

Sharon Isbin: *Karen LeFrak - Romantico*

Having dazzled a year ago on her *Live in Aspen* release with sarod master Amjad Ali Khan, renowned guitarist Sharon Isbin turns her attention to the musical heritage of Miami with *Romántico*. Partnering with the Enrico Lopez-Yañez-conducted Orchestra of St. Luke's, Isbin presents the world premiere recording of Karen LeFrak's *Miami Concerto for Guitar & Orchestra* and rounds it out with two short chamber works by the composer, *Habanera Nights* and *Urban Tango* (also world premiere recordings). As someone who's premiered nearly 100 works written for her and amassed a catalogue of over forty albums, Isbin's reputation precedes her, and her playing on this compact release doesn't disappoint, even if its tidy twenty-six-minute running time leaves you wanting more.

Shifting gears is nothing new to Isbin, who's played alongside everyone from Sting and the Pacifica Quartet to fellow guitarists Stanley Jordan and Romero Lubambo. The career of LeFrak, a native New Yorker, is no less distinguished. She's created over 300 works, issued seventeen studio albums, and seen her music presented on concert hall stages across the globe; she's also a celebrated children's book author. She merged the two when she wrote a score for her fourth book, *Sleepover at the Museum*, and the multimedia concert piece for children she created and that was premiered by the Miami Symphony Orchestra in 2020 has since been performed nearly twenty times by an array of orchestras.

For the three-part *Miami Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, LeFrak channeled her creative energies into a loving tribute to her second home. While there are contrasts of moods between the movements (as well as different dance rhythms), the work collectively conveys her affection for what she calls an “ebullient, colourful, and lively city.” Animated by the guaguancó, a subgenre of the Cuban rumba, the opening movement “Bailamos” is rendered all the more exquisite by Isbin's presence. Strings, horn, and oboe gently ease the music into being with an eloquent intro until the piece abruptly jumps to life with Isbin's entrance and the dance rhythm's infectious drive. As always her playing is technically sound, but it's matched by the artistry of her phrasing and the authority of her attack. Her back-and-forth with the orchestra captivates, and the performances by both soloist and ensemble are vibrant and inspired. With one's attention suitably engaged, the tango-inspired central movement, “Romántico,” seduces for its nostalgic warmth and beauty. In blending cantabile expressions by Isbin (plus a delicious cadenza) with swoon-inducing flourishes by the orchestra, the performance proves irresistible, never more so than when it swells radiantly during its closing section. High energy's reinstated with the concluding “Festivo” and its bembé-powered pulse. Buoyed by claves, congas, bongos, and the orchestra, Isbin breezily glides across their rousing base with virtuoso finger work and flurries.

The orchestra and Lopez-Yañez withdraw for the chamber works, which partner Isbin with smaller groupings: on *Habanera Nights*, she's joined by cellist Carter Brey, pianist Peggy Kampmeier, bongo artist Javier Diaz, guiro player Rolando Morales-Matos, and two other percussionists; *Urban Tango* augments the guitarist with, again, Kampmeier, Diaz, and Morales-Matos, the latter this time on shaker. Titled with the Cuban Habanera rhythm in mind, the evocative *Habanera Nights* takes little time at all to establish a sultry atmosphere when Isbin, Brey, and Kampmeier emote against a gently swinging backdrop. At set's end, LeFrak revisits the tango on *Urban Tango*, with guitar and piano envisioned by the composer as dance partners engaging in the soulful and sensual moves of the dance form. As stated, *Romántico* is more mini-album than full-length, yet there's no denying the beauty of its contents. Think of it as a succinct illustration of Isbin's artistry and demonstration of her ability to meet any and every stylistic challenge with ease.