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MISS TROUBADOUR



DOCUMENTARY SHINES LIGHT ON SHARON ISBIN—‘THE FACE OF CLASSICAL GUITAR’

by Jason Walsh

It was the day Sharon Isbin met Sharon Isbin.

Or rather, it was the acclaimed guitarist's moment of reckoning during the making of *Sharon Isbin: Troubadour*, the new documentary on the life and career of one of classical music's most renowned guitarists.

It started with *Troubadour* filmmaker Susan Dangel's vision that the documentary would include specific archival material from the guitarist's career—and one such request was decades-old footage from when Isbin premiered the first work ever written for her.

Easier said than done—it was a live broadcast, shown 35 years ago on Israeli television. Isbin herself had never even seen it.

But following some extensive cross-global digging, a tape emerged from a television station in Jerusalem. And for the first time, Isbin, age 58, watched Isbin, 21, emerge on the international scene—as not only one of the few females in the genre, but, as some would say, the future of classical guitar.

“It was amazing,” says Isbin. “It felt like I was seeing another person—and yet that was me. There was youthful energy, and innocence, and determination—and, oh my focus.”

The ghost of Isbin past may have possessed different qualities than the reflective woman she is today, but if there are two things this Minnesota native has never lacked, they are determination and focus.

In the film, she is described by various friends as “intense,” “challenging,” a “firebrand.”

Her New York apartment neighbor, David Hyde Pierce, calls her “a nightmare,” though the *Frasier* star’s tongue was planted firmly in cheek.

Still, as *Troubadour* makes clear, few have risen from the icy sidewalks of 1960s Minneapolis to performing a solo concert before the Obama family at the White House without a little intensity.

Premiering through American Public Television last fall, and now available on DVD and Blu-ray, *Sharon Isbin: Troubadour* traces the career of the classical guitarist from her early days as a youthful science whiz, who blasted grasshoppers into the abyss on a homemade rocket, to her lofty position, to quote one contemporary in the film as, “the face of classical guitar.”

Along the way she studied with Andrés Segovia, collaborated with some of the finest musicians on the planet, took home multiple Grammys, and founded the guitar program at Juilliard.

She still holds no quarter for the grasshoppers.



Classical Guitar asked the nylon-string firebrand about *Troubadour* and her place in the world of classical guitar...

What were you hoping to see in a documentary about yourself?

I thought it was important to show some of the kinds of collaborations that were unique and changed the course of an instrument. In my case, it had been with some of the notable composers of our time, John Corigliano, Tan Dun, Chris Rouse, Joan Tower, Steve Vai, and many others. It was an opportunity to give people a chance to be a fly on the wall and get a glimpse of what this special alchemy is like and how it happens in a very spontaneous way.

Cross-genre collaborations are nothing new—but they seem to be increasing exponentially in classical music. How important are such sojourns in winning new audiences and reinvigorating repertoire? The funny thing is, I've never done any of these projects with a commercial thought. It all came from a love of the music and a chance encounter with a great artist who asked to work with me.

It wasn't always so easy.

Crossover used to be considered a dirty word. The first time I ever did a cross-

over collaboration was with Laurindo Almeida and Larry Coryell; we were invited to perform together at a concert. They made sure the arrangement of music would match each of our particular styles of playing and even composed music for us. And what we thought would be a one-shot deal lasted for five years of touring and recording. If you try to explore because you think it will be a commercial success, that's really the wrong way to go about it. It has to be organic and authentic and with a lot of integrity.

In the film you say, classical guitar "is an instrument that has had to catch up." Has it caught up yet?

I think that's a process that will continue beyond my lifetime. The reason for that is it's a newer instrument and has had more challenges to deal with—including sound reinforcement. I don't feel that's a challenge anymore. But when you consider some of the great composers of our time—Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven—they didn't write for the guitar, so we've had to create our own literature. That's why it's so important to me to work with extraordinary composers to continue to create new repertoire. I'm still the only guitarist ever to have recorded an album with the New York Philharmonic. So clearly the instrument is still in its pioneering phase.

Therefore do you see your legacy as being less about your playing, and more about commissioning of new works?

Oh, I think so. Because when you see what is left behind after a [musician's] lifetime, you can't go hear them perform anymore. But the recordings and the works that they have written for them will last an eternity. So, for me, it's very important that a film like this can encourage other guitarists to play this music and become exposed to it. It's very different listening to a recording versus seeing the visual of an interaction. And I think that if there's one thing that happens from this film, it will be that these works will be showcased in a way that will give them international exposure and inspire others to pursue projects none of us have ever thought of before.

That's one advantage classical music has over pop music—in that popular music is so tied to a particular performer. People don't necessarily want to hear the hundreds of awful versions of "Yesterday" that have been recorded—they just want the Beatles' original. Whereas classical is more about whether the compositions stand the test of time.

That's interesting. And I think you're right. It really is the core of what I think is the essence of classical music—the music itself. The artist is certainly part of the creative process, but we will always have the music.

As the first woman to achieve massive success in a previously male-dominated arena, you're often cited as being a role model for young women.

Is that something you're conscious of in a day-to-day way?

When it hits home is when people come up to me after a performance and say, "I was inspired to play the guitar because of you." I think that having grown up in a time when there were so few female players of any style of guitar—to show up at the Aspen Music Festival and be only one of two females out of 50 guitar students, I mean those are pretty tipped odds over there—I think it's really great when young girls have a chance to see that they can do it, too.

"Crossover used to be considered a dirty word.... It has to be organic and authentic and with a lot of integrity."

SHARON ISBIN



Partly thanks to you, there are a number of rising-star female classical guitarists—is there anybody you’re particularly impressed with?

Antigoni Goni studied with me at Juilliard. She was one of the winners of the Guitar Foundation of America International Competition, and she’s gone on to have a wonderful career. Bokyung Byun and Alberta Khoury are outstanding students well on their way. It is interesting that all of the female students I’ve had at Juilliard, none have been Americans. So we still have a ways to go in this country. There’s a tradition that goes back to the 19th century in Europe. But here, if you think of the 1960s, ’70s, ’80s and ’90s, a lot of the kids who become classical guitarists as Americans were first experimenting with rock guitar.

Speaking of that, what sort of popular music do you like?

I have such eclectic tastes. Everything from Pink to Melissa Etheridge to Steve Vai—what he does is extraordinary. It just depends on the moment if something strikes me as really moving and exciting.

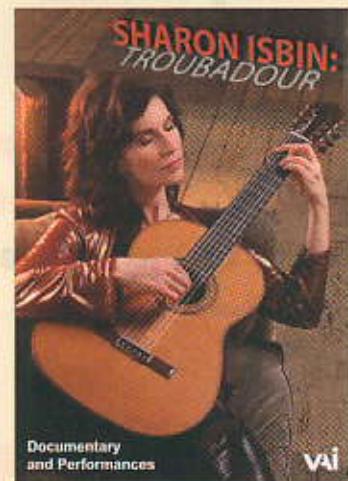
SHARON AND FRIENDS

Sharon with (clockwise) Joan Baez, Martin Scorsese, Steve Vai, and Mark O’Connor.

One of your Juilliard students in the movie said, “Studying with Sharon is a very challenging and intense experience.” Why do you think he said that?
Because I really expect a lot from them. The students I choose have extraordinary talent. I know they can accomplish great things, and I want to bring that out. It means really having high standards and not letting them off the hook. But I do it in a fun way, I do it in a way that is always respectful. I have an enormous admiration for what they have achieved and their talent and the hard work that they put in. It is really remarkable what I see these students doing. Some of these students are just brilliant. They will carry forth the mantle. They represent Juilliard in an extraordinary way, and they also represent the instrument very brilliantly.

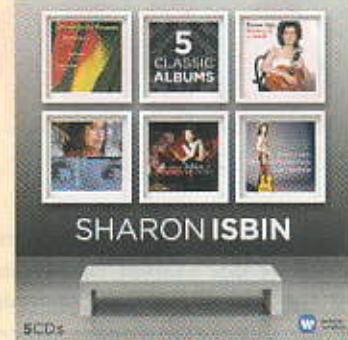
Did you really blast grasshoppers off into the stratosphere when you were a kid?
Oh yeah! When you use a plastic capsule, and the parachute doesn’t work right, what you saw in there was soup. **CG**

TROUBADOUR



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Sharon Isbin isn't just a subject of American Public Television documentaries—she's also the focus of a recent box set, *Sharon Isbin: 5 Classic Albums*.

The 43-track package from Warner Classics includes her collaboration with Rodrigo and Villa-Lobos live with the New York Philharmonic, a Latin-infused turn with saxophonist Paul Winter, her collection of Baroque classics, as well as her two Grammy-winning discs, *Dreams of a World* and *Rouse: Concert de Gaudi/Tan Dun: Guitar Concerto Yi2*.

For more information, visit sharonisbintroubadour.com.