

ACOUSTIC
GUITAR

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2020 | ACOUSTICGUITAR.COM

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2020

Sharon Isbin



Without Boundaries

Sharon Isbin's Multihued Musical Experience

BY MARK L. SMALL

During a phone call from her New York City home, multi-Grammy-winning guitarist Sharon Isbin's voice reveals patience and acceptance regarding the situation imposed by the current pandemic that has kept her and every other touring artist out of concert halls. "I haven't traveled since the middle of February," Isbin says. "But I live a block from the river and can go jogging whenever I want, and the grocery store where I shop is four blocks away. So it's a convenient location if one has to be sequestered."

While Isbin is unable to appear onstage, fortuitously for her fans she has released a pair of new albums with premieres of music written especially for her. The two outings are worlds apart stylistically. *Affinity* showcases solo guitar works by Tan Dun (China) and Leo Brouwer (Cuba); a two-guitar arrangement of the famous waltz "Natalia," by Antonio Lauro (Venezuela); three songs by Richard Danielpour (America) featuring mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard; and "Affinity: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra" by American jazz musician Chris Brubeck. The second album, *Strings for Peace*, contains four compositions by Indian sarod player Amjad Ali Khan based on popular ragas. Isbin is heard in separate settings with three master sarod players: Amjad Ali Khan and his two sons, Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash, alternate tracks (with Ayaan playing on two cuts), and tabla player Amit Kavthekar appears on all four.

These two recordings expand a catalog of more than 80 works written or arranged for Isbin—including a dozen concertos. For decades, Isbin's classical virtuosity has shone in her solo albums and in projects with musicians of diverse backgrounds. She's joined forces with the



ROB FORTUNATO

world's top orchestras and classical artists, and with stellar jazz, rock, folk, and bluegrass performers. Her multihued musical canvas is gloriously arrayed.

NO BOUNDARIES

"I've always been drawn to music that I love, and I haven't seen it as having boundaries," she says. "When asked to do projects in unfamiliar styles, if I felt inspired by the talents of the collaborators and felt we could make something together, I've said yes. If there is an inner, organic goal that's not contrived and comes from a place of love, beauty, and respect for others, you can find a way to make it work."

The timeline for the *Strings for Peace* album illustrates the process of finding common ground between Western and North Indian classical music. Isbin has listened to Indian classical music since her college years. In January 2009, she heard from Amjad Ali Khan—the world's most prominent sarod player—that he wanted to collaborate. Bringing two dissimilar musical languages together, however, was a challenge. "Amjad writes his own music and he had to find someone to arrange the music and notate his ideas in a way that I could read," she says.

"He needed a person with a knowledge of improvisation—especially jazz—North Indian classical music, and classical guitar. After a while I wondered if it would ever happen." While Khan was doing a residency at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, he met a student, Kyle Paul, who fit the bill. In November of 2018, Khan sent scores and MP3 samples of his ragas to Isbin.

In preparation for a February 2019 tour of India, Isbin traveled a few days early for intensive rehearsals where the musical worlds coalesced. "In the ragas' slow sections, there is a lot of melismatic improvisation they do, and I had to find a way to add slides, embellishments, and bent notes to my parts to reflect the style of the sarod," she says. The arrangements required the sixth and fifth strings of Isbin's guitar be tuned to C and G, respectively, for a drone effect, and included other Western musical elements such as

harmonized melodic lines and occasional chordal accompaniment. Isbin ably holds her own, even in the breakneck unison lines heard at the climax of the ragas.

'If there is an inner, organic goal that's not contrived and comes from a place of love, beauty, and respect for others, you can find a way to make it work.'

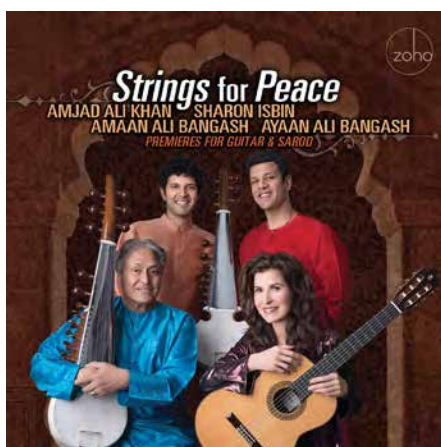
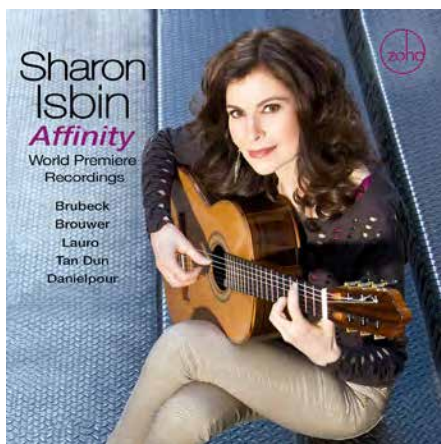
—SHARON ISBIN

"I found that all the years that I spent playing with jazz and South American musicians made this all feel very natural," she reflects. "Even the ten years of Baroque performance study I did with [keyboard artist and Bach scholar] Rosalyn Tureck informed my ideas about improvisation and embellishment in the slow sections of the Indian music. This project was an opportunity to bring all of that together."

TOWARD AFFINITY

The music on *Affinity* presented different challenges.

Tan Dun has written for Isbin before, and the solo piece "Seven Desires for Guitar" was derived from his "Yi2" concerto for guitar and orchestra penned for Isbin in 1996. The solo



work, recorded here for the first time, finds commonality between guitar techniques and those of the *pipa*, a four-string Chinese lute. Strident strums, rapid tremolos, and percussive slaps evocative of flamenco combine with microtonal bent notes, glissandi, and sprays of harmonics to amalgamate the sonic worlds of the two instruments. Isbin states that Dun, a non-guitarist, “sensed intuitively what the guitar could do and figured it out.”

Brubeck’s concerto required more elbow grease from Isbin. “Chris plays electric bass guitar, trombone, and piano, and counted on me to adjust the part,” Isbin states. “The guitar enters with a series of runs that leap all over the place. I spent dozens of hours on the first 40 seconds of the piece trying to figure out what would be the most faithful to the composer and most playable for the guitar.”

“Chris was drawn to my interest in different styles of music. The fact that I had played in classical, contemporary, folk, bluegrass, and jazz settings was attractive to him. He wanted to create something that showed our shared affinity. *Affinity* ended up being the title of the piece and the album because it reflects an affinity for different styles of music and cultures.”

Brubeck solicited Isbin’s input while composing the piece. “He stopped by to show me some sketches and asked if there was anything I wanted to change,” she says. Isbin admired the slow section, but wasn’t deeply moved by it. She suggested that Chris pay homage to his late father—jazz pianist and composer Dave Brubeck—in that section. He sent Isbin recordings of three songs his father had written. She listened to them with Elizabeth Schulze, who conducted the Maryland Symphony Orchestra in the 2015 premiere and the recording. “We both loved the song ‘Autumn in Our Town,’” Isbin says. “Chris wrote a beautiful orchestration of that song and it became the core of the piece.”

The modern classic “El Decameron Negro” has been in Isbin’s repertoire since Leo Brouwer penned it for her in 1981. “I recorded it in 1988 and didn’t expect to do it again,” she says, “but when this project came up, I wanted to include it. I’ve grown so much in the interim that I wanted to express how I’ve lived in the piece.”

“Natalia,” which bears the name of Antonio Lauro’s daughter, is the late composer’s most beloved piece. “I was at a party once in Caracas, Venezuela, and Natalia was there,” Isbin recalls. “Someone passed me a guitar and I played Lauro’s waltz and Natalia picked up a *cuatro* and started improvising with me. I never forgot how touching that experience was.” Isbin’s former student Colin Davin made a brilliant two-guitar arrangement of the piece, adding high-strummed chords evocative of the *cuatro*, percussive accompaniment, harmonized passages, and counter lines. Isbin and Davin draw out the piece’s folk spirit on the record.

The grouping of three songs, “Of Love and Longing,” by Richard Danielpour, rounds out the album. Isbin backs renowned mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard (with whom she previously collaborated on the 2017 album *Alma Española*) in Danielpour’s ambrosial settings of romantic texts by 13th-century Persian poet Rumi. “We premiered them at Carnegie Hall in 2015,” Isbin says. “I always had it in mind to record them and was amazed when everyone’s schedules came together to permit that.”

LESSONS PRESENT AND PAST

Isbin’s future plans include premiering a piece by Joseph Schwantner for string quartet and guitar with the Pacifica Quartet in March 2021. A tour this fall in support of *Strings for Peace* has been postponed. Yet, she has learned to calmly deal with the unexpected.

“I learned this back in 2002 when I was asked to play during the reading of the names of the nearly 3,000 victims of 9/11 at the memorial ceremony at Ground Zero. It was the first

time the families of those who died and the survivors were allowed to gather there. I didn’t know if I would be able to hold up. But the moment I saw their faces, I knew that I was there to be part of the healing process. This was going to be a new destiny for me.”

During the subsequent concert season, Isbin prefaced her encore, Naomi Shemer’s “Jerusalem of Gold,” by sharing her experience playing it at the 2002 memorial. Almost without fail, audience members approached her afterwards saying they had lost someone in the attack. Having their experience acknowledged through her sharing of words and music provided comfort.

“This is a time to take stock and remember what’s important in life,” Isbin says. “You can’t change the virus, but you can change how you deal with big issues like this.” **AC**



WHAT SHE PLAYS

Sharon Isbin plays a guitar built in 2010 by luthier Antonius Müller of Aarbergen, Germany. It’s a double-top featuring two layers of cedar. The scale length is 650mm. Isbin uses a mixed set of Savarez strings: New Cristal Blue (high tension) for the first, New Cristal Red (normal tension) for the second, Alliance Red (normal tension) for the third, and Cantiga Blue (high tension) bass strings.