

Spanish Soul

Classical guitarist Sharon Isbin brings new spirit to the music of Federico Garcia Lorca on *Alma Española*

By Mark C. Davis - September, 2018



Photo: J. Henry Fair

“The weeping of the guitar begins. Useless to silence it. Impossible to silence it.”

Federico García Lorca wrote those words in his 1921 poem “La Guitarra,” but he could have just as easily been writing about himself. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco’s fascist Nationalist militia executed the Spanish poet, playwright and composer in 1936, ostensibly for his outspoken socialist views. Franco further attempted to silence him by banning his works, a prohibition that remained in place until 1953.

Despite such attempts to stifle García Lorca’s words and compositions, they have continued to find expression, particularly among musicians. His poems have been set to music by various artists, ranging from avant-garde composer George Crumb to folk singers Joan Baez and Leonard Cohen.

Sharon Isbin is the latest musician to present an interpretation of García Lorca’s music. The celebrated classical guitarist teamed up with opera singer Isabel Leonard to record *Alma Española* (Bridge Records). Released last summer, the album finds the duo performing Isbin’s new arrangements of nine García Lorca songs, in addition to duets by Manuel de Falla, Xavier Montsalvatge, Agustín Lara and Joaquín Rodrigo. The disc also sees Isbin performing solo, offering her masterful renditions of works by Enrique Granados and Francisco Tárrega. **Together, Isbin and Leonard bring truth and immortality to García Lorca’s words and music, and in doing so they evoke the very essence of Spanish soul.**

The last major recording of García Lorca songs was made more than 40 years ago by 10-string maestro Narciso Yepes. Did you listen to those recordings?

I listened to recordings of Yepes performing García Lorca's songs with the wonderful Spanish singer Teresa Berganza. But the guitar parts needed more depth, contrast and energy. Published settings of the songs were also problematic. I envisioned a different approach and was inspired to make my own arrangements that would bring out folk and flamenco influences, timbral and dynamic contrasts, lyricism, nuance, rhythmic complexities and engaging tempi, all in service of illuminating the compelling stories, lyrics and Spanish traditions from which these beautiful songs had evolved. Isabel Leonard, who is Argentine-American, was an ideal collaborator in this process.

García Lorca never wrote out *Canciones españolas antiguas* but did make more than a dozen recordings with La Argentinita [Spanish-Argentine flamenco dancer and singer Encarnación López Júlvez] around 1931. How much did you rely on those recordings in transcribing them to guitar?

What remarkable good fortune that García Lorca recorded these songs just a few years before he was murdered by Franco's thugs in 1936. It was particularly helpful to hear tempi, rhythms and vocal flavors guided by Lorca's joyous collaboration at the piano. La Argentinita added castanets to some of the songs, which was fascinating to hear. Isabel and I chose not to do that, preferring instead to highlight the richness and colors of the voice and guitar, with their many subtle nuances.

How important do you think it is to consider the backstory of what the composer was experiencing in his/her life during the time that a piece was being composed?

More than half the composers on *Alma Española* fled from or were murdered by fascist governments. Granados drowned trying to save his wife after their boat was torpedoed by a German submarine in World War I. Falla fled Granada to Argentina after his friend García Lorca was murdered, fearing he would be next.

Rodrigo and his wife, Victoria Kamhi, invited me to their home in Madrid in 1979 after hearing my live performance on the radio of his *Concierto de Aranjuez*, the beginning of our 20-year friendship. They had fled both Franco and Hitler, and believed that the misery they endured in 1938 to 1939 likely contributed to losing what would have been their first child at seven months gestation. During her ensuing illness, Rodrigo found solace playing the haunting "Adagio" from his concerto at the piano, a movement steeped in sadness, beauty, passion and nostalgia. Years later, Victoria penned the lyrics to the melody, and their daughter Cecilia presented me with the score of "Aranjuez ma pensée," asking me to make the first recording.



Isbin with Isabel Leonard (left) Photo: J. Henry Fair

Isabel Leonard suggested that you shift into a higher register to complement the reveal in the final verse of "Romance de Don Boyso." Are there any other examples on *Alma Española* of how you phrased your playing based on the lyrics of a piece?

Our interpretive choices reflect the character, lyrics and drama of each song and verse. In "Anda, jaleo," for example, I vary the solo intros, and with the voice I alternate between flamenco-inspired rasgueado and light strokes without, depending on the meaning of the words and the vocal dynamics. I intensify endings of each verse progressively with denser strums as death approaches. In "La Tarara" and "Sevillanas," I draw from Spanish folk and flamenco techniques that inspired these songs, but

which cannot be realized on the piano. The Tárrega and Rodrigo are the only works on the recording originally written for guitar. All the other music was inspired by the instrument and calls out for it.

You and Isabel both live in New York, which allowed you to rehearse and tweak the material. Describe how you prepared for the album.

We spent several weeks choosing the music, keys and verses, then editing and rehearsing before our first performance at the Aspen Music Festival in August 2014. After that we would rehearse the day of each performance until recording the album in June 2016. Experimenting with new ideas, including spontaneous ones, while performing on tour over a two-year period, was a luxury that enabled our interpretations to grow and develop before we made the recording. We recorded our tracks together onstage in the resonant auditorium of the Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City, as if performing in concert.

How did you record your guitar?

Engineer Tim Martyn and producer David Frost placed two mics about two feet in front of the guitar and mixed them with mics placed in the hall. I'm thrilled that Frost won the 2018 Grammy Award for Producer of the Year, Classical for his latest recordings, including *Alma Española*.

Tell us about your instrument.

My Antonius Mueller guitar is a cedar double top, with Brazilian rosewood back and sides. Mueller glues thin strips of balsa wood between the two top layers. I use Savarez High Tension New Cristal 1st, Standard Tension New Cristal 2nd, Standard Tension Alliance 3rd, and for recording, polished High Tension Cantiga basses. The only difference in concert would be using Cantiga basses that are not polished.

You studied with Sophocles Papas, Oscar Ghiglia and Andrés Segovia. How have they influenced your playing?

I started at nine when my family lived in Italy for a year, and at 14 I met Papas in Washington, D.C. He made me practice scales and exercises and introduced me to Segovia. What inspired me most from lessons with Segovia was hearing his gem-like magical tone whenever he would demonstrate something just inches away. That sound stayed in my mind as a model to emulate. When I studied for five summers with Ghiglia at the Aspen Music Festival, his elegant playing and artistry was such an inspiration. I later studied for 10 years with the great Bach scholar and keyboardist Rosalyn Tureck, transcribing and recording the Bach lute suites for guitar.

You practice Transcendental Meditation. How does your practice benefit your music?

I learned Transcendental Meditation at age 17 and have been practicing ever since, 20 minutes twice a day. TM reduces stress, enhances mental stamina and focus, and facilitates access to one's inner creativity. Studies have shown tremendous physical benefits as well, from lowering blood pressure to lengthening age-defying telomeres. Transcendental Meditation is so rejuvenating. It's like charging your battery every day. I feel that it gives me twice as much life.

You mentioned in a previous *Guitar Player* interview that you might collaborate with Carlos Santana. Is that still a possibility?

Santana and I had a wonderful visit for some seven hours at his home in Las Vegas, during which time he patiently gave me an extended lesson in jazz improvisation, a style in which I have no training. I'd need another lifetime to prepare for such a collaboration.

Do you still play entirely from memory onstage?

I play most solo works from memory, as well as several of the nearly 30 works for guitar and orchestra that I've performed. To speed up memorization, I practice visualizing right- and left-hand fingerings without the guitar while hearing the music in my mind as I wish it to sound. I describe this process in detail in my *Classical Guitar Answer Book*.

Any plans for a sequel to the book, based on your 28 years of experience as the founder/chairwoman of Juilliard's guitar department?

I could imagine perhaps instead writing about all the entertaining, surprising and unusual adventures I've experienced.

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