

Sharon Isbin's Visionary Legacy

by Colin Davin

The documentary *Sharon Isbin: Troubadour*, broadcast recently on nearly 200 public television stations throughout the U.S., explores the life and work of the star guitarist whose career has crossed countless boundaries. The title calls to mind both her journey as an international traveling musician and as the artistic *trouveur* of John Corigliano's guitar concerto *Troubadours*, written for her in 1993. It is one of over forty new works which Isbin has brought into the repertoire through courage and vision every bit the equal of Segovia and Bream. This commitment to new compositions, in the midst of one of the most successful concert careers of any modern classical guitarist, is remarkable. Along with performances on the world's grandest stages, and in film and television settings, Isbin has embraced the pursuit of new music with fervor throughout the years, never resting on the laurels of popular success but rather using her recognition as a pulpit from which to champion these works.

A highlight of Isbin's legacy of new commissions is the impressive set of concerti written for her. Major composers who had yet to engage with the instrument bent to Isbin's persistence and featured the guitar as solo instrument with orchestra. While many of these partnerships were formed with preeminent American composers such as Christopher Rouse, John Corigliano, and Aaron Jay Kernis, her reach has been international. Most notably, *Yi2: Concerto for Guitar & Orchestra*, written for her by prominent Chinese composer Tan Dun, is an exciting work that she has premiered in eight different countries. From the very beginning, Isbin's desire to foster new music has been global in vision. Her first commission at age seventeen was a concerto by the Israeli composer Ami Maayani.

As a former student of Sharon Isbin, I've seen firsthand how she approaches projects, works with collaborators, and passes on her expertise in these skills as well as her comprehensive knowledge of the musical and technical aspects of the guitar. I had the opportunity to ask her some questions about her career and in particular her work with composers. Her explanations about the collaborative process, from the conception of an idea to the realization of the music on stage, are enlightening.

Colin Davin (CD): *Your first commission was a concerto for guitar by Ami Maayani. What drew you to his music, and how did that connection come about?*

Sharon Isbin (SI): I heard his harp concerto during a presentation he gave in Minneapolis. The engaging rhythms and gorgeous plucked timbres called out "guitar!" So I asked if he would consider writing a concerto for me. He laughed, exclaiming it was a ridiculous instru-



Above: Sharon Isbin with Christopher Rouse (left) and Tan Dun (right)

ment. But at a party later that evening, I offered to play for him, convinced it would change his mind. Amused by my naïve tenacity (I was only seventeen), he agreed to hear me in New York six months later. By the following summer I had the concerto in hand, and performances were soon arranged with the Minnesota Orchestra and Jerusalem Symphony. I saw the live Israel Television broadcast for the first time last year!

CD: *Over the years, you've commissioned works in solo, chamber, and concerto settings. Has there been a difference in your approach to working with a composer depending on which forces were used for a piece? And how do you determine whether you want a concerto or a solo from someone?*

SI: It's a combination of chemistry and intuition. When I heard the beautifully lyrical flute concerti Chris Rouse and Lukas Foss had written, I yearned for that from each. Chris proposed a concerto inspired by the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí, and I proposed to Lukas a work inspired by early American folk themes. Tan Dun commanded such an exotic sonic landscape that there was no question an orchestra would enrich the guitar in magical ways. He proposed that the concerto be inspired by the ancient Chinese *pipa* and its relationship to the Spanish guitar.

By the time I met John Corigliano, he had already written

several brilliant concerti, so the word rolled out of my mouth at our second chance encounter, which took place standing in line at a post office! Eight years passed before he agreed to take on the project, however, and I got his attention only after suggesting the romantic idea of the thirteenth-century French troubadours. As with Rouse's *Concert de Gaudi*, I recorded *Troubadours* and have given over eighty performances of the work.

I had a very different experience with Ned Rorem. When I ran into him at a concert, he said that he was jealous I was asking everyone else to write for me. Why not him? Having heard many of his magnificent art songs, I suggested something for guitar and voice. A couple of years later, I premiered his *Songs of Sadness* with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Guitarists required no convincing. I invited Joseph Schwanter to a recital of mine, after which he suggested a concerto—turns out, he was a former guitarist! When he finished *From Afar ... A Fantasy for Guitar & Orchestra*, I didn't have to change a note, though he did ask that I write half the cadenza. Leo Brouwer's *El Decameron Negro* arrived out of the blue one day in the mail. We'd not discussed a new work, though I had recorded two of his earlier compositions.

John Duarte had been eager to write for me. Inspired by his *English Suite*, I suggested a suite based on Appalachian folk music. We each researched source material, and he made the selections. We approached his *Joan Baez Suite* in a similar way. When he finished it, I made a special trip to London to coach it with him, knowing that he was dying of cancer and this would be my only opportunity. The experience was invaluable in answering questions of tempo, expression, dynamics. He played his favorite recording of the haunting "Lament" from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* to illustrate the quote he used in the movement "Unquiet Grave." As he recited the prescient lyrics aloud (which begin, "When I am laid in earth..."), we both broke down.

Sometimes the project precedes the composer. For example, flutist Carol Wincenc and I chose Joan Tower (at the recommendation of Bruce MacCombie) for our recital commission. Violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and I selected Aaron Kernis to write a double concerto. I premiered it with Nadja and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, violinist Cho-Liang Lin made the recording with me and the SPCO, and soon after I performed it with several other violinists.

The most recent work came about in an unusual way. Richard Danielpour called two years ago to say he wanted to write a song cycle for me. By coincidence, Columbia Artists was making plans for me to tour with Met Opera star Isabel Leonard, and Carnegie Hall had just asked to commission a work for us. That was an easy puzzle to put together! We'll premiere his beautiful work in November 2015.

CD: Bruce MacCombie's *Nightshade Rounds* appears in a version with orchestra as well as a solo version. Was this an adaptation of the solo version? And in either case, what led to this adaptation?

SI: I asked Bruce to write a work for my New York recital debut at Alice Tully Hall in 1979. Nine years later, Lukas Foss and the Brooklyn Philharmonic commissioned him to arrange it for guitar and strings.

The main difference is that in the solo version the player improvises the number of repetitions for each pattern, whereas in the version with orchestra the length for each is specified.

CD: Your next commission is a concerto from Chris Brubeck. What has the experience of preparing this new work been like, and what can we expect in his music?

SI: For the first time in working with a composer, I was invited to participate in the actual compositional process (as opposed to just refining the guitar part) and to suggest revisions and new directions along the way. I loved this approach, and it allowed me to influence the outcome substantially. One very important change involved the slow middle section, which was transformed into a ruminative elegy that commemorates his late father Dave Brubeck with one of his beautiful melodies. The concerto is dynamite, and I'm looking forward to premiering it this April! Chris describes it best:

"I am very excited about *Affinity: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, which I have written for guitar virtuoso Sharon Isbin. Like most of my compositions, this piece has taken on a personality and life of its own but was nurtured by the ideas Sharon and I discussed at the inception of our collaboration. *Affinity* possesses an international stylistic flair with sounds that reflect the rhythms and harmonies of South America, the Middle East, Iberian Peninsula, and America. The spirited music bursts out of the starting gate in the first measure, eventually evolves into a beautiful andante section in the middle, and then takes us on an intense musical ride from the virtuosic cadenza to the soaring finale. This new single movement concerto, about fifteen minutes in length and scored for guitar and chamber orchestra, is a *tour de force* for a truly exceptional guitarist."

Even in the context of her teaching, Isbin instills a passion for new works in her students and substantial wisdom in how to pursue the collaborative process with composers. We spoke about her proudest experiences as a teacher and her approach to developing students not only into outstanding guitarists, but musicians with diverse pursuits throughout the field.

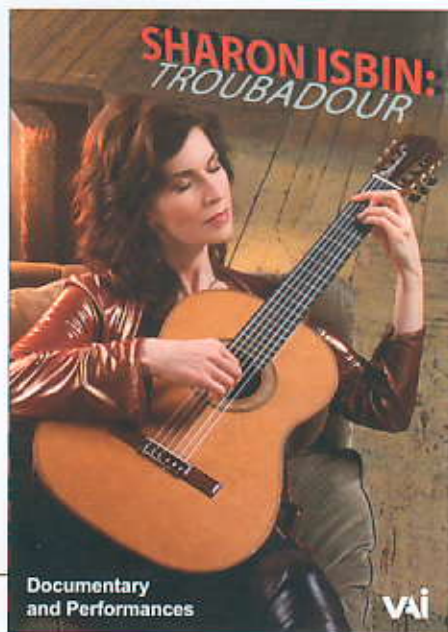


Sharon Isbin: 5 Classic Albums, a five-CD box set release on Warner Classics, includes music performed in the *Troubadour* film. The five albums are: *Journey to the Amazon* (1997 GRAMMY® nomination), *Dreams of a World* (2001 GRAMMY® Award), *Concerti by Rouse/Tan Dun* (2002 GRAMMY® Award), *Baroque Favorites*, and *Concerti by Rodrigo/Villa-Lobos/Ponce with the New York Philharmonic* (2005 Latin GRAMMY® Nomination). For more information, please visit sharonisbin.com/music.html

Sharon Isbin's Visionary Legacy (continued)

CD: *Of the many accomplishments in your career, is there one that you're most proud of?*

SI: It's all been exciting, but one of the things I'm most proud of is seeing students like you blossom from a talented and hard-working fifteen-year-old at the Aspen Music Festival to a brilliant performer and Juilliard graduate who is now my teaching assistant in Aspen, commissioning composers and curating your own series in New York City, speaking eloquently in the *Troubadour* documentary, and sharing the stage with the likes of Jessye Norman at Carnegie Hall and on the Letterman Show! How cool is that!!!



Sharon Isbin: Troubadour, a one-hour documentary produced by Susan Dangel, was presented by American Public Television and seen by millions on nearly 200 public television stations across the U.S. since November 2014. The March 2015 release on DVD and Blu-ray by Video Artists International features the film plus thirty minutes of extra performances. For more information, and to view the trailer, please visit sharonisbintroubadour.com/

I'm so proud when students come into their own and forge new paths in the guitar world. This year at Juilliard, for example, I have three remarkable students: Bokyoung Byun, Tengyue Zhang, and Alberta Khoury, and last year, Pierre Ferreyra-Mansilla (M.M. 2014). Check out their YouTube channel: youtube.com/JuilliardGuitar. *Troubadour* shines a light on teaching at Juilliard and the Aspen Festival as well.

CD: *You've left quite a mark as an educator, with alumni from Juilliard and Aspen carrying on successful musical careers throughout the world. Do you take a specific approach to working with your students, and what do you hope to offer them by the end of their studies with you?*

SI: I encourage students to refine their listening, to master rhythm, lyricism, legato, color, vibrato, phrasing, dynamics, nuance, expression, Baroque performance practice, and techniques of teaching, all with the goal of nurturing their unique voice and artistry. I encourage them to work with composers, to make transcriptions, and to play chamber music with each other and with non-guitarists as well. Juilliard offers many performance opportunities, including some high profile gigs at Lincoln Center. Another wonderful player, Cameron O'Connor (M.M. 2011), found himself onstage at Alice Tully Hall performing under the baton of Tan Dun his very first semester! Brazilian João Kouyoumdjian (M.M. 2010) created a summer guitar program in São Paulo for underprivileged kids that was so successful Juilliard modeled one of their own after his and invited him to participate as a teacher.

We also briefly discussed some of the challenges Isbin has faced over the years, which seem to have served as important motivating factors.

CD: *What are some of the greatest challenges you've faced? In *Troubadour*, you mention facing the uphill battles of a woman in the male-dominated guitar world and as a guitarist in the classical music world. Are there any specific examples of these challenges you'd wish to share?*

SI: One summer in Aspen, as a student of the great Oscar Ghiglia, I was one of only two girls among fifty guitarists! That outsized ratio made me work extra hard to eliminate any questions of gender. On the guitar front, at fifteen, I had to fight to enter a competition sponsored by the Minnesota Orchestra. I succeeded and was then fortunate to win it. There have been several times when I was an orchestra's first guitar soloist, and I'm the only guitar soloist to have recorded with the New York Philharmonic. [Author's note: the New York Philharmonic's website claims that the orchestra has recorded over 2,000 albums.] When I won a GRAMMY® in 2001, it had been twenty-eight years since a classical guitarist had last won the award (Julian Bream and John Williams in 1973 for *Together*), and I'm still the only female guitarist to have received a Grammy in classical.

For their part, Isbin's composer collaborators have noted both the freedom she has given them to consider a broad range of possibilities for the guitar, as well as the support needed to develop a non-guitar composer's capacity to write for the instrument. Christopher Rouse, who wrote the dramatic Spanish-style *Concert de Gaudi*, describes how Sharon Isbin worked with him regularly to overcome a steep learning curve:

"Every aspect of writing for the guitar was a challenge! Sharon sent me a cardboard fretboard that showed the pitches available on each string, and this was of enormous help! For the only time in my concerto-composing career, I needed to work closely with her in order to be certain that what I wrote would work, so we would get together every six weeks or so and Sharon would play through what I'd written, and I'd then make whatever changes were necessary. And she showed me a few "tricks" that were helpful when it came time to deal with the cadenza."

John Corigliano discussed his own experience working with Isbin, both in developing the idea of *Troubadours* and approaching the challenge of the guitar:

"Three things made me shy from writing for guitar. First, I knew nothing about writing for the instrument ... second, I like to write a big concerto with full orchestra, but with the guitar one must think in terms of chamber orchestra. And the last problem was that I did not want to write a "Spanish" concerto. Sharon spent more than a decade with no concerto, until she came up with the idea of writing a work based on the lute/guitar world of the troubadours. This completely solved my "Spanish guitar" problem and made it possible to think of a gentler orchestra, with double-reeds playing like ancient oboes and bassoons, and the memory of another time.

"Sharon is a perfectionist. I could write lyrical lines embellished with filigree ornamentation, knowing that she could—both technically and musically—understand what I was doing. She is a great artist."

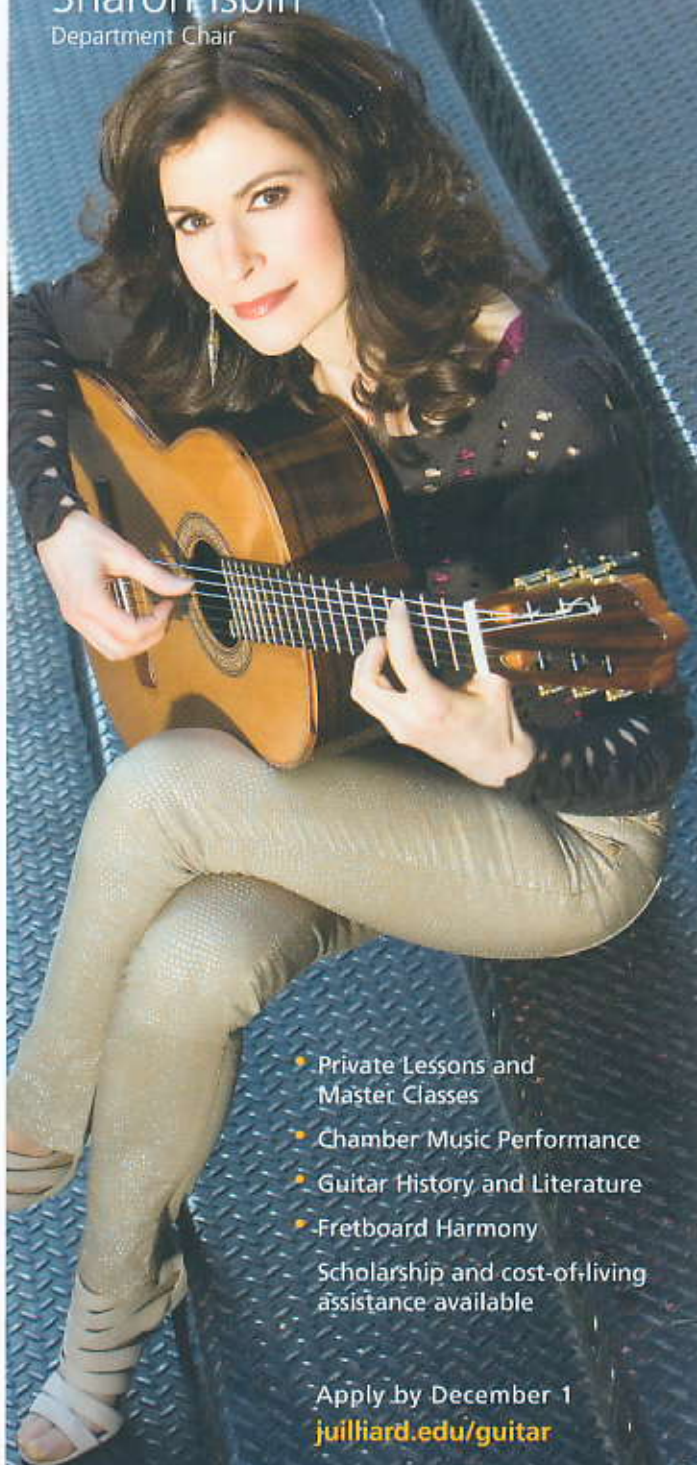
This approach, of developing works with composers—pitching ideas, working out the technical problems of the instrument, and even inspiring new creative possibilities in those solutions—is at the heart of Isbin's effectiveness in this realm. The documentary *Troubadour* offers some interesting insights into this, particularly in a scene with Tan Dun, as the composer uses his voice and body to convey his intentions, and Isbin recreates his "performance" with uncanny accuracy and passion.

There is yet one more scene from *Troubadour* that perhaps captures Sharon Isbin's artistic essence more than any other. And in a way, it is far removed from the glamour of a career filled with Grammy awards, prestigious teaching posts, and concerts in the world's great halls. She sits in the Piazza of Venice, Italy, playing the "Largo" from Vivaldi's famous *Concerto in D, RV 93*, unaccompanied, as though to herself. There is an intimacy, gracefulness, and humility in the performance that reveals an important truth behind Isbin's many and varied pursuits: that she is driven, ultimately, by the beauty of the music itself, and the fulfillment that comes from being able to share a piece of music at the highest level.

With much to admire in Isbin's musicianship, accomplishments, and contributions to the guitar's place in the classical music world, we as a community can also be inspired by her achievements to channel our own love for music and for the guitar, and to make our own impact.

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Sharon Isbin's Visionary Legacy (continued)

Solo and Chamber Works Written for Sharon Isbin: *Recorded by Sharon Isbin—see sharonisbin.com/music.html

- Laurindo Almeida: *Tremolo Melancolico* (guitar solo) – Brazilliance Music Publishing/Mel Bay
- Laurindo Almeida: *Brazilliance** (3 guitars) – Brazilliance Music Publishing
- David Balakrishnan: *Darkness Dreaming* (2 guitars, violin, chamber orchestra), 2004
- Leo Brouwer: *El Decameron Negro** (guitar solo), 1981 – Editions Musicales Transatlantiques
- Chris Brubeck: *Affinity: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, 2015 – Brubeck Music
- John Corigliano: *Troubadours* (Variations for Guitar and Chamber Orchestra),* 1993 – G. Schirmer
- Larry Coryell: *PSP #1** (3 guitars), 1985
- Larry Coryell: *PSP #2* (3 guitars), 1986
- Richard Danielpour: *Songs of Love and Longing* (mezzo soprano and guitar), 2014 – Lean Kat Music
- David Diamond: *Concert Piece* (guitar & string quartet), 1994
- John Duarte: *Appalachian Dreams** (guitar solo), 1996 – G. Schirmer
- John Duarte: *Joan Baez Suite** (guitar solo), 2002 – to be published
- Lukas Foss: *American Landscapes** (guitar & orchestra), 1989 – Carl Fisher
- Aaron Jay Kernis: *Double Concerto for Guitar, Violin and Orchestra,** 1996 – G. Schirmer
- Ami Maayani: *Concerto for Guitar,** 1976 – Boosey & Hawkes
- Bruce MacCombie: *Nightshade Rounds** (guitar solo), 1979 – European American
- Bruce MacCombie: *Nightshade Rounds for Guitar & Strings*, 1988 – European American
- Mark O'Connor: *Strings & Threads Suite** (violin & guitar), 2006 – Mark O'Connor Musik International
- Mark O'Connor: *Appalachia Waltz for Guitar & Violin,** 2009 – Mark O'Connor Musik International
- Ned Rorem: *Songs of Sadness* (baritone, guitar, clarinet, cello), 1994 – Boosey & Hawkes
- Christopher Rouse: *Concert de Gaudi,** 1999 – Boosey & Hawkes
- Paul Schoenfield: *Three Fantasy Pieces for Guitar and String Quartet*, 1985 – contact composer
- Joseph Schwantner: *From Afar ... A Fantasy for Guitar and Orchestra,** 1987 – Schott-Helicon

Gaudencio Thiago de Mello: *O Presidente** (guitar, soprano sax, percussion), 1997 – GauPublishing

Gaudencio Thiago de Mello: works arranged for Sharon Isbin

- *Varre-Vento** (guitar solo) – GauPublishing
- *A Hug for Pixingha** (guitar & percussion) (guitar, soprano sax, percussion) – GauPublishing
- *Cavaleiro sem Armadura** (guitar, soprano sax, percussion) – GauPublishing
- *Choro Alegre (A Hug for Tiberio)** (guitar & percussion) – GauPublishing

Howard Shore: from *The Departed*, 2006 – South Fifth Avenue Publishing

- *Beacon Hill** (2 guitars)
- *Madolyn** (2 guitars)
- *The Departed Tango* (2 guitars)
- *Boston Common** (4 guitars)

Howard Shore: *Billy's Theme** (guitar, strings, rhythm guitar), 2006 – South Fifth Avenue Publishing

Tan Dun: *7 Desires for Guitar* (guitar solo), 2002 – G. Schirmer

Tan Dun: *Yi 2: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra,** 1996 – G. Schirmer

Ivana Themmen: *Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, 1981 – Lyra Music Corp.

Joan Tower: *Snowdreams** (flute & guitar), 1983 – G. Schirmer

Joan Tower: *Clocks** (guitar solo), 1985 – G. Schirmer

Steve Vai: *Blossom Suite* (2 guitars), 2005



Colin Davin has performed at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, and on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. He plays an active role in the classical and contemporary music scenes in New York, working with dozens of composers, and curating and performing new music across the city. Among his collaborators are legendary soprano Jessye Norman, GRAMMY® Award-winning soprano Estelí Gomez, and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw.