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# Sharon Isbin

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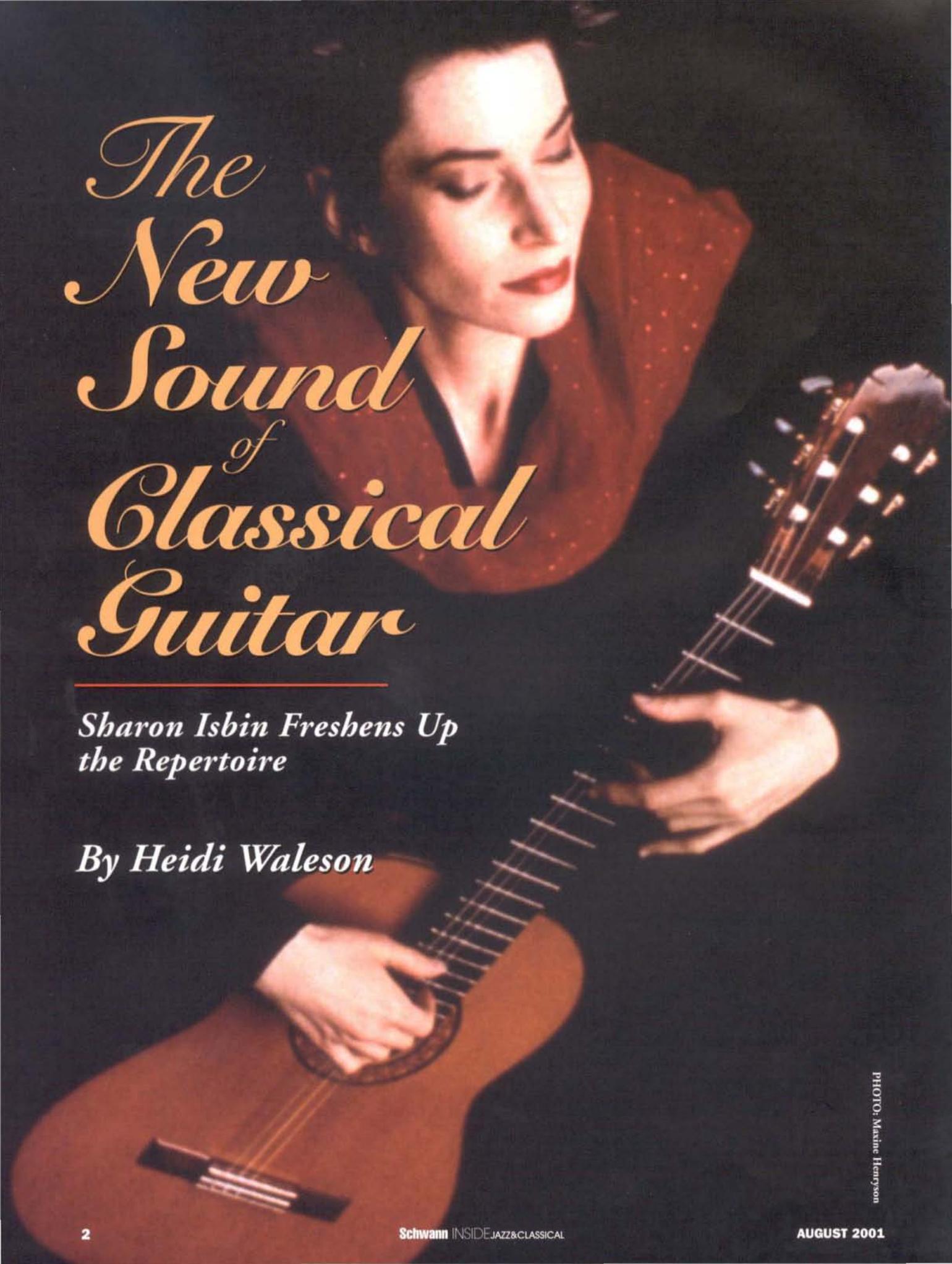
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New  
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*Sharon Isbin Freshens Up  
the Repertoire*

*By Heidi Waleson*

PHOTO: Maxine Henryson

*“I’m not a great fan of 19th-century guitar literature—  
I think a lot of it is substandard.”*

**S**haron Isbin didn’t really expect to win the Grammy Award this year. Nominated in the “Best Instrumental Soloist without Orchestra” category for *Dreams of a World*, a collection of folk-inspired pieces for solo guitar, Isbin says that she rehearsed the phrase “And the winner is—Murray Perahia!” over and over, so that it would sound natural when it inevitably occurred. When the name called turned out to be hers—making her the first classical guitarist to win a Grammy since 1973—Isbin was so blown away she didn’t even notice who presented her with the award. “I watched the video afterwards, and found out it was Charlotte Church,” she says.

*Dreams of a World* (Teldec 25736) is part of an eclectic discography that demonstrates Isbin’s unusually broad range as an instrumentalist. 1997’s *Journey to the Amazon* (Teldec 19899), for example, explores music from South America, with the participation of the Brazilian percussionist Thiago de Mello. On 1998’s *Wayfaring Stranger* (Erato 23419), Isbin collaborates with mezzo-soprano Susanne Mentzer. *Nightshade Rounds* (Virgin Classics 45024), a 1994 collection of 20th-century solo pieces, includes two works written for Isbin, and her most recent Teldec recording, this year’s *Sharon Isbin Plays Tan Dun/Rouse* (Teldec 81830), features two concertos she commissioned from two very different composers, Christopher Rouse and Tan Dun.

Isbin has found a great deal of freedom in what could have been a serious drawback: lack of concert repertoire for her instrument. “We don’t have much,” she says. “We have no Chopin, no Mozart. I’m not a great fan of the 19th-century guitar literature—I think a lot of it is substandard.” So she’s had to be creative, looking in unusual places. Take *Dreams of a World*.

“That grew out of a stack of music that I’d had sitting around for a long time,” says the guitarist, looking around the living room of her Upper West Side Manhattan apartment as though another pile of scores might materialize at any moment. (She hasn’t gotten around to decorating it in the 20 years or so that she’s lived there; she’s never home for long enough.) “I started looking through it, and realized it was all inspired by folk music.”

Folk music was one of Isbin’s earliest musical influences: Her parents were amateur folk dancers, and she grew up in Minneapolis with the voices of Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynolds in her ear. “I’ve come full circle,” she says.



## OPEN MIND, OPEN EARS

The disc’s program is wide-ranging. It includes music by several composers from Latin America and Spain, like Antonio Lauro (the “South American Gershwin”) and Francisco Tarrega. The British composer John Duarte wrote *Appalachian Dreams*, based on five folk songs of the Appalachian Mountains, for Isbin. There are also works by the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis and Isbin’s own arrangements of songs by the Israeli icon Naomi Shemer, including the hugely popular “Yerushala’im shel zahav” (Jerusalem of Gold). “It’s an instrumentalist’s fantasy of making a Joan Baez recording!” Isbin says. “It was fun to step into that troubadour role. And guitar has really figured in a strong way as the expression of different cultures. There’s a melancholy quality to a lot of this music, because often it tells the history of struggle.”

Isbin’s life with the guitar was international from the beginning. She took up the instrument in Italy at the age of nine; her father, a university professor, was on sabbatical there with the family. Guitar lessons had been arranged for Isbin’s older brother, but when it turned out that he was more interested in following Elvis than Segovia, Sharon took his place. And while she spent a lot of time playing those 19th-century pieces that she subsequently rejected, as well as Bach, and guitar classics by Britten and Henze, Isbin kept an open mind. At 14, she went to the Banff Festival to study with the Venezuelan guitarist Aliro Diaz, who turned her on to a wealth of Latin American music, especially dances, for guitar. “He used to play for us after class,” she says. “Hearing him play opened a door for me.”

Isbin has continued to delve enthusiastically into Latin American music throughout her career, forging relationships with such artists as Carlos Barbosa-Lima and Antonio Carlos Jobim. She formed a trio with Larry



PHOTO: Thomas Muehler

*“It was my mother’s idea,” Isbin recalls. “She said, ‘Your Bach playing is boring.’”*

Coryell and Laurindo Almeida. A trip to the Amazon—“I wanted to see monkeys in the rain forest”—found a musical voice in an association with Gaudencio Thiango de Mello, an Indian from the Maue tribe of the Amazon. “When he played his music for me, I recognized the whole world of beauty that I had experienced there,” Isbin says.

Even Isbin’s approach to classic repertory was done with a twist. During her senior year at Yale, she approached the harpsichord virtuoso Rosalyn Tureck for lessons in Bach. The result was a ten-year relationship and a whole reworking of that repertory and performance practice, as well as the first performance editions of the Bach lute suites for guitar. “It was my mother’s idea,” Isbin recalls. “She said, ‘Your Bach playing is boring.’” Isbin got more than she had bargained for from Tureck. “It was very challenging. I’d think I was there, then she’d want to go to the next level. We spent a year on one 20-minute lute

suite! She taught me so much about structure and embellishment. I would never be playing Bach otherwise.”

### CHALLENGES AND LEGACIES

Isbin has also eagerly embraced the composers of her own country and time. Indeed, one of the guitarist’s most enduring legacies is likely to be her commissioning. The total now stands at about 25 works, including nine concertos, several of which she has premiered in the last few years. Composers who have written for her include John Corigliano, Joseph Schwantner, Aaron Jay Kernis and Joan Tower. Most of them had no prior familiarity with the guitar, and the earliest ones had to be coaxed and persuaded. Yet Isbin says that non-guitarist composers have often done the best work, because they are not inhibited by a sense of what can and can’t work.



Sharon Isbin receives the 2001 Grammy Award for "Best Instrumental Soloist Performance (without orchestra)" for *Dreams of a World*.

*“Five different orchestras programmed the Rouse in its first year, and there were several this season. I think it will have a life: It has already exceeded expectations.”*

As the composers find their wings with the guitar, Isbin has had to innovate as well. “I’ve had to erase the word ‘impossible’ from my vocabulary,” she says. “It ranged from things like figuring out how to put suction cups on my guitar so that I could walk around while playing a run in John Corigliano’s *Troubadours*—a run that I’d be grateful to be able to play sitting down! Tan Dun wanted me to sound like a pipa player in his concerto. I had to find a way to sustain a long tremolo that’s easy for pipa players because they have a plectrum.”

That’s not to say that Isbin leaves composers entirely to their own devices. “It would be dangerous if I stepped back and waited for [a] package to arrive,” she says. “I give them tapes and scores. I’ve created a cardboard replica of the neck of the instrument, which results in the exact spacing of fingers, so they can try out chords in the privacy of their own homes, and see what works, and what doesn’t. I work with them; I have to be sure it sounds guitaristic, and that it’s not uncomfortable to play.” The result, she said, usually needs only very minor changes—in voicing, for example, or “a tempo that might work on piano but not for me. And it has to sound natural to the instrument.”

Isbin picks her composers carefully with that in mind. “I have to hear something that appeals to me. I also have to hear them writing for guitar. With Chris Rouse it didn’t dawn on me that he could write for guitar until I heard his flute concerto, which was very lyrical, much less bombastic than a lot of his other orchestral works.” The Rouse concerto, *Concert de Gaudi*, a Spanish-tinged response to that architect’s surreal creations, is indeed more playful and transparent than Rouse’s usual idiom.

The next trick, of course, is getting orchestras to program the new piece, rather than the ubiquitous Rodrigo *Concierto de Aranjuez*. While the Rodrigo is still her most requested concerto, and Isbin loves it—“It’s converted a lot of people to the idea of guitar with orchestra”—she insists that new music is not that hard a



Isbin in Space: Astronaut/guitarist Chris Hadfield presented Isbin’s *American Landscapes* album and a guitar to Russian cosmonauts when the space shuttle *Atlantis* docked with *MIR* in November 1995.

sell. “I commit to it. I’ve played *Troubadours* 50 times in eight years. Five different orchestras programmed the Rouse in its first year, and there were several this season. I think it will have a life: It has already exceeded expectations.” Isbin has some other composers lined up as well. William Bolcom has promised to write a piece for her, and she wants one from John

Adams. However, she says she’s not planning to add too many more. “I have my hands full now. I could be asked to do 10 different concertos!”

One of Isbin’s techniques is to offer the Rodrigo and a new piece for the same concert. The 20-minute Rodrigo, when paired with a new piece such as the Schwantner, creates a concerto portion of the program amounting to the same 40 minutes that a violin concerto would take. Thus the traditionalists and the novelty seekers are both satisfied. The Corigliano has caught on, she says, because it’s an appealing work, the composer is well known, and “it’s not difficult to put together in one or two rehearsals.”

While every artist hopes that the pieces he or she commissions will be good and have a long life, Isbin feels that as a guitarist, the stakes are particularly high for her. “There’s no chance for error,” she says. “If a violinist screws up a concerto, no one is judging the instrument. In a guitar concerto, they are. It’s up to me to be sure that everything is right.”

## LOUD AND CLEAR

Isbin has done a great deal to advance the concept of guitar as a concerto instrument, and today, about half of her engagements are with orchestra. One challenge to its acceptance is the fact that the guitar requires amplification if it is to be heard with orchestra. Isbin got creative about that too: In order to play *Troubadours*, which required her to move around, she had a wireless amplification system created for her. It turned out to be so good that she uses it all the time. She doesn’t need to rely on the technicians



*"I've been doing transcendental meditation since I was 17, and that really increases my mental resonance and gives me the ability to click into that character."*

and the system in the hall, and can control her own sound. Isbin ships the system, which weighs about 100 pounds, ahead of her by FedEx, and says that it has had a dramatic effect on the number of concerto dates she is offered. She's now played with more than 100 orchestras in the United States alone.

"Word gets around that it works," she says. "The sound is natural, and it gives me a much larger dynamic range. It's like playing in my living room." Isbin uses the system for solo recitals as well—and says that because the system is practically invisible, blending into the stage setting, people who don't know it's there have no idea. "There have been concert presenters who were adamant that I not use it. They listen, and their mouths are agape! Then I have them listen to me play when it is turned off, and there's no question in their minds which is better." For Isbin, the issue is only to "represent the instrument in the best possible way."

Switching between a South American recital program,

in which she has to cope with Thiago de Mello's improvising, and a straight-ahead evening of Bach or a new concerto hasn't posed difficulties for Isbin. "It's like being an actor," she says. "I change characters, but I only choose characters I can identify with. I've been doing transcendental meditation since I was 17, and that really increases my mental resonance and gives me the ability to click into that character."

For the moment, Isbin doesn't have any big new project underway. "It's fun to step back and enjoy all the work of the last few years," she says. "Every time you do a world premiere, it's so stressful. You don't get the score until much later than you want it, and everything else has to fall by the wayside. Then, at that first rehearsal, sounds emerge that were only on paper before. But now, I'm just reveling in developing the music I have already created." Though probably not for long. "In six months, I'll be moving into something new again." ■