

Guitarist Sharon Isbin packs NEO debut with music of personal, historic significance (preview)

Updated Nov 3, 2017; Posted Nov 3, 2017



Guitarist Sharon Isbin is set to make her Northeast Ohio debut Nov. 4 with a concert for the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society. She'll be joined by local guitarist and former student Colin Davin. (J Henry Fair)

By [Zachary Lewis, The Plain Dealer](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Prepare to be moved, to witness a display of guitar's power to shape and connect lives.

From the first note played this weekend by guest artist Sharon Isbin to the last chord strummed by students next spring, the remainder of the Cleveland Classical Guitar

Society's [2017-18 season](#) will serve as living proof that music matters both inside the concert hall and out.

With so much in store this season, "I'm really on top of the world," said Erik Mann, executive director of the society. "I'm really excited about the future."

Start with Isbin, the first artist on this year's International Series. Not only is the guitar heroine making her Cleveland debut in the company of her former student Colin Davin, to Mann's enormous delight. She's performing music rich with personal and historical significance.

Most in Isbin's position would simply show up and play whatever happens to be of interest at the moment. Not Isbin. For Cleveland, she's planned an eclectic slate of composers she knows or knew personally, some of whose lives and work were affected by authoritarian governments.

"It's an interesting collection of composers, all of them united by Fascism," Isbin said, alluding to Rodrigo, Granados, and De Falla, the principal figures behind her latest recording, "Alma Espanola." "They're such a robust part of the music that I play, and it's important to be celebrating them now."

Granados lost his life during World War I. Not in battle, but in transit. After attending the U.S. premiere of his opera "Goyescas," he perished when his return ship to Spain was sunk by the Germans. Isbin plans to perform his second and fifth "Danza Espanola."

De Falla, meanwhile, whose home Isbin once tracked down, only to end up playing for gypsies, fled to Argentina to escape the Franco regime. With Davin, a teacher at both Baldwin Wallace University and the Cleveland Institute of Music, she'll perform an excerpt from his opera "La Vida Breve."

Isbin's connection to Rodrigo is even closer. She was friends with the composer and his wife. She knew intimately of the Jewish couple's struggle to survive World War II and of the pain that inspired Rodrigo to pen the work she'll perform Saturday, "Aranjuez, Ma Pensee."

"It's music that I love," Isbin said. "It has deeply nostalgic roots, and reminds me of my friendship with them. I really think of that when I play this music."

The rest of the program is also meaningful to Isbin personally. Both of the selections by Tan Dun ("Seven Desires") and Howard Shore (three pieces from the film "The Departed") were composed specially for her, with an ear to her sound and versatility.

"The pleasure of adding to the repertoire never stops," Isbin said.

Isbin, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg. As eager as Mann is for the long-overdue first appearance here by his idol, he's also excited about the rest of the society's 2017-18 season, to hear Les Freres Meduses (Feb. 24), Paul Galbraith (March 17), and Cleveland's own Jason Vieaux with [mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke](#) (May 8).

Then there's the society's education project, an ongoing partnership with Cleveland public schools. That effort has enjoyed some notable successes of late, Mann said, and appears to be on the edge of further breakthroughs.

Recently, Damian Goggans, one of the 200 students society members regularly visit, was named one of the first [Minority Artist Fellows](#) at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He's only 14, and in ninth grade, which means he'll enjoy free private lessons (by Mann) all the way through high school.

Mann said he's convinced Goggans "is going to make his mark in something."

Others, meanwhile, are making progress, overcoming what Mann called a "lot of challenges" to stick with a system of guitar orchestra classes and private lessons for students as young as third grade. The idea, Mann said, is to bring them up in music and then guide them into advanced studies and possibly even a career.

"We really make sure we're capturing them," Mann said. "Music is what saved me, and it's amazing to see it happening in others."

PREVIEW

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society

What: Guitarists Sharon Isbin and Colin Davin

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 4.

Where: Plymouth Church, 2860 Coventry Rd., Shaker Heights.

Tickets: \$25-\$50. Go to cleguitar.org.