

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Sharon Isbin with Colin Davin (Nov. 4)

by Timothy Robson



For reasons unknown, Sharon Isbin, one of the leading classical guitar virtuosos of our time, had never performed in Cleveland until Saturday evening, November 4, when she appeared in a recital for the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society at Plymouth Church of Shaker Heights. During the second half of the evening, she was joined by Cleveland native Colin Davin, a former Isbin student and current faculty member at the Cleveland

Institute of Music and Baldwin Wallace University.

Isbin's playing was, in a word, remarkable, characterized by myriad colors and textures kaleidoscopically changing from phrase to phrase depending on the sense of the music. Particularly in solo works by Spanish masters Enrique Granados and Isaac Albéniz, she employed generous rubato — bending of the musical pulse for special emphasis. She was in complete control technically and musically. The clear and resonant, but not reverberant acoustic of the Plymouth Church's sanctuary proved especially favorable to the guitar.

Her program opened with one of the enduring favorites of the classical guitar literature, Granados' *Danza española No. 5 (Andaluza)*, performed in honor of the composer's 150th anniversary. This was the first taste of Isbin's mastery of quiet dynamics and clarity of sound.

Perhaps the most interesting work of the evening was Tan Dun's *Seven Desires for Guitar*, written for Isbin in 2002 and based on a concerto the composer also wrote for her. In the multiple short movements, Tan blends the sound and technique of the pipa

(classical Chinese plucked string instrument) with that of the Spanish classical guitar, including downward glissandos, rapid tremolos on a single string, and bending of pitch associated with the pipa, as well as the strumming found in flamenco. The harmonies are astringent, and the adjusted pitches disorienting to Western ears, but the suite is arresting in its combination of Eastern and Western compositional techniques.

The first half of the program also included Francisco Tárrega's *Capricho árabe* and Andrés Segovia's arrangements of Isaac Albeniz's *Mallorca* and *Asturias*. Especially in *Asturias* the music of flamenco was never far away.

In the second half, Colin Davin made an excellent foil to Isbin. The duo began with mid-20th century Colombian composer Gentil Montaña's lively *Porro*, a popular Colombian dance originally played on native instruments, with a second guitar part composed by Gustavo Colina.

Isbin's contributions to the guitar repertoire continued with Howard Shore's *The Departed: Three Pieces for Two Guitars*, extracted from his score to the Martin Scorsese film *The Departed*. All three movements are in minor keys, creating a sense of melancholy. "Madolyn" featured Isbin playing an ecstatic melody, with Davin accompanying in a "tango-ish" rhythmic pattern. "Beacon Hill" was a sad aria, while "The Departed Tango" was more energetic, yet unsettling in its sorrow.

Davin had the opportunity to improvise in Joaquín Rodrigo's *Aranjuez, ma pensée*, a song that has been covered by many artists, including Miles Davis. The two guitarists traded phrases back and forth, alternating between elaborating on the melody and accompanying it.

Antonio Lauro's *Waltz No. 3 (Natalia)* received its first performance in a two-guitar version devised by Colin Davin. The textures and interactions were especially interesting, including rhythmic tapping on the body of Davin's guitar.

During the two-guitar version of Granados' *Danza Española No. 2 (Oriental)*, it was intriguing to compare the two musicians' sounds: Isbin's was clear and refined, while Davin's was more robust, yet the two blended well.

The concert closed with Manuel de Falla's "Danza Española" from *La vida breve*, in a transcription for two guitars by Emilio Pujol. It was a brilliant tour de force.

The large audience was reluctant to let Sharon Isbin retreat. The guitarist obliged by returning for two beautiful encores, Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* and Agustín Barrios' *Vals*, Op. 8, No. 4.

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