

Top American classical guitarist teams with Indian music master in 'Strings for Peace' in Minneapolis



Sharon Isbin – Photo credit: J Henry Fair

By JON BREAM, STAR TRIBUNE
March 09, 2023

Renowned American classical guitarist Sharon Isbin received an unexpected invitation to play with Indian classical titan Amjad Ali Khan, the master of the sarod. "When Amjad wrote to me — more than a dozen years ago — inquiring about doing a collaboration, I had to google the instrument to make sure what he was talking about," said Isbin, the St. Louis Park native who will perform with Khan and his two sons next week at the Dakota in Minneapolis.

She asked: "Why me?" He said: "I really wanted to work with guitar and everybody had been mentioning your name." "In a way, I almost tried to discourage him by saying because I don't improvise, I might not be the ideal collaborator," Isbin recalled. "But he was insistent. He had an inner knowledge of that goal more than I could understand at that time."

They tried playing together when the Khans made one of their annual visits to New York, where Isbin lives, and they realized she needs notated music in order to make it work. "It took him literally 10 years," Isbin said, "to find the right collaborator, Kyle Paul, who was experienced as a jazz musician, knew classical guitar, was a composer, knew how to improvise and notate and had experience with Northern Indian classical music."

Then one day in late 2018, a batch of ragas appeared in Isbin's email inbox. She told Khan that the works were "amazing." He was happy to hear that because he'd booked a tour of India for two months later. "So, I had to move mountains and change things in my schedule to make this possible," Isbin explained. "I had to get there three days early so we could rehearse." It was her first (and only) trip to India even though she has studied India-rooted transcendental meditation since she was 17. "It was an extraordinary adventure to be in a culture that had long fascinated me," she said.

The adventure had only begun. Two months after the concerts in India, the Khans were in the States performing with the New Jersey Symphony. They had a day and a half free afterward, so Isbin booked a studio to record an album. "We couldn't find a producer, so we produced it ourselves," she recalled. "We did everything in basically two takes, maybe three. We did all the editing on the spot and sent it to a brilliant engineer and mixer in India." They titled their 2020 album "Strings for Peace" because Khan believes music "can create harmony in a world that is in such flux," Isbin said.

Sarod compared with sitar

Khan is to the sarod — a 17- to 25-stringed lute-like instrument with an animal skin top — what the late Ravi Shankar was to sitar. "The whole quality of sound is different from that of a sitar," Isbin pointed out. "The manner in which it is held is different. They cradle it in their lap as a guitarist or lutenist would." A sitar has frets, a sarod doesn't. "With sarod, they're able to navigate from pitch to pitch and all those in between, which helps to accentuate the sense of lyricism," Isbin said. "It's very vocal."

When the sarod pairs with classical guitar, the musicians' approaches are opposite. Khan uses a heavy pick in his right hand and, with the long fingernails on his left hand, presses strings against a fretless metal fingerboard. By contrast, Isbin plucks with long nails on her right hand and the short nails on her left hand allow her to press strings onto a fretted fingerboard. "But the mixture of the two sounds together creates a third kind of instrument that is haunting," the guitarist said.

Joan Baez to Sting

Isbin first heard North Indian classical music as an undergrad at Yale University, where she later earned a master's in music. Having started on guitar at age 9, she studied with the great Andrés Segovia and Bach scholar Rosalyn Tureck, among others. Isbin is now regarded as one of the world's preeminent classical guitarists. She has recorded 35 albums (including two with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra), collected two Grammys and earned Musical America's 2020 instrumentalist of the year, the first guitarist to win the prize in its 59 years. Her resume includes performances with more than 200 orchestras around the world. Isbin also teaches. In 1989, she founded the guitar department at the prestigious Juilliard School, where she works with three to five students when she's not touring.

The Khans are among a long list of Isbin's diverse collaborators — rock stars Sting and Steve Vai, jazz greats Larry Coryell and Stanley Jordan, classical crossover luminaries Josh Groban and Mark O'Connor, folk giant Joan Baez and Brazilian guitar legend Laurindo Almeida. O'Connor and Baez are among artists she listens to in her free time, along with Melissa Etheridge, Loreena McKennitt and Pink. "My tastes are so eclectic I can't even remember what I listened to yesterday. I would say probably more often than not, it's not classical," Isbin admitted. "I'm listening to so much music on YouTube that every day is a feast of something I'm exploring."

A world traveler who speaks four languages, Isbin returns regularly to the Twin Cities to visit family and friends, though she hasn't been since 2019 because of the pandemic. She takes a piece of Minnesota with her wherever she goes. "I keep a pair of cross-country skis in my closet to haul out anytime we get several inches of snow in Central Park. I've gone cross-country skiing in the Canadian Rockies, in upstate New York and in Aspen," said Isbin, who also is the director of the Aspen Music Festival guitar program. "It's another way for me to get great exercise and forget about the guitar."

'Strings for Peace'

Who: Sharon Isbin with Amjad Ali Khan, Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash, Amit Kavthekar

When: 7 p.m. Wed.-Thu.

Where: Dakota, 1010 Nicollet Mall, Mpls.

Tickets: \$50-\$70, dakotacooks.com

Jon Bream has been a music critic at the Star Tribune since 1975, making him the longest tenured pop critic at a U.S. daily newspaper. He has attended more than 8,000 concerts and written four books (on Prince, Led Zeppelin, Neil Diamond and Bob Dylan).