

Guitarist Sharon Isbin is one of the music world's great collaborators

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Sharon Isbin



From Bach masters to Joan Baez, Sharon Isbin refuses to make do with the classical guitar's traditional repertoire. **Brian Wise** meets a thrilling musician paving the way

PHOTOGRAPHY: LAURA BARISONZI

Sharon Isbin is one of a handful of classical guitarists of the post-Andrés Segovia age who have crossed into something approaching celebrity. That is what happens when you've performed alongside Sting, Joan Baez and Mark O'Connor; have founded the Juilliard School's guitar department; and have commissioned concert works from the likes of John Corigliano, Aaron Jay Kernis, Joan Tower and Christopher Rouse. And that doesn't even scratch the surface of Isbin's reach into popular culture, which includes a cameo in the pioneering Showtime series *The L Word* and a performance in the White House before Barack and Michelle Obama.

Isbin's desire to expand the guitar repertoire has sparked collaborations with artists from Brazil, China, Colombia,

Spain, the UK and recently India. And though she could live comfortably on performances of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* and a handful of Spanish miniatures, she has devoted much of her career to inspiring (and cajoling) composers to write concertos that speak to her interests. 'The *Concierto* is a magical piece, and I love playing it, but we can't only do that,' says Isbin, who has recorded it at least three times. 'And to work with masters who are willing to collaborate with me and find ways to make it really idiomatic for the instrument – that's the best kind of togetherness you can hope for.'

As a hazy light pours into Isbin's Manhattan apartment on a winter afternoon, she is flanked by artefacts from her trips to South America, among them a handcrafted poison-dart gun and a dried-out piranha head. Other objects in the room capture something even more fundamental about Isbin's interests. In one corner is a mustard-coloured armchair, on which Isbin practises transcendental meditation, a technique that requires sitting for 20 minutes twice a day and repeating a mantra.



Cross-culture:
Isbin performs with
Sting in New York,
November 2015



‘For me, transcendental meditation is part of Indian philosophy in the sense of unity of peoples, of nations, of minds, of thoughts, of spirits,’ she says. ‘It’s also just a great technique for anyone who wants to be released and relieved of stress and to be able to focus on their own inner creativity, be super-productive and be able to get along with others.’

Isbin has practised the meditation technique since she was 17 years old, and recently came into closer contact with it during her first tour to India, in which she travelled to New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata alongside the sarod master Amjad Ali Khan and other noted Indian musicians (their recording *Strings for Peace* is out in May). ‘It was fascinating to go to the country of origin and feel steeped in the culture of something that has been so pivotal and important in my own life,’ she adds.

Beyond spiritual concerns, Isbin is also a former child science whizz, the daughter of a chemical engineer whose earliest ambition growing up in Minneapolis was to be a rocket scientist. In another corner of her living room, not far from her two Grammy Awards, are a pair of model rockets. One is a scale model of the Saturn 1B; the other she designed herself and tested by putting unsuspecting grasshoppers in the plastic payload as it was shot 1,500 feet in the air.

These too had a role in her passion for the guitar. When Isbin was nine, her father, a professor at the University of Minnesota, took the family on a one-year sabbatical to Italy. Her older brother voiced

an interest in guitar lessons, and their parents arranged for him to study with Aldo Minella, a student of Segovia’s. ‘My brother’s fantasy was to be the next Elvis,’ she says. ‘But when he learned that the lessons would be classical he said “no way”, so I volunteered to take his place.’

After returning to Minneapolis, Isbin’s father told her she couldn’t launch model rockets until she practised the guitar for an hour. The bribe paid off. At age 14 she performed a Vivaldi concerto with the Minnesota Orchestra after winning a local competition. She went on to study at Yale University, earning both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music, and taking occasional lessons from Segovia.

Before graduation in 1979, Isbin approached Rosalyn Tureck, the late Baroque keyboard player and scholar, with the aim of developing her skills in early repertoire. ‘Actually it was my mother’s idea,’ she says. ‘She was not too impressed with how my Bach was sounding and I can understand that. It wasn’t very good.’ Though Tureck had never taught a guitarist, she agreed to give Isbin a lesson. ‘That was the test and I guess I passed it. For ten years I studied with her and we had a friendship for a good 30 years.’

‘It was fascinating for her to work with an instrument that was so closely connected with her keyboard, with the harpsichord. The lute definitely had a relationship to the harpsichord. One of Bach’s so-called lute suites was written for a *lautenwerk*, a keyboard instrument strung with gut strings to sound like a ▶





Golden tones:
Isbin, photographed
in New York

I'm pinching myself thinking, "I'm sitting in a car and Joan Baez is humming in the backseat. That's pretty cool!"

Isbin has not shied away from her pop and rock brethren, having shared the stage with Nancy Wilson of the band Heart, and with the electric guitarist and former Frank Zappa sideman Steve Vai. In fact, Isbin says that many American classical guitarists start out as would-be rockers before they decide to explore the classical instrument. This differs from Europe, where interest in classical repertoire begins earlier and, as a result, the instrument lacks macho overtones. 'It's still 90 per cent guys in the US,' she says, ruefully. 'It's really a matter of having role models out there so that people do not see limitations.' Besides Tureck, one of Isbin's role models was Ida Presti, the leading woman classical guitarist of an earlier generation, who died in her early 40s.

Colin Davin, a former Isbin student who now teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Music, reports that there are 'a decent number of female students' in Isbin's Juilliard studio, and that a wide range of nationalities are represented. He is now her frequent duet partner and arranger. 'She's had a number of prominent graduates go on to be professionals, including Antigoni Goni,' he observes.

For all of her advocacy, there is no disputing her versatility or desire to keep pushing forward. She is enthralled by cultural connections, tracing the roots of Spanish flamenco music to the Romani and gypsy musicians to India. Or when, working with Tan Dun, she evoked the wiry sound of the Chinese pipa, and in the process heard a distant echo of Jimi Hendrix.

If there is a wonky aura about the classical guitar world, Isbin also grasps a bigger picture. She recalls performing in 2002 for the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks as the victims' names were read aloud at the World Trade Center site. 'It hit me like never before why I was a musician and why I was on the planet,' she says. 'I was here to be a part of the healing process and to connect with everybody. That will always be a reminder as to why it's important to endure whatever we do in order to play our music.'

lute. She hadn't explored these four suites before, and I think it was a fun challenge to immerse herself in something different.'

With Tureck, Isbin developed the first performing edition, for guitar, of Bach's lute suites, followed in 1989 by a recording. And her training with Tureck informed a recent collaboration with the Pacifica String Quartet on pieces by Boccherini and Vivaldi. Brandon Vamos, the Pacifica Quartet's cellist, says he admires the varied colours in Isbin's sound and her fastidious regard to detail. 'Every phrase is talked about,' he says of their rehearsals, which began at the Aspen Music Festival, where Isbin directs the guitar department. 'She's very intricate about dynamics, nuances and articulations and she doesn't let anything go by without examining it.'

The same passion that brought Isbin to Tureck has also guided her commissions. Initially, composers were unsure of how to proceed with the unfamiliar guitar. It took Isbin eight years to persuade Corigliano to write a concerto for her. In 1993 he produced *Troubadours*, a concerto that calls on Isbin to stroll, like a 13th-century troubadour, around the stage while using a discrete wireless amplification system.

Isbin has brought ideas to other composers. When Chris Brubeck was

'We need to have role models out there so that people do not see limitations'

writing his concerto *Affinity*, Isbin suggested he include a homage to his father, the jazz legend Dave Brubeck (the premiere recording, also titled *Affinity*, is out in May). Previously, she proposed the theme of the *Joan Baez Suite* to the late British composer John Duarte. His score, which incorporates songs by the US singer-songwriter, brought back memories for Isbin, a child of the 1960s. During its genesis, she asked Baez permission to use her name. 'I had to reach out to make sure she would be OK it being named after her,' Isbin recalls. 'When she heard the suite she offered to sing on the album. I never dreamed that I would play with Joan Baez, who was one of my idols when I was in college. I just loved listening to her music, it moved me so much. I'll never forget to going off to the recording session and she was humming in the back seat. She was practising a new song that she thought I would like called *Rose of Sharon*.