

SHARON ISBIN

As head of the guitar department at Juilliard, Sharon Isbin is the first ever guitar professor to have an official post in that august establishment. She follows, in somewhat grander style, a tradition begun more than one hundred years earlier, when Giulia Pelzer (born in 1837, sister of the more celebrated Madame Sydney Pratten) became professor of guitar at London's Guildhall School of Music.

She is an extremely able solo performer who delights to play in various mixed ensembles (her frequent collaborations with the Brazilians Carlos Barbosa-Lima and Gaudencio Thiago de Mello are outstanding), in addition to which she is a teacher of formidable powers. Sharon Isbin has also been a director of the guitar department of the Tureck-Bath Institute, and has taught at Yale University, the Manhattan School of Music, Mannes College of Music and the Aspen Music Festival. She has recorded a wide range of music, and her list of CDs is highly impressive. Its importance may be judged by the inclusion of many substantial contemporary works, brought into existence through her enthusiasm for American music and her ambition to expand the repertory.

One important aspect of her development as a musician was her association with Rosalyn Tureck, the pianist and harpsichordist who once played Bach on the Moog synthesiser in order to demonstrate the universality of his keyboard techniques. But fingerboard techniques are different, and I asked Sharon Isbin if she saw anything at all incongruous in a keyboard player editing a work such as the Suite in E minor for guitar.



Photo by Michael Lavine

Sharon Isbin: There is nothing incongruous about working with a keyboard player in editing the Bach Suites for guitar, provided one's goal is not to imitate another instrument but rather to achieve a deeper understanding of the music. When Rosalyn Tureck agreed to edit the lute suites with me, I realized my fortune in being able to learn from her lifetime devotion to studying and performing Bach's music. It is that depth and clarity we bring to the music - the years of analytic thought, hard work and experience.

I try to explore the guitar's potential as a distinct, unique instrument. Though it may bear similarities to other instruments, it is certainly not a harpsichord or a lute or a violin. The sustaining quality of a bass note on the guitar, for example, is quite different from that of the above instruments. Therefore, one has to consider each individual case about whether to stop the ringing if there is a rest, or to allow the note to sustain (such as in the opening of the Prelude of Suite BWV997 or the Prelude of the Prelude, Fugue and Allegro).

One advantage, I might add, to working with a non-guitarist is that I was not influenced by preconceived notions of what was possible technically or musically, and what was not. In our work, so many ideas were explored and achieved that the realm of 'possibility' expanded considerably.

We hear a lot about authenticity nowadays. How far does this passion for authenticity work against musical communication? Why can't we enjoy Bach on our own terms?

First of all, there is no such thing as an 'authentic' performance of Bach, because the man is dead and we have no recordings. We have only educated guesswork, based upon treatises, score markings and other sources of historical information. That material, combined with musical sensitivity and understanding, with luck creates a synthesis that may come very close to something Bach might have envisioned. To deliberately ignore, however, the knowledge that is available about performance practices of the time, because these practices are not in accordance with 20th-century

attitudes, is bound to do an injustice to the music. If I go to see a performance of Shakespeare, and the actors haven't a clue as to the meaning and pronunciation of 16th-century English, I would be appalled. Worse yet, if they chose to deliver the text in colloquial 20th-century style and vocabulary because of their lack of skill and understanding, I would feel cheated of the writer's great art (it's almost as much fun as hearing Schubert Lieder sung in English!).

If, however, a fine jazz musician takes a theme from Bach, improvises, changes the rhythm and structure and creates something entirely new, that is another story. This new creation does not then purport to be Bach on its own terms, but another medium, another art form. Transmutations of this sort vary in their degrees of success. The best ones spark off challenging creativity and inner continuity. Back to theatre, if a director or playwright takes a Shakespearian theme and successfully transforms it into an avant-garde surrealist production, it would succeed (if it's good) as an avant-garde surrealist production, not as an attempt to faithfully reproduce Shakespeare. Non-interest in historical perspective, its structural and spiritual components, is a far cry from creatively veering into totally different mediums.

Many early music people believe that it is misguided to want to play Bach on the piano. By the same token, they would argue against playing baroque music on a modern guitar. But nearly all guitarists do. Is any defence needed?

Bach is one of the few composers from the 18th century onward whose music is not based upon individual instrument sonority but upon structure. That is one reason why Bach works on the Moog synthesiser and Chopin does not. Since Bach himself often transcribed from one instrument to another, and sometimes did not even designate specific instruments, there is a clear precedent for transcription. Much of what is 'appropriate' is determined by context. Can you imagine going to a clavichord recital at the Barbican?

Leo Brouwer, a towering figure in contemporary guitar composition, wrote the Tres baladas ('El Decameron Negro') for you. Did you ask him for them? What was the story?

I received the score of Brouwer's *Tres baladas* in the mail one day with no advance warning. You can imagine my delight. I think these are some of his finest pieces and I've been performing them everywhere. They are based on old erotic love stories from

Africa, and volumes of these charming vignettes were collected in the 19th century by the German anthropologist Leon Frobenius. I love the colorful programmatic nature of the music, which also makes considerable use of Afro-Cuban rhythmic elements. I've always had an affinity for Brouwer's music, and looking back I can think of few recital programs in which I did not play at least one of his works.

Segovia is supposed to have changed a piece according to 'the needs of the moment'. Is this improvisatory element ever present in your own playing?

I have been performing extensively with my trio Guitarjam, which features myself, Larry Coryell and Laurindo Almeida. In working with these outstanding musicians, I've come to appreciate even more the great skill and control inherent in spontaneity and improvisation. Their art is much like composing on the spot, a tradition dating back to earliest forms of music. Playing precomposed music, we classical players don't have quite the same liberties, but it is a joy to participate in styles and venues which do permit that kind of creative expansiveness.

Why is there still a great preponderance of male professional guitarists over female?

When you consider that it takes a good 20 years to become proficient on an instrument, it is not surprising that it takes time for new generations of guitarists to emerge, including guitarists who are women. In another 20 years, it is likely that men and women in more equal numbers will be professional guitarists. It is interesting to note that in France, many more women than men attend guitar masterclasses. One reason may be the everlasting and powerful musical heritage left by Ida Presti, who continues to be a strong role model.

I think we are all agreed that the guitar needs to be accepted more into the general world of music. Is it easier in America than in Britain for a guitarist such as yourself to achieve this level of acceptance?

One of my goals in presenting the guitar on such a grand scale in the two festivals I recently directed, Guitarsteam '85 in Carnegie Hall, and Guitarfest in St Paul's new Ordway Music Theatre, was to bring together many kinds of performers and audiences. During the seven concerts of the Carnegie Festival I featured over 40 performers and an orchestra. Musical styles included classical, jazz, Brazilian, African, flamenco, Middle Eastern Sephardic, Elizabethan and folk music. The chamber music combinations included flute, violin, string quartet, voice and percussion, all

with guitar or guitar-related instruments (such as the 3rd-century Persian oud). I watched with great joy as the punkers with green hair who came to hear jazz guitarist Stanley Jordan sat next to Bill Kanengiser's three-piece-suited Long Island relatives for an evening of half classical/half jazz, a new experience for most in the sold-out recital hall that night. The week was truly a celebration - of the guitar, of all music, of humanity.

The next time I met Sharon Isbin, she was on her way to Holland to do a tour that included a recital at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam. She had just made a recording of Spanish and Latin American music for Virgin Classics, who also produced successful records of Bach's music. Titled 'Road to the sun — Estrada do Sol, Latin Romances' (VC 79 11 28), the CD included Leo Brouwer's El Decameron Negro, a work that had been written for her in 1981. She was delighted to be able to record it, along with Rodrigo's impressionistic Invocación y Danza, in a program of more traditional Latin music. Contemporary music, she said, was not something to be afraid of. Julian Bream had shown the way in that respect, and Sharon Isbin paid due tribute to his efforts. Virgin Classics were taking another step in the same direction.

Virgin had high artistic standards, said Sharon, and moreover were wonderful to work with. Of her recording of Bach's four lute suites in Rosalyn Tureck's edition, she said: 'Other companies might have shied away from something they might have considered too sophisticated for the mainstream. But Bach has such an international appeal that he transcends all those kinds of boundaries.' Public response had been good. The record had excellent reviews in the New York Times, CD Review, Billboard, American Record Guide, many newspapers, and all the guitar magazines. In Germany it sold out in the first month. It was chosen in Gramophone as a Critics' Choice Recording of the Year and in CD Review as an Editors' Choice Best Recording of 1989.

'It seems to be of interest to non-guitarists as well as guitarists, and I'm pleased by that, because the more we can take the guitar out of its own little world and bring it to others, the more they will appreciate it and realize that there is guitar music that's serious and meaningful, and that isn't stereotyped in one way or another, with the usual associations for guitar.'

The collaboration with Rosalyn Tureck had undoubtedly brought Bach's guitar music to the attention of a

wider musical listening field. 'It's funny, you know, because the kind of collaboration we're doing strikes non-guitarists as so perfectly natural. Occasionally you encounter approaches to guitar from someone who's steeped in the 19th-century tradition, with 19th-century fingering and ornamentation, and who has difficulty freeing themselves from that anachronistic mould. But most welcome the guitar as a modern, 20th-century instrument with tremendous capabilities of expression — dynamically, rhythmically, lyrically and sonically. My whole purpose in presenting this music was to draw on the guitar's vast resources and to make Bach's music really flourish. One can't merely imitate another instrument, such as the lute, violin, harpsichord or piano. Once you think in terms of imitation you lock your mind into a frame of reference that denies the grand panorama of what is really there and all that is available to you.

'It's so important to recognize the instrument's individual and unique qualities. For example, the overlapping string sound that you can have naturally on a six-stringed instrument can translate into a more micro-cosmic sensibility as well. When you do trills on the harpsichord, you've got that undamped resonance. The guitar has that too, but the capability of damping as well. We can control that to an even greater degree, so that when you finish a trill or mordent, you stop the vibration of the penultimate note and you don't have that non-harmonic ringing. That beautiful blend gives an opportunity in the course of the embellishment for great musical expression.

'But if I wanted to copy the harpsichord, for example, then I wouldn't damp the string at the end, and we'd be left with a situation that was musically undesirable in most circumstances. And if I wanted to copy the lute, then I would do strictly left-hand trills, and then I'd be denying the greater volume and lyrical possibilities of the modern guitar. If I were trying to imitate the violin, then I'd have to use a bow.'

The manner of the expression, fingering as well as embellishment, has to come from the musical structure. 'Bach continually wrote for one instrument and then set the result for another. In this manner, he transcribed hundreds of his own works. He sometimes did not even specify instrumentation. With regard to the lute suites, we only know with any certainty that one was written for the lute, and even that takes transcribing in order to be done on the lute. Bach arranged BWV1006a from his E major Violin Partita, and BWV995 from his G minor Cello Suite. BWV996

may have been written for the *Lautenwerk*. But they all have textures that relate very much to the lute. 'It would be absurd in this day and age to think of a keyboard player playing Bach's music without embellishment, but that's what had been done for so long on the guitar and on bowed instruments as well. Yet if you go to the manuscripts of something like BWV996, it's filled with embellishment: the Prelude and the Courante, the Sarabande - and there's a lot that can be gleaned from that. In that suite, much of the embellishment I play comes from original manuscripts. I think too that when people are working with the editions of BWV996 and 997 which Tureck and I have published with Schirmer, they should take them as models, but ones which can be altered so long as the music's structural integrity is preserved. As performance editions, they are the first of their kind with extraordinary attention devoted to phrasing, embellishment, dynamics, articulation and fingering.'

Bach himself, in transcribing from one instrument to another, would make changes that were necessary. Structure had to be the guide. His own transcriptions were never mere imitations; he expected each instrument, in Sharon's phrase, 'to flower and flourish with its own integrity.'

Unlike many modern exponents of Bach on the guitar, Sharon Isbin seemed content with six strings, though clearly extra basses would open up many new possibilities. But she is happy with her Tom Humphrey 'Millennium' guitar, with its steeper neck angle (designed to create a greater impact on the soundboard, much like a harp). 'I'd been playing one of his other instruments for six years before I bought this one, and I'm really pleased with how it sounds. But there are many guitar makers, and it's a very personal thing. You have to choose what you sound good on.'

Her reasons for not having extra strings were practical more than anything else. She needs six strings for Spanish, classical and contemporary music; more than six, and resonance starts to interfere with the sound. 'A large number of strings may sound beautiful in some baroque music, but it's not essential musically. And I don't want to travel with three guitars. It's hard enough travelling with one.'

Sharon Isbin commissions many new works. In November 1989 she performed a new concerto, the fifth to be written for her. By Lukas Foss, it is based on American folk themes and is called *American Land-*

scapes. 'The last movement is Bluegrass, with a Fossian twist, and the second movement is in variation form based on a white spiritual called "Wayfaring Stranger". The first movement uses a couple of old colonial period American folk tunes, which Foss fragments and develops contrapuntally. It's an unusual and clever kind of approach. Each movement is very different, but they're all held together by that common strand of celebrating an American cultural heritage, which really hasn't been done before in the context of a guitar concerto.'

And, of course, the guitar plays an important part in that heritage. A fairly recent study, said Sharon Isbin, discovered that roughly half of American households have a musical instrument, with the guitar the most popular, followed by the piano. 'You're talking about over 15 million amateur and professional guitar players in the United States. That's a tremendous number. With all the bellyaching that goes on these days about older audiences dying off and presenters wondering where the young people are to replenish them — because many are so blasted out on rock music and rap — I really feel that it's important to cultivate the familiarity of the guitar in a way that can be attractive to young people and draw them into classical music.' She has used this philosophy in a number of her own projects, including her five-part series 'Guitarjam' for American Public Radio, a big national radio network, in 1989. Each of the one-hour shows, which she conceived, wrote, directed and played in, had its own theme, but was nevertheless united with the others.

'For example, the first one had to do with Brazilian music, and was called "Brazilian Journey". On that program Carlos Barbosa-Lima, myself and a Brazilian percussionist did a number of works by composers such as Nazareth and Pixinguinha. It was very interesting to examine some of those popular styles and how they influenced a writer like Villa-Lobos. How the modinha form, for example, would creep into a work like the *Etude no.8*. The show gave people a better idea of the origins of Brazilian music, from jungle sounds to classical traditions. On another show, I included Odetta, a well-known black folk singer in the United States who does blues as well as more traditional folk music. In the same program I played the music of Brouwer, in particular the third Balada from *The Black Decameron*, because it uses a lot of Afro-Cuban rhythmic and lyrical elements, including antiphonal call-and-response that goes way back to more traditional African chant styles. I also demon-

strated some of the folk music of Barrios and Lauro as a way of showing how our classical repertoire has early folk roots as well, the guitar being so much an instrument of the people and of popular culture.'

There was also a banjo group playing hot jazz of the 20s and 30s, along with Cuban rhythms and the South American tango. All interconnect, said Sharon Isbin, even Scott Joplin and Ernesto Nazareth, who shared similarities of style and syncopation at the same time. A sort of cosmic unity, she suggested.

'In a more traditional vein, another show focused upon early music: Paul O'Dette came and demonstrated on the renaissance lute and on the baroque lute - that was fascinating, because I asked him to take a theme and show us how embellishment would change it, not only from period to period but from country to country. It was also quite wonderful to hear a movement from one of the lute suites on the baroque lute and then on the guitar. In another program, a Sephardic trio, Paco Peña, and music of Albéniz and Falla provided fascinating insight into the development of Spanish music.'

Creating the series was a lot of hard but satisfying work, but it did bring the classical guitar to an audience that might not otherwise have been exposed to it. Commissioning the concertos also represents a step away from the traditional guitar audience, for the simple reason that symphony orchestras attract large audiences who know little about the guitar. And getting well-known composers to write for the instrument results in its being taken more seriously.

In 1989 Sharon Isbin gave the first performance of a work for guitar and orchestra by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Joseph Schwantner, with the St Louis Symphony in Carnegie Hall and in St Louis. It was done again in Utah, and she was amused and delighted to see the headline in the local newspaper: 'New Sexy Savage Guitar Concerto'.

Salt Lake City is Mormon country, and very traditional. 'I thought, great! This piece has really reached people on a visceral level. And I felt I understood the piece for the first time. Those two words sum it up — I'd never thought of it that way before.'

The Schwantner work was 'beautifully orchestrated', eliminating problems of balance. Schwantner was a guitarist himself, which clearly helps. 'He doesn't perform any more, but when he was a teenager the guitar was his first instrument. He really knows the

instrument, and what he did was very unusual: he used the guitar as a kind of central control board for the orchestra. It's hard to describe without hearing it, but he realizes that, this being his first major guitar piece since he was a teenager — he's in his late forties now — all of his writing has been using guitar as a model subconsciously in terms of the sharply articulated attacks and the pitch register distribution in a lot of the chording. So for him to write this piece finally for the instrument that has for so long inspired him meant returning to his early origins. And that's why he titled the work "From Afar . . . A Fantasy for Guitar and Orchestra". The orchestra complements the guitar's sonority, and the cadenza of course allows the guitar to do even more.'



Photo by Stuart O'Shields

People often forget that virtually any instrument that competes with the orchestra is going to lose. If you write any concerto, you have to watch that aspect. With the guitar, and despite the care taken by composers, the problems seem exacerbated.

'For so many years we've had to deal with the idiosyncrasies of the amplification technology. I've come up with a solution that really works. I place a couple of speakers mounted on poles about ten feet high at the back of the stage, centered so the orchestra can hear what's going on. If they can't hear what you're doing, there's not going to be much co-ordination. The

sound reaches out to the audience, and the soloist can hear it as well. Sometimes one might need a small monitor, just for enhancement. It sounds natural for the audience too, because they're hearing it from where you're sitting, and by the time it reaches that front row it's not on top of them, it's already been filtered through a good 30 feet.

'It's important to have a good engineer who's sensitive to EQ and that you have time beforehand to set it all up. The other problem these days is rehearsal time. When I came here and played with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican a few years back, we only had one rehearsal in the morning, and that was it, a 45-minute run-through. Fortunately, the piece that they requested was the *Aranjuez* Concerto. My thought was, had it been a less familiar work or a premiere, there simply would not have been enough time to rehearse. Can you imagine preparing a new work in 45 minutes? And then giving a performance?

'I mean, they know the *Aranjuez* beautifully, and they play it wonderfully; and for 45 minutes that was a good choice to make. But I think it's really important that, as programming complexities become an even greater morass to sift through, we do not abandon contemporary music. Allotting enough rehearsal time to develop and create new works is still going to be important.'

Among Sharon Isbin's many achievements are the New York premiere of *Clocks*, written for her by the 1990 Grawenmeyer Award winner, Joan Tower. Another is the concerto written for her by the American composer John Corigliano. In 1997 the Concerto for Violin, Guitar and Orchestra, with Sharon Isbin and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg the soloists, was performed in New York. The process continues. Her latest plans include, as ever, new commissions, recordings, and lots of concerts.

'My focus is solo recitals and concerti, but my work with the Guitarjam Trio, with Larry Coryell and Laurindo Almeida, was certainly an eye-opener in terms of drawing in an entirely new audience for the guitar. It's been a lot of fun. And I find it has loosened me up with music that can be flexible with that kind of freedom. And in terms of concerts it's been very successful. For example, in 1989 we played at the Kennedy Centre in Washington, D.C., which seats about 2800 people; it was a four-concert guitar series, and that program sold the best. It's exciting to know that you're bringing in a mixture of people, many of

whom are hearing classical guitar or Brazilian style for the first time. But the Trio was always an adjunct to each of our solo careers.'

In September 1989 The Juilliard School of Music, New York, started a graduate program in classical guitar - one of the last major schools of music to give credibility to the instrument in this way. It is also one of the most prestigious. Sharon Isbin, a holder of Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from Yale University, is its Department Head and Principal Faculty Member. Announcing the program, the Juilliard President, Joseph W. Polisi, referred to the guitar's unique position in Western musical tradition. He said: 'We look to Ms Isbin's dedication and artistry to help us achieve the goal of enhancing that great tradition in the years ahead. It is Juilliard's hope that we can nurture the finest classical guitar performers as well as encourage more composers to create new music for the instrument.'

In the light of such clear-headed dedication, it is hard not to feel optimistic about the future of the classical guitar.

CC