

entertainment guide

calendar

ORLANDO SENTINEL • FEB. 20-26, 2009

GUITAR GODDESS

Grammy winner Sharon Isbin headlines
Winter Park's 74th annual Bach Festival



AMERICAN IDOL EXPERIENCE • 'LA CENERENTOLA' • SUBDUDES

By Jim Abbott
Sentinel Music Critic
jabbott@orlandosentinel.com

Guitar gods are still strictly rock theology, but if the term were applied in the classical realm, **Sharon Isbin** would be fit for deification.

Isbin, who performs on Sunday with the **Bach Festival Choir and Orchestra** at **Knowles Memorial Chapel** at **Rollins College**, is certainly one of the instrument's most ardent ambassadors.

A student for a time with the legendary **Andres Segovia**, Isbin has performed with more than 160 orchestras, including a 2004 debut performance with the **New York Philharmonic** that was that orchestra's first collaboration with a guitarist in 26 years.

Isbin's gentle playing also was in the spotlight at the first Sept. 11 memorial service at ground zero. Her playing also was featured on the soundtrack for **Martin Scorsese's** 2007 Oscar-winning film, *The Departed*.

"You have to break through a lot of prejudices with the instrument and make it acceptable on the mainstream stages," Isbin says in a recent phone interview.

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Baroque Classics

What: Sharon Isbin, and J.S. Bach's Easter Oratorio.

When: 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 22.

Where: Knowles Memorial Chapel, Rollins College, Winter park.

Cost: \$20-\$60.

Call: 407-646-2182.

Online: Bachfestivalflorida.org

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Sharon Isbin will be featured in 2 pieces at Sunday's Bach Festival.

J. HENRY FAIR

STRINGS SPECIALIST

74th annual Bach Festival



Guitarist performs at Bach Festival

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A delicate balance

Among the hurdles is the logistics of the guitar's delicate sonic design. In the orchestral setting, Isbin works with an amplification system specifically designed for her. The idea, she says, is to pump up the volume without anyone noticing.

"That has always been one of the issues," she says, conceding that the nuance of the connection between strings and fingertips is the essence of the guitar's appeal.

It's an extension of the human body, she says.

"It's almost as immediate as the human voice, which is the most interior process in music," she says. "With the guitar, there is no keyboard, no pedal, no keys, no bow. Nothing to separate you from the actual sound production."

In her Bach Festival performance, Isbin will be featured in two pieces: **Vivaldi's** Concerto in D Major and *Fantasia para un gentilhombre* by **Joaquin Rodrigo**. The latter composer is known for his "Concierto de Aranjuez" (1939), one of the signature concertos for guitar.

The Rodrigo *Fantasia* was inspired by 17th-century Spanish Court dances of **Gaspar Sanz**, which Rodrigo adapted.

"You have a very different approach in Bach," Isbin says. "There are many different voices going on at the same time."

"In the Vivaldi concerto, the guitar takes more of the melodic line. It's the concept of elaboration, since Baroque music was the jazz of its time."

"The composers know not to be fixed by what was on the page," Isbin says. "You actually improvise. In the Vivaldi concerto's second movement, I had all kinds of embellishments to make it a different take."

Career of collaborations

It's not a rock solo, but Isbin collaborated through the years with players outside the classical realm such as jazz hero **Larry Coryell** and rocker **Steve Vai**.

She teamed with the latter for *Blossom Suite*, a Vai composition that debuted in 2005 at the Theatre du Chatelet in Paris.

"Steve is a very sophisticated composer, a very knowledgeable musician, not to mention a great guy," she says.

"He has written out my part, but his part, a lot of it is improvised. He played on electric and I play on my amplified acoustic."

Other collaborations range from 1997's *Journey to the Amazon*, an exploration of South American music with soprano saxophonist **Paul Winter**, to an upcoming collection of Irish and other folk songs with violinist **Mark O'Connor** and singer **Joan Baez**.

She finds inspiration in such projects.

"I've been moving in different realms for a long time. It's like if you were an actor and you're doing **Shakespeare** versus a contemporary writer."

"Sometimes you have to follow certain styles and traditions. But when you cross into different realms, you bring new audiences to you."