The Slatkin Years: The Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra*, includes Sharon Isbin's 1988 live world premiere of Joseph Schwantner's *From Afar...A Fantasy for Guitar and Orchestra* | Saint Louis Symphony | 1995

*Nightshade Rounds* | EMI/Virgin Classics | 1994

*Rodrigo: Concierto de Aranjuez*, with Lausanne Chamber Orchestra | EMI/Virgin Classics | 1991

*Love Songs & Lullabies*, with Benita Valente, soprano; Thomas Allen, baritone; Gaudencio Thiago de Mello, percussion | EMI/Virgin Classics | 1991

*Road to the Sun* | EMI/Virgin Classics | 1990

*J.S. Bach: Complete Lute Suites* | EMI/Virgin Classics | 1989

*Rhapsody in Blue/West Side Story*, with Carlos Barbosa-Lima, guitar | Concord | 1988

*Brazil, with Love*, with Carlos Barbosa-Lima, guitar | Concord | 1987

*3 Guitars 3*, with Larry Coryell & Laurindo Almeida, guitars | Pro Arte | 1985

*Dances for Guitar: Waltzes, Fandangos, Tarantellas* | Pro Arte | 1984

*Sharon Isbin Guitar Recital* | Denon | 1981

*Spanish Works for Guitar*, with Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony | Denon | 1981

*Sharon Isbin Classical Guitar*, v. 2, Sound Environment | 1980

*Sharon Isbin Classical Guitar*, Sound Environment | 1978




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\* GRAMMY Award   \*\* GRAMMY Nomination   \*\*\* Latin GRAMMY Nomination   \*\*\*\* Echo Klassik Award





# Hall of Fame - Artistic Achievement Award

## A FEW WORDS FOR SHARON

*By Antigoni Goni*



The first time I heard about Sharon Isbin, I was in the back seat of a bus in Havana, Cuba. I was one of the young competitors of the Havana Competition, and I was traveling, together with the international guests of honor, from the hotel to the concert hall.



Sharon and Antigoni in Athens, Greece, 1992.

It was spring 1988, and next to me sat an incredibly captivating lady with piercing dark eyes. That lady was Rose Augustine and, although I was barely out of my teens and in a constant state of wonder, I somehow managed to cover my shyness and bring myself to ask her some questions. I was fascinated and intrigued: the person who sparked a conversation with me that day was the woman behind the pink packaged strings I had been using all my life! Among the many things we spoke about, since I was one of the very rare young female guitarists participating in an international competition, she asked me if I knew of Sharon Isbin.

I was flabbergasted. Back then, I was not aware of any young female guitarist who was pursuing a solo international performing career. The only other female guitarists I ever knew of were Ida Presti and Luise Walker, neither of them any longer alive, and María Luisa Anido, whom I was about to meet in Havana that very day.

“Who is Sharon Isbin?” I naively asked Rose. “Sharon Isbin,” Rose said, “is . . . fabulous! She is undoubtedly one

of the leading guitarists of her generation. She is young, dynamic, intelligent, full of fabulous projects and ideas . . . like creating the guitar department at the Juilliard School next year.” At that point my mouth dropped. Juilliard for me was linked to Maria Callas and her famous masterclasses there. Rose had me under her spell! “You should meet her,” she said.

Little did I know then that four years later, on a humid August day in Manhattan, Sharon Isbin offered to take me out for Chinese. I had just arrived at Juilliard as her new exchange student with the Royal Academy of Music in London. I still remember how stunned I was when I first saw her walking toward me from afar. She looked so young, so informal, and so down to earth. “Very nice to finally meet you Ms. Isbin” I said. “Please, call me Sharon,” she replied, “Ms. Isbin is my mother!”

I have always loved that moment! It was the first lesson Sharon ever taught me: be yourself, unpretentious, direct, captivating, straight to the point, and present—above all present.

It was such a simple and easy-going meeting that the persona I had created in my mind and nervously anticipated dissolved instantly. Ms. Isbin—internationally acclaimed soloist and chamber musician, career woman, pioneer, high achiever, multiple award winner, cutting edge guitarist with accomplishments that transcended both the instrument and our gender—didn’t of course disappear but went to the background. In the years that followed I had the opportunity to discover the real person behind the public figure, which helped me to make sense of it all.

Sharon’s persistence, determination, and conviction are mind-blowing. She harbors no fear or complexes. Where someone sees a problem, she sees a challenge. Where a door closes, another opens. There are no dreams that cannot be realized or places that cannot be reached. There is only one condition: you have to want it badly enough and be prepared to work hard enough.

And Sharon is like that! She takes one deep breath and dives fully, entirely, into every challenge without second thoughts. Not because she feels superhuman; on the contrary, because, as she once told me, she knows she is only human and will not get second chances.

For me as a young aspiring guitarist in my early twenties, being around someone with that energy was simply incredible. Studying and working next to her gave me always the sensation that I had some sort of supernatural powers that allowed me to realize anything I could dream of while I am under some sort of a protective spell—an

empowering feeling that still to this day I tap into when I need to keep going and stay strong and focused. (You may laugh, but to this day, when a tricky, professional situation arises, I quietly ask myself: What would Sharon say or do?)

Sharon is an amazing mentor: generous and supportive, loyal and honest, able to praise and highlight strengths as much as to point out weaknesses. In her lessons you know you will get the truth and nothing but the truth, which makes her compliments meaningful and her constructive criticism priceless. Next to her and with her support, I found the strength to address all my instrumental and musical weaknesses while constantly fine-tuning my strengths. During our lessons I always felt that, as a student, I was taken seriously and addressed with respect. My thoughts, my ideas, my intuitions mattered, were recognized, admired, and nurtured. She always encouraged me to think out of the box—be creative, audacious—to not hold back.

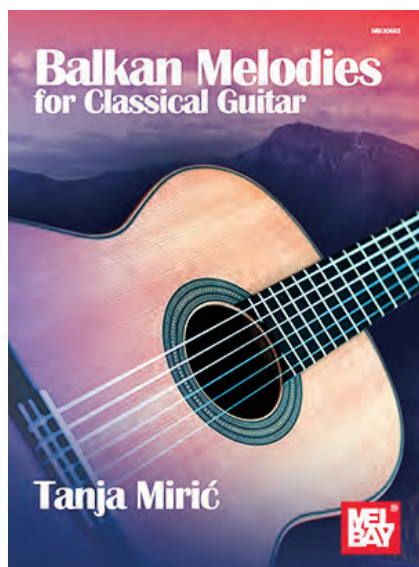


Three 1st Prize GFA ICAC winners and students of Sharon Isbin—Bokyung Byun, Antigoni Goni, Tengyue Zhang—after Antigoni's guest class at Juilliard, April 2016.

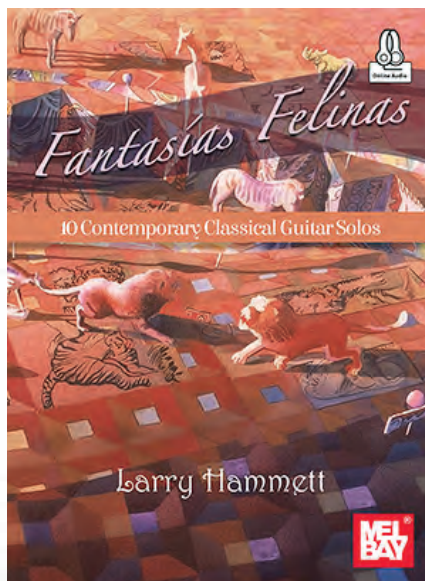
Being a teacher is not simply a job or a role you play when you enter the teaching studio. At the end of the day, it is not even just your knowledge and skill that can transform and transcend your students. Being a teacher is being coherent, consequential, and one-hundred-percent real. It is embodying what you teach, embracing and celebrating both your strengths and weaknesses, accepting your limitations and shortcomings while you stay always curious and open to surprise. It is living fully, with

devotion and dedication, everything you are teaching. It is having the humanity and empathy to treat each and every one of your students as unique and equal.

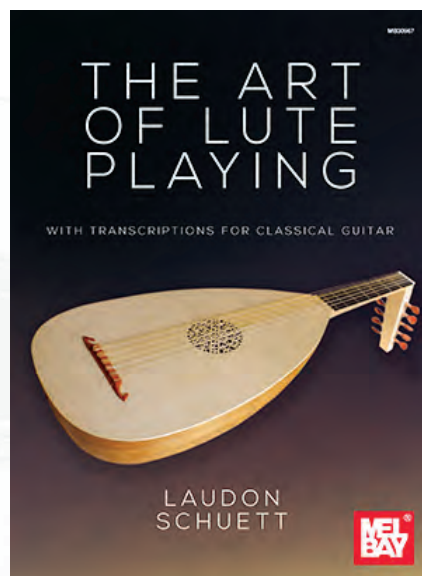
Sharon Isbin is one of the most remarkable and inspiring persons I have ever had the fortune to know, and I will always be grateful to her for teaching me how to recognize who I am, embrace it, and nurture it.



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## SHARON ISBIN: Teacher and Collaborator

By Colin Davin



When I first met Sharon Isbin in June 2001, to play for her in a masterclass at the Buffalo-Niagara Guitar Festival, my emotions were likely the same as many a young guitarist meeting a major figure of the instrument: something in the strange limbo between giddy excitement and unbridled terror. By that time, Sharon was already established as one



Sharon and Colin at the Buffalo-Niagara Guitar Festival, 2001.

of the most important forces in the classical guitar world, having founded the guitar program at The Juilliard School over a decade prior, and just a few months earlier, won a Grammy Award for *Dreams of a World*. Adding to my sense of intimidation was the fact that the event would be televised on Buffalo's public television station, WNED—as if a world-famous guitarist critiquing my playing in front of a live audience wasn't enough pressure! Somehow, I survived the experience (even enjoyed it!), and one of the most meaningful connections of my life had begun.

Following the Buffalo class, Sharon invited me to apply to the Aspen Music Festival and School, where I would spend the next two summers immersed in a classical music environment unlike anything I had experienced to that point. It was here that I first got to really know Sharon as a teacher. And among the many excellent qualities in her teaching, I came to recognize three things above all: she had a firm set of musical principles that guided her interpretive decisions, an impeccable attention to detail, and an uncanny ability to hear things in my own playing that I had totally missed.

While these qualities were apparent enough in my masterclasses with her in Aspen, I more fully appreciated the effect of her teaching abilities through my two years at Juilliard studying for my master's degree. One piece in particular stands out in my memory from that time: *Violin Sonata no. 3* in C major, BWV 1005, by J. S. Bach, and in particular the beautiful Largo third movement. I spent much time and energy planning, learning, executing, interpreting, memorizing, and repeating the Fuga and the zippy Allegro assai finale, but I had admittedly—perhaps in a show of youthful arrogance—taken the Largo a bit for granted. I figured that Sharon would spend about fifteen minutes of one lesson on it, suggest a new fingering or two, and we'd move on to the really difficult stuff. How mistaken I was. Instead, Sharon insisted upon the utmost care for every note, nuance, fingering, legato, line, and phrase. I still have my copy of that score, marked in her signature colored pencil (a different color for each lesson on any given piece) with a few words repeated insistently throughout: *less, more, together, lyrical*.

As I spent the next weeks delving into Sharon's guidance, I realized how much I hadn't previously heard or understood especially well. Over that time, the music began to reveal itself more clearly, those fine details enlightening the larger structure. It didn't require any sort of maverick interpretive impositions to find and express depths lying beneath the surface; rather, it was attention, care, and commitment to every aspect of what was already present in the music that showed its true beauty.



Sharon and Colin at WCLV Classical 104, Cleveland, 2017.

Remarkably, Sharon has remained a teacher and mentor to me even years after finishing my formal studies with her. As her teaching assistant in Aspen from 2012 to 2015, I was honored to be asked to perform in duo with her on a few occasions, which led to an ongoing collaboration of half-recitals of duo repertoire together and a recording of



my two-guitar arrangement of Antonio Lauro's *Natalia* on her 2020 release *Affinity*. In rehearsal and on stage, Sharon has always treated me as an absolute equal. What a wonderful feeling to be able to discuss and debate technical and interpretive choices in a true open dialogue with someone whose guidance had informed so much of my own musical understanding. In these rehearsals, especially, I came to learn yet more from Sharon. It is certainly valuable to receive instruction and advice from a great artist and teacher, but it is altogether something else to experience firsthand her own process of working through musical and technical challenges.

Sharon's sense of openness and respect toward others is in so many ways what makes her a special artist, and a special person. She holds a deep interest in other people, their stories and perspectives, and she is endlessly curious. Her ability to listen extends well beyond music. A Sharon Isbin post-concert lobby reception is an event in itself, and every person who wants an autograph or a photograph seems to have Sharon's complete interest and attention as she learns about their experiences and their passions.

This shows in her artistry, too. Consider the vast range of collaborations she has explored, from more traditional concerto and chamber music projects to genre-diverse explorations with the likes of Stanley Jordan, Romero Lubambo, Thiago de Mello, Steve Vai, Paul Winter, and most recently, her album and accompanying tour of *Strings for Peace* with the Indian sarod masters Amjad Ali Khan and his sons Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash.



Sharon with Steve Vai, 2009. Photo: Afshin Javadi.

It's my honor to offer this small tribute to Sharon on the occasion of her induction into the GFA Hall of Fame. To my lifelong teacher, inspiring collaborator, and dear friend: cheers on this well-deserved honor, and to your truly remarkable life and career!

*Wharton Hall,  
Michigan State  
University*

### Isbin

Blood of the Amazon  
runs in her fingers.  
From her thicket  
of hair, as from trees,  
sakis peer. Tilting  
Tupá's primeval box,  
she plays a *vals tropical*  
by Paganini of the Jungle.

Tremolo trickles  
like water along walks  
of the Alhambra.  
Mountains of Asturias,  
dancers of Seville,  
warrior's harp of Ovangkol  
she extols in punteado  
and rasgueado.

She gives the ballad  
youth his due, *arte musical*  
for his unquiet grave.  
Basses sound tropes  
of ancient organum,  
dirge for the lover  
who longs to lie  
in her own grave by his.

At Ground Zero  
she offers an elegy  
to the nation, *cante jondo*  
for thousands gone.  
Bright-plumed birds  
fill her dreams of a world.  
It's 1920. Bach plays  
in la Catedral de San José.

by Robert Ferguson