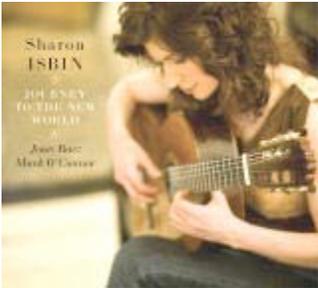


Guitar star Isbin teams with violinist O'Connor

Thursday, March 11, 2010

By **JOSEPH DALTON**, Special to the Times Union

Perhaps there's something about the humble guitar that brings people together. Take the case of Sharon Isbin.



Sharon Isbin. (J. Henry Fair)

Although widely regarded as the top classical guitar soloist of our time, she keeps teaming up with other artists, often far afield from the traditional realm of so-called concert music.

One of her most recent collaborations is with heavy-metal guitarist Steve Vai, better known for his work with Frank Zappa, David Lee Roth and Whitesnake. Isbin says the two will eventually record together, but for now, she's riding on the success of her disc "Journey to the New World," which was released a year ago and last month won Isbin her second Grammy Award.



Sharon Isbin, Joan Baez recording. (Paul Liberatore)

For much of "Journey to the New World," Isbin performs with violinist and composer Mark O'Connor, and the two will appear together on Sunday afternoon at The Egg. The concert will feature solo sets from each artist, and they will also perform two duets written by O'Connor -- a new arrangement of his hit "Appalachian Waltz" and "Strings and Threads," the suite that concludes Isbin's recent disc.

"He's a very sweet, wonderful and generous person, and it's a pleasure to call him a friend. We enjoy traveling together and have a very warm collaboration," says Isbin. "It's especially fun to do that last movement of 'Strings and Threads,' since it's different each time with Mark improvising while I do the chord chart."

Also on Isbin's recent disc and an expected part of Sunday's program is a tribute to Joan Baez, a lifelong hero of Isbin's. Almost 10 years ago, Isbin commissioned John Duarte, a British composer and guitarist who died in 2004, to write the "Joan Baez Suite." It includes such now-standard fair as "The House of the Rising Sun" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone."

More recently than that, Isbin worked with the real Joan Baez, not just her songbook. After giving a hearty blessing to the piece by Duarte, Baez agreed to sing a couple of additional songs on Isbin's disc "Journey to the New World."

"Our first rehearsal was extraordinary," recalls Isbin. "She came to my home in New York and asked me to play for her before we began. So I sat down about four feet from her, and when I was done, she had tears streaming down her face."



Sharon Isbin (J. Henry Fair)

Isbin's selections that afternoon included some Spanish pieces that Baez remembered from childhood, when her dad played recordings of Segovia. "It was a poignant meeting of the souls, since her music has inspired me for so many years," says Isbin.



Sharon Isbin (Thomas Mueller)

Last November, Isbin had a slightly more grandiose audience when she performed at the White House. It was actually more than just a one-evening, in-and-out concert. Isbin was one of four classical musicians who spent a full day in the building, giving classes for local students followed by a matinee concert. After that was done, they went back to their Washington hotels to dress up for the evening's formal concert in the East Room. (Apparently there are no dressing rooms for visiting artists in the presidential residence.)

Nevertheless, says Isbin, "We practically moved in, since we were also there the previous night to rehearse. It was very elaborate, with multiple bomb-sniffing dogs each time we were going in and out. I kept hoping the dog wouldn't drool on my guitar."

During the evening's concert, Isbin performed a few Latin-American selections and a duet with violinist Joshua Bell, which was their first collaboration. She also had a few moments with the President. But it wasn't their first encounter.

Isbin says they met in 2005 at a memorial for Chicago philanthropist Irving Harris, at which Isbin performed. Out on the sidewalk afterward, Isbin spotted Illinois' newest senator, went up to him and introduced herself. She recalls that Obama complimented her on the performance and said, "I wish you'd do something like that for me sometime."

After her performance at the White House, he paid her another compliment, "He told me that one of his daughters is interested in studying the guitar. So maybe I inspired someone to go in that direction."

Joseph Dalton is the author of "Artists & Activists: Making Culture in New York's Capital Region" and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.



Sharon Isbin (Stuart O'Shields)

At a glance

Sharon Isbin, guitar, and Mark O'Connor, violin

When: 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: The Egg, Empire State Plaza, Albany

Tickets: \$34.50. Call 473-1845.

Also: Videos of Isbin's performance at the White House are available at her Web site: <http://www.sharonisbin.com>