



CLASSICAL GUITARIST SHARON ISBIN

A PASSIONATE AND DEDICATED TEACHER AND PERFORMER

By Enmaria Cumisky

Classical guitar virtuoso Sharon Isbin is internationally known for her guitar skills, having produced dozens of albums, studied with unbelievably talented guitarists, and toured the world on multiple occasions. We've had the fortune to chat with Isbin on multiple occasions throughout her career. This time, we have connected to discuss her role as the founder of the guitar department at Juilliard School of Music in New York. She talks about her experience being the chair, how her career as a guitarist affects her teaching, and what advice she has for her guitar students.

You founded the guitar department at Juilliard in 1989. What inspired you to launch that endeavor?

Joseph Polisi invited me to create Juilliard's first guitar department a few years after he became President. We met when I was an undergrad at Yale University and again on faculty at the Manhattan School of Music, where he was the Dean. He admired my playing and thought it would be a great mix. I was honored and thrilled!

What was the process of creating the department? Did it present any challenges that you didn't expect?

The other departments were enthusiastic to have me join as it meant their students could collaborate with mine in chamber music! I suggested that we start by offering a Master of Music degree. I brought Mark Delpriora onboard to teach fretboard harmony and guitar history.

How has the program developed over the years?

We added the Bachelor's degree program in 2011 and DMA in 2019. I've had students from over twenty different countries, many of whom now have impressive careers performing, recording, and teaching.

What is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching guitar?

It's a joy to mentor talented young players, helping them grow in their artistry, technique, and profession. Seeing them thrive is gratifying! They have also introduced me to beautiful new music over the years. Since I like to look at each score with fresh ears, even if it's music I've performed and taught before, this process keeps me ever inquisitive, engaged, and discovering.

If you could create or teach another course at Juilliard, what would you want to teach?

Ha! Cross-country skiing, only in the winter, of course, and only during the one or two days a year



Photo by J. Henry Fair

we have enough snow in Central Park. I actually did that one winter at the Banff Festival in the Canadian Rockies. I was required to teach five hours a day for two weeks, but there was only one guitar student. Since nobody said *what* I had to teach, I taught the student for an hour each day on guitar and then dragged him out onto the slopes. He'd never been on skis before and fell down a lot, but he has since forgiven me and claims he actually enjoyed the experience. I was relieved to hear that years later! We had to keep it a secret from the administration, of course.

Your work as an internationally famous guitarist often takes you away from New York. How do you balance teaching classes with your other musical projects?

I take only a handful of students, and they are all independent and advanced enough to make great use of the time while I'm away. Juilliard has four months off every summer, one month of which I spend directing the guitar program at the Aspen Music Festival, with lots of great hiking in the Rockies!

How has COVID-19 affected your teaching and chair-duties at Juilliard?

Teaching has been virtual since March. My Juilliard students email me audio recordings with scores, which I then critique by email in great detail as if I were their own personal recording producer! Since there are no visual distractions, everyone has been sharpening their listening skills, achieving amazing progress and results.

How has teaching young people about what you do best affected how you look at your career as a guitarist?

It makes me realize how many challenges students face in learning the craft, growing as artists, and forging a career. It's such hard work; one really has to be passionate, dedicated, patient, and creative to navigate with purpose and meaning.

What characteristics does it take for a guitar student at Juilliard to become a professional musician?

Passion and love for music, a personal voice with something unique to offer, creativity, a super-strong work ethic, courage, proactive personality, joy in performing and collaborating with others, humanity, kindness, generosity, and eagerness to learn and grow.

Do you have any advice for your students on what it takes to play guitar for a living?

I encourage them to be open-minded about what a career in guitar can mean. Many secure teaching positions which give them security while offering opportunities to perform. Some focus on community outreach, others on contemporary music and chamber ensembles. Some may go into the music business, including management, producing, and engineering recordings or concert presenting.

COVID has given many of us time to think and dive into new interests. Have you begun working on any new projects since the pandemic?

This year without travel has been a welcome respite and very productive for me! I released two albums in May, *Affinity* and *Strings for Peace*. I set up basic audio, video, and lighting technology to do over fifty radio, press, and video interviews from home in support of the rollout, as well as some virtual performances. I completed my edition of the *Joan Baez Suite*—composed



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for me several years ago by the late John Duarte—just now published by Mel Bay in time for Baez's 80th birthday. I also secured the re-release of my GRAMMY-winning Sony album on which it appears, *Journey to the New World*, with guests Joan Baez and Mark O'Connor.

I'm excited to have overseen closed captioning for the one-hour award-winning documentary *Sharon Isbin: Troubadour*, now streaming for the first time online on Amazon with an additional 30 minutes of bonus performances (free on Prime Video), while continuing to be available on DVD and Blu-ray formats and PBS television broadcasts as well. I just judged the finals of an international guitar competition in China, virtually from my living room, and am learning a fun Alison Brown bluegrass tune she wrote for me to record with her band. Looking ahead, Joseph Schwantner has composed a wonderful new work for me to premiere with the Pacifica Quartet, though the NYC performance is now postponed until next season.

I've been jogging up a storm several times a week along the Hudson River in New York City, exceeding all my previous endurance times! I've perfected making organic lentil stew and organic cherry-apple pie over the last many months, and now really need to expand my culinary repertoire. Over the holidays, I'm looking forward to reading Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* and finishing Anne Nelson's brilliant *Shadow Network*.