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SHARON ISBIN

Interviewed by LAWRENCE DEL CASALE



Sharon Isbin and Joan Baez.

THE LONGER I KNOW Sharon Isbin, the more I am amazed at the scope of her career. She has done so much for the classical guitar that one could honestly call her an ambassador of the instrument. Along the way Sharon has collected a handful of Grammys and Grammy nominations, received countless awards from various musical organisations and worked with some of the world's highest profile musicians. Recently she has found her way onto the soundtrack for one of Hollywood's highest-grossing films, *The Departed*. As an educator, Sharon Isbin holds a post at the Juilliard School, New York, where she passes on her knowledge of the guitar to her gifted students. I was finally able to catch up with Sharon in New York to talk about her various projects and latest recording.

There are so many things I want to talk to you about. Let us start with your most recent

Grammy nomination (2008) and your participation on the soundtrack of the Oscar winning film, 'The Departed', directed by Martin Scorsese...

Howard Shore wrote the music, and it was a joy to work with him. I'd admired his film music for years - from *The Lord of the Rings* to *Silence of the Lambs*, and from *Mrs. Doubtfire* to *Philadelphia*.

The Departed is a film about the Irish Mafia in Boston, with Matt Damon, Jack Nicholson, and Leonardo DiCaprio all engaged in an undercover, veiled dance of death. Shore and Scorsese chose the idea of the tango to communicate this intertwined sleuthing, and the all-guitar soundtrack features myself along with three steel-string players. *Billy's Theme* forms the centrepiece, a sensuous yearning and hauntingly beautiful seven-minute work, which I play accompanied by string orchestra.



Joan Baez and Sharon Isbin.

The music takes place during Leonardo DiCaprio's therapy session, and it illuminates the character's innermost sensitive feelings, contrasting with the violent imagery of his flashbacks. At the recording session, Howard described the emotion he wished to create, and he guided me on tempi, dynamics, shaping, and expression.

Billy's Theme closes the compilation soundtrack of vintage songs performed by The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys, Van Morrison, Patsy Cline and The Allman Brothers [Warner Bros. Records]. It's also on Howard's score album [New Line Records NLR 39078] along with several other tracks I recorded. I've been performing these works in concert since the film's release.

How did you become involved in such a major Hollywood project?

I met Howard in December '05, when I performed a song from *Lord of the Rings* at an event in which he was being honored by the New York Chapter of the Recording Academy.

Speaking of Hollywood, Tan Dun's 'Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra' [soundtrack, Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon] garnered you yet another Grammy. [Teldec New Line, 8573-81830-2] for which Mark Swed of the Los Angeles Times said you deserved a Nobel Prize because your performance displayed such 'gripping persuasiveness'. Can you talk a bit about your association with such a high-profile composer?

I was fortunate to meet Tan Dun in New York in the late 1990's, before he became famous. He wrote the concerto for me on a joint commission from the NDR Symphony and the Dallas Symphony orchestras.

I premiered it with Christoph Eschenbach conducting his new millennium celebration in Hamburg; Tan joined me providing an improvised accompaniment using handheld stones. It's an amazingly powerful and colourful work inspired by the ancient Chinese lute (pipa), Chinese folk traditions & rituals, and the heritage of the Spanish guitar. I gave the Italian premiere on May 7 in Milan, with Tan conducting the Filarmonica Toscanini. I also play a

"Sharon's exquisite playing allowed me to revisit and fall in love with these songs all over again."

- Joan Baez

shorter solo version of this piece entitled *Seven Desires for Guitar*.

In 2001 you became the first classical guitarist in twenty-eight years to win a Grammy in the 'Best Instrumental Soloist Performance' category, for your recording: 'Dreams of a World: Folk-inspired Music for Guitar.' It was your first Grammy. How did it feel to receive this award?
It was surreal. I fully expected one of the pianists nominated in that category to win, like Murray Perahia or Evgeny Kissin. So when my name was called, I thought perhaps I was dreaming. The multi-cultural aspect of folk-inspired music from eight different countries was unusual and stood out from traditional selections. It was a proud moment for the guitar to re-enter what has been a long neglected arena.

You have a new recording entitled, 'Journey to the New World' [SONY Classical, 88697-45456-2]. The recording also features two high profile guest artists, Joan Baez and Mark O'Connor. What was the genesis of this project?

It's a voyage in the evolution of folk music from the 16th century British Isles and Ireland, crossing the ocean to the New World. My personal story goes back too...My parents taught folk dance, so I grew up listening to that style of music from the time I was born. When I was three, they returned from a holiday in Mexico and presented me with a gift of a little guitar (which I still have!) At nine, our family moved to Italy for a year. There I began lessons with Aldo Minella, by default after my older brother Ira backed out (his fantasy was instead to be the next Elvis Presley.) I hadn't a clue what classical guitar was, but gathered it couldn't be too far from folk music.

Once back in the States, Joan Baez became one of my favorite musicians. How fitting that her aunt, Mimi Kingsley, lived in our hometown of Minneapolis and used to dance in our basement with my parents at their dance club!

You open 'Journey to the New World' with four English Renaissance lute duets. Why did you choose these four particular pieces? You are your own duet partner on the recording, what was that experience like?

I performed these duets - *Drewries accordes* (Anon.), Dowland's *Lord Willoughby's Welcome Home*, *Rossignol* (Anon.), and John Johnson's exquisite 16th century rendition of

Greensleeves - five years ago with my former Juilliard student Go Nagano. He brought these works to my attention during his time at Juilliard, I fell in love with them and invited him to perform them with me in New York at the 92nd St Y and at the Aspen Music Festival where he was serving for a summer as my teaching assistant. During that time I formed a clear artistic vision replete with specific articulation, timbral contrasts, dynamics, and embellishment in both parts. The music is so beautiful - I knew someday I would have to record it. I used a capo on the 2nd fret to approach a lute-like sound.

It's a bit challenging being your own duet partner as there are no visual cues to follow, and no one to swear at! So it's important to

have a fully integrated vision in your mind. What's remarkable is that the process of synergy, inspiration, and spontaneity still happens when playing to your own previously laid part, as if it's another person - a fascinating dichotomy. When it comes to matching playing style, guitar sound and timbre between parts, it can't be beaten. When changing parts, I also changed seat positions in the studio to create the same stereo effect one would experi-

ence with two players. I used my Thomas Humphrey 2007 cedar top, *Le Sacrifice*, an instrument with an amazingly warm and lush sound with two muses painted on the back by artist Tamara Codor. The recording is dedicated to the memory of Tom and another dear friend, Jody Nordlof.

Andrew York has a piece on the recording, entitled 'Andecy'. Was it written specifically for this recording? It seems to match the theme perfectly. I heard Andecy on a Windham Hill sampler and found it mesmerising, a musical gem. It fitted the character of this recording perfectly, and only later did I learn why: Andrew took his inspiration for the piece from the early American, English and Irish folk tunes he'd heard his father and uncle perform when he was growing up.

The 'Joan Baez Suite' Opus 144 (2002), a seven movement work for solo guitar, was composed for you by John Duarte (1919-2004). The Suite is receiving its premiere recording here. Is it true that when Joan Baez heard you perform the Suite, she asked to sing on the recording?

"Sharon Isbin's superbly lyrical playing endows these folksongs from the British Isles and North America with poetic beauty and enchanting intensity. The singing of Joan Baez is as sweetly evocative as ever."

- Graham Wade

After the success of John's *Appalachian Dreams* suite which he wrote for me in 1996, I suggested the idea of a similar arrangement for songs which Joan Baez sang in the early part of her career. John loved the idea, so I approached Joan to seek her permission. We met, she gave the project her blessing, and when it came to the time of the premiere in San Francisco, she was on tour; so she sent flowers and her delightful 91-year old mother as her representative. When Joan eventually heard the work she loved it, and she offered to sing a couple of the songs on the recording. We performed *Wayfaring Stranger* and *Go 'Way from my Window*; her renditions are haunting.

Our first rehearsal took place in my New York apartment. Joan asked me to play for her and placed a chair about four feet in front of mine. As I played, tears streamed down her face. What a poignant, powerful and intimate moment it was, especially since her magical voice had moved me to tears for decades.

Our next rehearsal was the night before recording at Skywalker Sound in CA. I had just flown in from an afternoon working with composer John Williams at his home in Los Angeles, and my taxi driver got thoroughly lost. By the time I finally arrived at Joan's house two hours late, she and her mother were in a vigil by the phone, fearing I was road-kill. We had a delightful rehearsal anyway, and the next day was spent traveling, visiting, and recording. She is as beautiful and down-to-earth a person as she is an artist. She's been playing concerts all over the world this season to celebrate the 50th anniversary of her career.

The next piece on the recording, also receiving its premiere here, is violinist Mark O'Connor's 'Strings and Threads Suite' for Violin & Guitar. This piece was originally written for solo violin tracing O'Connor's ancestral musical roots from Ireland to the western United States. When did you first hear the piece and what was it that prompted you to ask Mark to adapt it for guitar and violin?

Mark and I first met many years ago in New York, and among the works I heard then was his *Strings and Threads Suite* for solo violin. I loved the energy, lyricism, beauty and variety in the short movements (thirteen in all) which express the violin's evolution in American folk music from reels, waltzes, blues, spirituals and swing, to just before bluegrass. I immediately

imagined it for violin and guitar. Mark adapted it for the two of us in 2006, we premiered it a year later in Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, and again recently in New York. After the first performance I suggested we record it. The suite ties the music on the disc together in a remarkable way.

We'll perform at the Aspen Music Festival in August, and on tour in the U.S. next season. He's a wonderful, dynamic, exciting and passionate player, and his hot jazz improvisation in the last movement will knock your socks off.

It's different each time, and that's great fun for me.

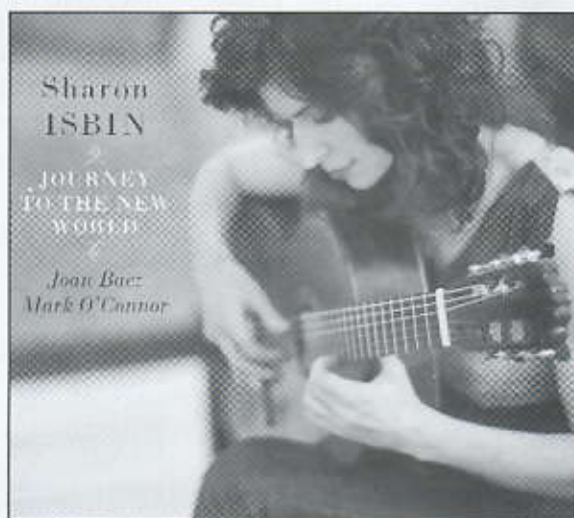
So what's next? It seems to me that every project you touch turns to Grammy gold, or at least a nomination...

Rock guitarist Steve Vai and I have been performing together, and one of several projects I look forward to doing with SONY is recording the amazing work Steve wrote for the two of us, *Blossom Suite*.

He's a great musician,

composer, performer and friend - a legend in his own time. We premiered the work in Paris in 2005 during a week of concerts I gave at the Theatre du Chatelet. The 2000-seat hall was sold out for months in advance, and his fans flew in from all over the world, nearly causing a riot during the several hours of post-concert CD signing. Theatre Chatelet, a very classical organisation, had never seen anything like it - they had to improvise bodyguards and had us snaking through a labyrinth of backstage corridors. The exciting thing is that there is always something delightfully unexpected around the corner....

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REVIEWS...

JOURNEY TO THE NEW WORLD

ANON: *Drewrie's Accordes*. DOWLAND: *Lord Willoughby's Welcome Home*. ANON: *Le Rossignol*. JOHNSON: *Greensleeves*. ENGLISH FOLK SONGS: *The Drunken Sailor*, *Wild Mountain Thyme*. ANDREW YORK: *Andecy*. TRAD: *Wayfaring Stranger*. DUARTE: *Joan Baez Suite, Op. 144*. NILES: *Go way from my window*. O'CONNOR: *Strings and Threads Suite*.

Sharon Isbin, Joan Baez,

Mark O'Connor

Sony Classical 88697-45456-2

This album was released on 24 March 2009 with a live interview on the New York radio programme WQXR (available on Sharon Isbin's website), and a Performance Today national broadcast throughout the USA from 235 radio stations. It is extremely encouraging to find that such high profile publicity is available for the classical guitar in the appropriate context. Moreover, Sharon Isbin's performances for film soundtracks (such as Scorsese's *The Departed*), her various Grammy and other Recording Academy Awards, as well as playing at Ground Zero for the Names Memorial and televised broadcast on 11 September 2002, are all facets of a career which has established her as the guitarist laureate of the USA.

This new recording is intended as a progressive musical journey, moving from the roots of English music in the Elizabethan age, to Ireland, and thence to the USA, where the traditions of European folk songs and dances evolved into new and distinctive cultural identities. To help with this journey Isbin is joined by Joan Baez and Mark O'Connor in a presentation full of delightful surprises which nevertheless maintains a sense of coherence amidst considerable diversity.

At the heart of the content is a remarkable *Joan Baez Suite, Op. 144* by John Duarte, featuring some of Baez's favourite songs such as *House of the Rising Sun* and *Where have all the flowers gone?* arranged for solo guitar. The settings are poignant yet understated with deft harmonic touches and imaginative twists to familiar melodies.

The lyrical singing of Joan Baez is timeless, of course, and her presence endows the occasion with truly historic perspectives. It is a pity that Baez only appears on two of these tracks for her musical togetherness with Isbin is so excellent that it needs further opportunity to reveal all the possibilities of range and expressiveness implicit here. An entire programme of these two artists should surely be the next step.

Mark O'Connor's superb *Strings and Threads Suite* for violin and guitar, is spectacular, offering brilliant virtuosity in a framework of authentic folk intensity. O'Connor's impeccable violin playing is frequently reminiscent of the sonorous precision of Stéphane Grappelli and as a composition which breathes utter spontaneity, the suite provides an abundance of emotional contrasts and dazzling colours.

This album is thus contemporary and relevant yet traces profound historical patterns. As such its strength is that of a sense of identity and purpose. It also demonstrates that guitar music does not have to be overtly complex or esoteric to achieve an impact. Sharon Isbin's concept here is that of a recital, progressing naturally from one perspective to another but ultimately creating a satisfying synthesis of all the component parts. One can imagine that the appeal of this journey will be considerable, not only attracting guitarists but also the attention of the general public. As such this new issue provides a powerful consolidation of Isbin's stature on the international scene and a reminder that artistry of the highest order manifests itself in many subtle and unexpected ways.

Graham Wade