

## Sharon Isbin: A Small Orchestra on Gossamer Wings

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Sharon Isbin photographed by J. Henry Fair

Indeed, Miss Isbin exploits this characteristic to its fullest in such a seductive manner that she makes this aspect of her playing a truly alluring aspect of her own virtuosity, on this particular album as well as on her other discs, which is even more challenging as we shall soon as we go a little more in depth into the recording of Ms. LeFrak's works.

### **Exhilarating, extrovert and virtuosic**

*Romántico* features a world premiere recording of Ms. LeFrak's seductive *Miami Concerto for Guitar & Orchestra*. There is every indication that the composer had her heart set on making this record with Miss Isbin. The composer has a deep understanding of the South American – Latin and Brazilian – music and selected her performers with punctilious care. It isn't surprising that Miss Isbin would be a first choice.

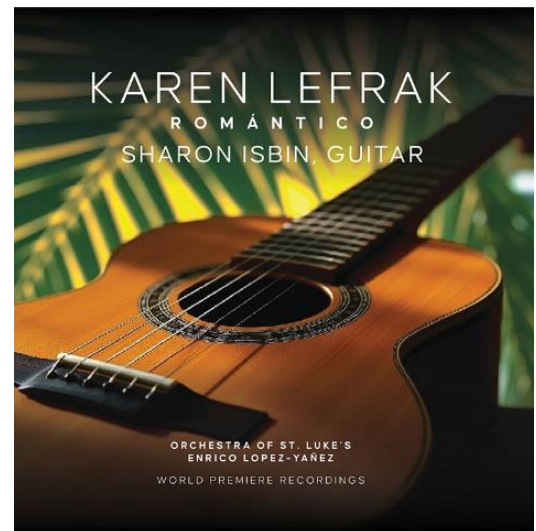
Miss Isbin, in turn returns the favor. Her playing throughout the concerto is exhilarating, extroverted and virtuosic as it should be. She is, after all, immersed in the realm of the Habanera and the Tango – music and dance forms that came to South America via the erstwhile colonizers from Europe. A deeper dive into the origins of the music lead unequivocally to the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic influences from the African continent.

The guitarist is joined, here, by the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Enrico Lopez-Yañez. Ms. LeFrak's *Miami Concerto for Guitar & Orchestra* pays homage to oceanic musical heritage of Miami with influences from Africa, Europe

The guitar's ancestors include the gittern, the vihuela, the four-course Renaissance guitar, and of course the baroque guitar, all of which contributed to the development of the modern six-string instrument. Few people in our day have mastered it with such alacrity, with such sage nobility and with such openness to the world of music around us as **Sharon Isbin**.

I admit to stealing the metaphor of the "small orchestra" from none other from Segovia. As a matter of fact, how ironic that one should have found it while listening to Miss Isbin's recording of Karen LeFrak's new works on the album entitled *Romántico* (KL2 Records). Ironic because it is one that Miss Isbin undertook with the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Enrico Lopez-Yañez.

Segovia's stunning metaphor for the guitar also holds equally true of Miss Isbin performer and his characterization of her musicianship would be spot on for his actual words are "The guitar is as small orchestra. It is polyphonic. Every string is a distinct color, a different voice."



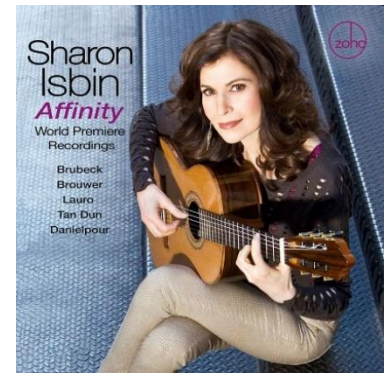
and Latin America. "Bailamos," the first movement of the concerto draws on the guaguancó, a dialect of the Cuban rumba, followed by a tango-inspired "Romántico," and concludes with an energetic "Festivo" in the rhythm of bembé.

The chamber works *Habanera Nights* and *Urban Tango* feature Miss Isbin with Latin percussionists led by Javier Diaz, pianist Peggy Kampmeier, and New York Philharmonic principal cellist Carter Brey. Throughout the concerto and the chamber works Miss Isbin shows immaculate poise and thoughtfulness. She cultivates a beautiful, poetic tone with an orchestral touch offering a unique palette of color amid riveting, charges interpretation of Ms. LeFrak's music.

Miss Isbin has delicate phrasing, a colorful touch and well thought-through ideas. Her performance is often a white-hot volcano of intense expression; it presents formidable challenges, all of which are surmounted with almost insolent virtuosity, the guitarist's focus resolutely serving the score, not the mechanisms supporting it. Miss Isbin plays with a particularly rewarding sense of rhythm, high sprung, light and incisive and entirely secure, which pays its way throughout all the works.

But hearing her navigate through the massive cadenzas – de rigueur in these works – as if they and their beckoning grandeur were the most natural thing in the world leaves no doubt that this is an artist of the most elite order, to be watched intently, listened to deeply and reckoned with for an exceptionally long time to come. These are qualities of a guitar playing musician who is cast in the same mold as Segovia and the rest of the renowned artists of the instrument.

### Luminous tone, natural grace and authority



Sharon Isbin photographed by J. Henry Fair

It is hard to put into word why this recording is so special. Perhaps the principal reason is that one of the finest guitarists has committed to disc, great works that she appears to have ostensibly lived with honing and polishing their subtle romanticism for a considerable length of time. Each movement and chamber work reveals her thoughtful artistry, exemplified by this slim volume. The five varied, but emotionally and thematically interrelated pieces have been played with her hallmark luminous tone, natural grace and authority.

From this exquisite recording of Ms. LeFrak to works by Leo Brouwer, Tan Dun, and Richard Danielpour, on which

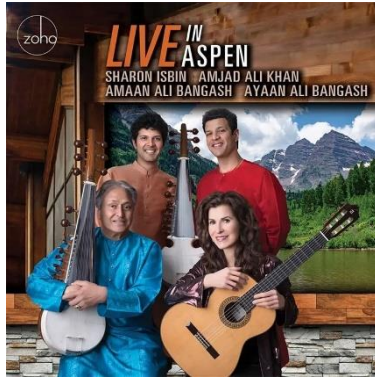
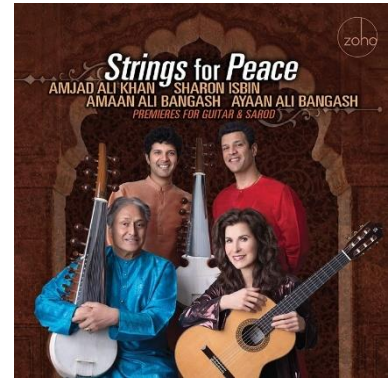
the web of charm has been spun by Isabel Leonard's vocals to a waltz by Antonio Lauro in duet with guitarist Colin Davin – and even a poetic spirit of love by Chris Brubeck which became the title of the recording, *Affinity* (Zoho Music, 2020) – this American guitarist proves herself to be one of the most versatile musicians playing on stage and in the studio today.

This story is even more telling – and enduringly epic – because it catches something more of Miss Isbin's genius in an incredibly unique way. Anyone who has listened to the range of her recorded performances, on her next two albums – *Strings for Peace* (Zoho Music, 2020) and *Live In Aspen* (Zoho Music, 2024) – will discover what it means for Miss Isbin to have a sense of daring and supreme confidence in her innate sense of sublime taste.

The former recording is made up of four North Indian Ragas, once again, all world premieres. Miss Isbin invites the grand sarod master Ustad Amjad Ali Khan on the apogee of the album, "Raga Pilu" alternatively entitled "Romancing

Earth". His son Amaan Ali Bangash appears on "Raga Behag" or "By the Moon" while the performance of the other two ragas, "Raga Mishra Bhairav" or "Love Avalanche" and on "Raga Yaman" or "Sacred Evening" are shared with the other son of the maestro, Ayaan Ali Bangash. The renowned tabla player, Amit Kavthekar, appears on all four ragas.

We are speaking here of Miss Isbin having collaborated with musicians from the upper echelons of Hindustani music. But when it comes to a guitar being heard along with a sarod the first test is a mechanical one. There are obvious differences between the classical guitar and the sarod that have to do with the fact that the instruments differ in pitch, and the dynamic and dramatic variance in their tonal and color palettes. And both instruments are plucked. This means that it isn't only the engineer who must have enormous ears.



### Orchestral Gymnasium of the Guitar

The encounters between Miss Isbin and the Ustads of the sarod is quite breathtaking. And it is also here – on their studio and live recordings – that the extent of the technical mastery of each on their respective instruments is superbly demonstrated. The playing by the Ustads provides what in orchestral terms would be a shadowy kind of ground bass simply because the tonal palette of the sarod makes this possible. And it is this effect that affords the guitarist an empty canvas on which to paint her masterpiece.

It is here that Miss Isbin exploits her guitar's huge vocabulary of sounds and effects combinable to make it sound as big as an ensemble. The evening ragas – Behag's emotive aspects are daunting as it is associated with times between 9 o'clock pm and midnight, Yaman is more crepuscular, its emotive aspects being associated with times between 6 and 9 o'clock pm, while Mishra Pilu is usually associated with between the afternoon and early evening.

On both *Strings for Peace* and *Live in Aspen*, Miss Isbin's use of her wonderful instrument is truly eloquent and masterful. Her playing ranges from harmonics and pizzicato to technique exotica and even enters into polyphonic and polyrhythmic dialogues with the tabla player Pandit Amit Kavthekar.

This spectacular array of playing is also evident on *Affinity* where the various composers collaborate closely with Miss Isbin on each of their pieces. It's complex for the composers to write not only for the instrument, but also for Miss Isbin. But neither of the parties are fazed. Miss Isbin is utterly amazing in this respect, as she has managed through inspiration and sheer persistence to create from the composers a whole raft of adventurous works, almost independent of the 'Segovia tradition,' but well within the elastic classical continuum.

### Instrument as Orchestra – Miss Isbin's Evolving Palimpsest

While this manipulation of the instrument is available to all masters of it, the players don't strike pure gold as often as Miss Isbin does. Does she 'get this' from Heitor Villa-Lobos? One is willing to hazard a guess as it was the Brazilian composer who first started to treat the guitar as something bigger than it was supposed to be – and he was phenomenally successful as a composer to strike gold with regard to visualizing and scoring for the instrument as a small orchestra.

For her part, Miss Isbin dwells constantly in that realm of possibility, continuing to extend the range and scope of the instrument with delicate albeit nervy fingers on gossamer strings. The sensuously liquid and always beckoning performance on LeFrak's masterful works on *Romántico* are a cut above almost anything a guitarist has brought to life – this year at any rate.

As with her Bach – as spectacular and as mathematically and emotively as Bach intended his music to be – so also is her foray into Hindustani music with *Strings for Peace* and contemporary classical music, as in *Affinity*. Thus, having carved out a space for herself, non pareil, in the realm where composers have created a legacy for her to explore, she comes across with flying colors. One has only to dive deeply into her work on *Affinity* and into her Latin-American repertory.

The lyrical – often bittersweet – expressiveness that is intended by both the composers and the culture in which their music was written has enabled Miss Isbin to re-create wonderful sound worlds so big that in doing so she has embraced the richness that her instrument afforded her and continues to constantly work at recreating her musical palimpsest as if to say: "I hereby wish that my guitar should not simply *respond* to a full orchestra, but to *become the full orchestra itself*."