



Troubadour  
Unveils the  
Mysteries  
of Classical  
Guitar



Classical guitar, with its full sound and intricate technique is completely removed from other guitar styles. “The instrument I play has nylon treble strings and metal wound bass [strings], so there are no steel strings in the top voices. And, I use my fingernails to play, rather than a pick,” explains Sharon Isbin, one of the world’s foremost classical guitar players. “You have to coordinate four, and sometimes five, fingers of the right hand with four fingers of the left hand.” This allows classical guitarists to play many voices at once, even a five-part Bach fugue, she says.

For musicians who might want to try classical guitar she offers some tips. First of all, find a good teacher. “Contact a university near you if they have a guitar department,” says Isbin who created the guitar department at The Juilliard School and is director of the guitar departments at both Juilliard and the Aspen Music Festival. She says graduate students often make great teachers.

“Learning to listen is critical, in order to create a really beautiful sound, and develop the kind of technique that allows you to express what you are feeling in your heart,” she says.

Another element is shaping and conditioning the all-important fingernails. “It’s important to moisturize them every time you wash your hands, especially when the weather is dry,” she says. “I use a special silicon-coated sandpaper designed to polish the paint on cars. It allows me to create a completely smooth edge that is great for sound and prevents them from getting nicked.”

## Beginnings & New Works

Back when Isbin first began lessons as a nine-year-old, she had no idea what she was getting into. Like many children, her parents had to coax her to practice. She didn’t dream of one day playing guitar on stage, rather she wanted to be a rocket scientist. “My father would say, ‘You can’t launch your rockets until you put in an hour of guitar,’” she recalls.

However, at age 14, the instrument abruptly became her focus. She won a competition and the prize was a performance with the Minnesota Orchestra. “Suddenly here I was stepping out in front of an audience of 10,000 people over two days, with the Minnesota Orchestra as a backing band,” she says. “It was a cosmic feeling.”

From then on, Isbin knew guitar would be her life. And she wasn’t going to let a little thing like the relative scarcity of music for the instrument stand in her way. At age 17, when she attended a lecture that Israeli composer Ami Maayani gave about his harp concerto, she approached him with a proposition: would he write a guitar concerto for her?

“It wasn’t premeditated. I had never heard of this guy before; I thought anybody that can write for the harp will probably do a great job on guitar,” she explains. “His response was to laugh and say that the guitar is such a silly instrument; he would never consider it.” Wounded, but not about to give up, Isbin later ran into Maayani at a party and asked to play for him.

“Some months later we met up in New York, and his response after hearing me play was, ‘I think we can do this,’” says Isbin. One year later (1976) she had the concerto.

She has since pursued other composers to write for her and nearly a dozen (so far) have. For all of them she’d heard something in their music that she liked. Some were selected purely by chance. “In the case of John Corigliano, I met him at

a party and then ran into him at the post office. There was a long line. What do you say to a composer standing in line for 20 minutes? ‘Will you write me a piece?’ He replied, ‘That’s an interesting idea, call me.’” And she did, for the next eight years, until he finally agreed.

## Musical Diversity

Isbin contacted Christopher Rouse after hearing his flute concerto. “I thought that beautiful lyricism would translate well to guitar,” she says. “In the case of Lukas Foss [*American Landscapes*, 1989], I loved the way he used folk music and early American music and I thought, since nobody has done this in a guitar concerto format, I would ask him. For Tan Dun [*Yi 2*, 1996] I found the Chinese style that draws heavily from folk music really captivating, colorful, and mesmerizing.”

As for her favorite concerto? “I would have to say that I love each one that I am playing at the moment,” she says, adding that she’s performed both the Corigliano (*Troubadours*, 1993) and Rouse (*Concert de Gaudi*, 2000) more than 70 times each. “It’s important to give a new work life and encourage and nurture it,” she says.

It’s obvious that Isbin enjoys venturing into diverse repertoire. In April, she premiered a work written by jazz composer Chris Brubeck. “It has a lot of wonderful jazz inflection and Middle Eastern components,” she says. This spring she toured with mezzo soprano Isabel Leonard, and November this year will see the premiere of a work written by Richard Danielpour for her and Leonard. Isbin also frequently performs in the trio *Guitar Passions* with jazz guitarists Stanley Jordan and Romero Lubambo.

Isbin’s 25 recordings also reflect her diversity. In particular, her *Dreams of the World* CD has folk-inspired music from eight different countries: the US (Appalachia), Ireland, Greece, Israel, Spain, Cuba, Venezuela, and Brazil.

For Isbin, each venture into a new genre or style requires study beyond practic-

ing the music. “Each time I’ve stepped into a new genre, whether it was folk music, rock, bluegrass, or jazz, it’s come with an open mind and eagerness to learn. What I find so exciting about this is that I get to fulfill a fantasy of being part of that world for a moment and participating with those who really are experts,” she says, concluding, “It’s very gratifying and makes me grow as a musician.”



orize it.” Memorization allows total immersion in the piece.

At 17, Isbin began practicing transcendental meditation, which she says helps her in her career. “It has so many benefits because it allows you

to really focus on what is positive in life and be even more creative,” She explains. “I find that the trance-like state that I enter when I’m doing transcendental meditation is very similar to the state that I feel when I’m playing at my best in front of an audience. I feel it has facilitated my ability to enter that realm.”

## Preparation

Isbin says that her preparation varies according to the type of performance she is gearing up for. “I have to be flexible and aware of the demands of each experience,” she says. “For example, when I am working with Guitar Passions we create on the spot, and when we rehearse and perform it is always different. If I am doing a new work that I’ve never performed before, the preparation is extremely intense, and it could be many hours a day of practice to get ready. If I’m doing something I’ve performed many times, such as the Rodrigo concerto [*Concierto de Aranjuez*] then it’s easier because it’s already in my blood, part of me.”

To learn new, difficult pieces, Isbin uses a step-by-step approach. “I like to get an understanding of how it’s structured—the phrasing. I think of it like learning poetry. I might write phrasing marks on it. It’s like punctuation—commas, periods, new paragraphs, anything that creates an understanding and allows you to grasp it better and give it meaning. I’ll look at the harmony, the voicing.”

“I’ll practice the difficult parts with the metronome, working it up number by number,” she says. “You are what you practice, so you really want to practice everything at a tempo where you can do it just right and not make mistakes, and that might be really slow for a long time. Then, I’ll start to play with it. Eventually it finds its way into me and I begin to mem-

## Keep It Fresh

Once a piece becomes part of her, she looks for ways to keep her performance of it fresh. “With contemporary works it’s almost second nature to always look for something new and different. I find that if I approach each performance as if it might be my last, then that heightens the experience,” she says.

Beyond that, for inspiration she recalls performances that were particularly moving, such as in 2002 when she played during the first memorial to 911 at Ground Zero. “I was wondering how I was going to hold up emotionally because it was so powerful. The moment I saw the faces and the posters of the lost loved ones right before me, I realized that this is why I am a musician, why I am on the planet. I’m here to be part of the healing process for people, whether it’s that experience or any other. That’s something music can do in a strong, meaningful way.”

“I entered a different state of consciousness and reality at that moment, and it is something I will always remind myself of if I wonder why I’m going through what I go through in order to be a musician,” she explains.



**You can learn more about Sharon Isbin in the documentary about her life, *Troubadour* (2014). For links to a trailer and performance videos visit: [www.MakingMusicMag.com/sharon-isbin](http://www.MakingMusicMag.com/sharon-isbin).**

**Sharon Isbin’s book *Classical Guitar Answer Book* (String Letter Publishing, 1999) offers advice useful to players of any style of guitar. Here are some practice tips relevant to almost any instrument:**

- It’s always a good idea to plan a basic outline of each day’s practice so that you use your time efficiently.
- Allow time for warm-up exercises—arpeggios, scales, etc.
- Estimate how many days, weeks, or months it will take you to prepare a piece, and pace yourself accordingly.
- Establish daily and long-term goals.
- Use a metronome beginning at a comfortable speed. Advance to the next speed only when the previous one is perfect.
- When using the metronome be careful not to become too rhythmically inflexible or mechanical.

