

Sharon Isbin: Notes From a Classical Guitarist

Sharon Isbin, a pioneer in classical guitar, faced a steep career climb, but she refused to accept the possibility of failure

By Alexandra Wolfe
November 26, 2014

For most of her childhood, Grammy-winning guitarist Sharon Isbin imagined a different career for herself: She wanted to be a rocket scientist. Her father, a chemical engineer, used to make her practice the guitar before she was allowed to work on the model rockets that she would construct and send speeding skyward.

The bribery worked. By age 14, Ms. Isbin performed as a soloist before an audience of 10,000 in her hometown of Minneapolis. "I walked out on the stage and thought, 'This is even more exciting than seeing my worms and grasshoppers go up to space,'" she remembers.

Now one of the world's pre-eminent classical guitarists, she's performed at the White House and Carnegie Hall and played with rock guitarists such as Steve Vai, Steve Morse and Nancy Wilson. She also founded the guitar department at the Juilliard School. And in a way she's made it out of the Earth's atmosphere, too; in 1995, astronaut Chris Hadfield took one of her CDs into space.

As a guitarist in the classical music world, and as a woman in the guitar community, Ms. Isbin has had a steep climb in her career. American Public Television has just released for national broadcast a new documentary called "Sharon Isbin: Troubadour," tracking her rise as a musical pioneer.

Sitting in the living room of her New York apartment, filled with South American artifacts like dried-out piranha heads—as well as a model rocket—Ms. Isbin says that she hadn't been interested in music until age 9, when her family moved to Italy for her father's job. Her parents found a talented guitar teacher nearby and initially urged her older brother to study with him. When he found out the teacher wasn't giving rock guitar lessons, he declined, so Ms. Isbin "volunteered out of family duty." "Classical

guitar was not on the radar of most kids in the U.S.," she says. "Had we not gone to Italy, I would've become a brain surgeon or a scientist, no question about it."



Sharon Isbin *Allison Michael Orenstein*
for *The Wall Street Journal*

She took to the guitar in part because of its range. "The guitar can capture the cry of the human voice because we can create the sound in between notes, which you can't do on the piano, but you can if you're a singer or a violinist," she says.

Her interest in the instrument continued after her family returned to the U.S. when she was 10. Back in Minneapolis, Ms. Isbin didn't have an official teacher after she was 16, but she says growing up in a scientifically oriented household

gave her the tools to continue to learn music on her own. She would experiment by sitting in front of the mirror and tape recording herself playing the guitar to test which hand positions created the best sounds.

Ms. Isbin went on to Yale University, and after graduation in 1978 she started studying Bach interpretation with Rosalyn Tureck, a pianist. Ten years later, she released the compilation "J.S. Bach: Complete Lute Suites," and has since released over 25 albums, including "Journey to the New World" (2009) and "American Landscapes" (1995), which Mr. Hadfield brought up to the Russian space station Mir. She has personally won two Grammys and contributed to a third Grammy-winning album.

Along the way, Ms. Isbin taught at the Manhattan School of Music before joining Juilliard in 1989, where she became the school's first classical guitar teacher. She also tried to raise the profile of classical guitar with projects such as Guitarstream, a music festival at Carnegie Hall, and Guitarjam, a series on National Public Radio.

She credits her trajectory in part to her refusal to accept the word “no.” Ms. Isbin doesn’t write her own music, so she relies on other composers. At age 17, she asked Israeli composer Ami Maayani to write her a guitar concerto, but he looked at her and laughed. “He said, ‘The guitar? What a silly instrument,’” she recalls. At a party that evening, she asked if she could play for him to try to change his mind. Five months later, he heard her play and agreed to write her a concerto. It took her eight years to persuade composer John Corigliano to agree to write a piece for her.

Ms. Isbin says that she feels like she goes into a trance when she plays. It helps that she practices transcendental meditation. “I feel like if I’m there in a trancelike state, the audience comes with me, and they’re in that journey with me,” she says. “Music takes people out of this world and into another for a period of time where hopefully they can experience the emotions of joy and sadness and nostalgia, but in a really artistically empowering way. So you might have tears streaming down your face, but you’re still enjoying the music.”

Playing at events such as the 9/11 memorial in 2002 for an audience of thousands—many holding out posters of their loved ones who had died in the attacks—made her realize that “art is a way of making sense out of the chaos of life and giving it meaning and purpose and transcendence,” she says. “If you’re expressing as a composer or performer or photographer something that is a painful experience with something that has beauty to it, in some fashion we have hope.”

That particular performance, she says, reinforced why she chose to be a musician. “If I ever doubt why I’m spending eight hours at the airport waiting for a delayed flight or going without sleep, I remember this is why.”

Ms. Isbin spends at least half the year traveling to concerts, she says. Part of her trips involve curating other performances. As director of the guitar department at the Aspen Music Festival, she has incorporated into the program different sounds all around the guitar, from folk music to jazz to bluegrass. “It was a wide net, and I think people really loved it because of the hip image and impression guitar has in our culture, and its relationship to all these different genres,” she says.

When she’s home in New York, Ms. Isbin says that she balances her practicing and teaching schedule with meditation and riverside runs near her Upper West Side apartment. In 1995, Ms. Isbin came out in the press as gay. At the concert following that mention in a newspaper interview, she received a standing ovation before she even began playing.



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Ms. Isbin sometimes plays as many as 20 concerts a month. To prepare for a show, she meditates and then practices only lightly, so that onstage she can “flip the switch and pretend it’s the first time ever.”

These days, she is working with jazz musician Chris Brubeck on a concerto that she’ll perform in April with the Maryland Symphony Orchestra, and early next year she’ll go on tour with Metropolitan Opera singer Isabel Leonard. “What’s been fun for me is I don’t ever know what’s around the corner,” she says.

With the new documentary, she hopes to show people of any occupation that perseverance pays off. “There was nothing that said this dorky-looking little kid who practiced 20 minutes a day and didn’t even like classical music would ever become a troubadour,” she says.

What inspires your music?

“I think I get my inspiration from life, from everything, and the music that I play has always had an association of the guitar with the human voice. I love working with singers.”

How did you put the documentary together?

“Producer Susan Dangel introduced herself to me at a rehearsal with the New York Philharmonic. It took five years of filming. I’d think it would be done the following year, but then I’d be asked to play the Grammys or at the White House, and she’d say, ‘We’ve got to get that.’ I really got used to being followed around by a camera crew and they were very unimposing. They even came with me to Italy. We were in Venice together on the gondolas.”