



September/October 2015

## Sharon Isbin: Troubadour

Albeniz, O'Connor, Jobim, Lauro, Barrios  
with Romero Lubambo, guitar; Mark O'Connor, violin  
VAI 8202 (Blu-Ray) 56 minutes

In 1975 the Guitar Society of Toronto presented the first of several triennial classical guitar festivals. The capstone of the festival was a competition, and this one was a prominent exception to the rule that no one remembers who came in second. The winners that year, in order, were Sharon Isbin, Manuel Barrueco, David Leisner, and Eliot Fisk. All four remain among the most important of their (and my) generation, but probably Ms. Isbin has had the biggest career of them all.

This is a wonderful documentary of an artist at the peak of her career, with a string of significant accomplishments and no indication of slowing down. We visit accounts of her youth - including her initial fascination with rocketry - her early teachers and her developing influences. The most fascinating part for me is the accounts of her collaboration with other artists in her quest to expand the repertory - her studies with Rosalyn Turek and the resulting Bach Suites editions and recordings, and the works from Joan Tower, John Corigliano, Tan Dun, and Christopher Rouse. We see her pioneering efforts at developing guitar programs for the Aspen Festival and the Juilliard School, and her performances at the White House and at the Grammy Awards ceremony. Special attention is given to her crossover work with artists like Mark O'Connor, Joan Baez, Steve Vai, Laurindo Almeida, and Larry Coryell.

That latter point is not something I am personally drawn to, but I'm not the target of this documentary - it's aimed at a wider audience, people who may have heard her first on the Grammy Awards, who never paid much attention to classical guitar. It's not a concert video, though there is a section of complete

performances. It is, as nearly as I can tell, her *only* video, though she has made as many audio recordings as any guitarist I know. So it's good to have this. Isbin is extraordinarily articulate and charismatic, and still as glamorous and beautiful as ever - and clearly deeply devoted to her art.

And a full discussion of her life would not be complete without some discussion of what it was like to be a female guitarist when men dominated the field, and of her coming out as gay back in 1995 (which led to a guest appearance on Showtime's *L Word*). That was two decades ago, and we have made a great deal of progress since those days, on both fronts, in no small part owing to examples like Ms. Isbin.

And there are complete performances - Albeniz's 'Asturias', some excerpts from O'Connor's *Strings and Threads* suite, and works by Jobim, Lauro, and Barrios with a counterline by Romero Lubambo. For me, that's adding makeup to a naturally beautiful woman, but the wider audience will surely love it.

Three extra scenes are included - segments with Leonard Slatkin, with Howard Shore, and a charming bit of her taking a dance lesson, where the normally stationary guitarist gets to connect with movement inspired by music.

Sound and video on the Blu-ray are exceptional, and the production superb. If you only know a few of Isbin's contributions, you'll find this a revelation. If you already know what a treasure she is, this will be a delightful hour.

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