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Smashing Through Glass Ceilings

Documentary charts classical guitarist Sharon Isbin's remarkable career

BY DAVID KNOWLES

To call Sharon Isbin a trailblazer is a bit of an understatement.

Isbin, who appeared on the cover of the first issue of this magazine 25 years ago, is not only the first female classical guitarist to have won a Grammy Award, the only guitarist to record an album with the New York Philharmonic, and the first director of Juilliard's prestigious guitar department, now, thanks to a new film, she is also the only female classical guitarist to be the subject of a nationally televised documentary.

Produced by Susan Dangel, *Sharon Isbin: Troubadour* tells the story of Isbin's storied career, and aired on over 200 PBS stations this past winter.

A DVD and Blu-Ray of the film that features video extras is now available.

"It challenged me to try and understand how on earth all this happened and why and what motivated me," Isbin says of the film, which was shot over a five-year period.

"I happened to meet the producer by accident," Isbin explains. "I was invited by the film composer John Williams to attend a rehearsal of his at the New York Philharmonic, and I was watching really extraordinary videos that were being used that he was syncing with his conducting, and at one point I exclaimed, 'That's

amazing. Who did that?' There were two other people in Avery Fisher Hall, and one of them said, 'I did.' We introduced ourselves to one another and she turned out to be Susan Dangel, his chief videographer."

Dangel set about weaving together testimonials given by a diverse range of Isbin fans, everyone from Joan Baez to Martina Navratilova to Steve Vai and Michelle Obama, with performances and one-on-one sessions with composers. The tenor of the film is one of gushing admiration, and rightly so given Isbin's place in the guitar world.

"There's thousands of little girls who have seen Sharon who now know that this is open to them," singer-songwriter Janis Ian says in the film. "That's huge."

After taking up the guitar at the age of nine, Isbin went on to study with Andrès Segovia, Oscar Ghiglia, and keyboardist Rosalyn Tureck. As her renown on the instrument grew, Isbin racked up numerous awards, and has appeared as a soloist with over 170 orchestras. But the one-hour movie is in no way a look back at a performer's career whose glory days are long behind her.

"Once we started filming a few months later, great things kept happening, and Susan

would say, oh, you're going to play at the White House, well we have to film that, or, you're doing the Grammy's, we need to have that, and it kept going on and on," Isbin says.

For a woman who has broken virtually every glass ceiling she has encountered, and worked with dozens of composers on new works for the guitar, the real thrill in being the subject of the film is that it promotes the instrument that has defined her life.

"When I've gotten composers who would never have written for guitar, but are very much in the vanguard of the mainstream, that's exciting to me, because it advances the guitar. There are so many ways I see the instrument moving forward."

Last fall, Warner Classics released a five-CD box set titled *Sharon Isbin: 5 Classic Albums*, featuring her recordings with the New York Philharmonic and Zurich Chamber Orchestra, as well as the Grammy Award-winning disc of concerti written for her by Christopher Rouse and Tan Dun, Latin-American music with Paul Winter and Thiago de Mello, and her Grammy-winning solo disc *Dreams of a World*. **AG**

For more information on the film, visit sharonisbin.com or sharonisbintroubadour.com.