

Guitarist Sharon Isbin to star with Santa Rosa Symphony

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Sharon Isbin serves as the American ambassador of the classical guitar, performing everywhere from the concert hall to the White House.

It's a job that no one else really wanted. That's because most Americans are exposed to the guitar through rock and folk music and then fall in love with classical guitar by accident.

"That's changing now, but that certainly has been part of the history of classical guitar in this country," Isbin said in a phone interview from her home in New York City. "Europe has a much longer tradition of classical guitar, going back to Spain and Italy and the U.K., so that the roots have had time to blossom and flourish."

For the Santa Rosa Symphony's fourth concert set this weekend, Isbin will whisk the audience off to the gardens of Spain during a performance of Joaquin Rodrigo's passionate "Concierto de Aranjuez."

"The Rodrigo is one of the most popular works of any works for orchestra," she said. "The second movement is so powerfully moving and emotionally raw, with great nuances and musical inspiration. It's something that really touches people in unusual ways."

Led by guest conductor and Mexico native Enrique Arturo Diemecke, the south-of-the-border program also includes Astor Piazzolla's seductive "Tangazo, Variations on Buenos Aires" and the Fourth Symphony of composer Carlos Chavez, considered to be the founder of modern Mexican music.

Diemecke serves as the music director of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic as well as the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra, underscoring the season's over-arching theme of international voyage.

Isbin has done her own share of traveling over the years. Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, she went to live in Italy with her family when she was still in elementary school. In Italy,

her older brother asked for guitar lessons, but when he realized the teacher wasn't Elvis Presley, he politely declined. The 9-year-old Isbin stepped into his place and never looked back.

Back in the states, she won a competition at age 14 that allowed her to perform with the Minnesota Orchestra. By the time she was 16, she was teaching herself.

"I was on my own with a mirror and a tape recorder," she said. "Being on my own really made that process much faster. It taught me how to problem-solve."

Through the years, however, Isbin has sought out an array of musical mentors to help guide her along her plucky path.

"I had private lessons with people like (Andres) Segovia," she said. "That really fueled me."

While studying at Yale, Isbin connected with pianist and Bach scholar Rosalyn Tureck. Together, they created the first performance editions of all the Bach lute suites.

Through the years, Isbin has sought out all kinds of musicians for collaborative projects, from heavy-metal guitarist Steve Vai (who worked with Frank Zappa) to folk singer Joan Baez. The guitarist's omnivorous musical tastes remind some of another musical ambassador: cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Isbin won her most recent Grammy award in 2010 for "Journey to the New World," an album that traces the history of folk music on both sides of the Atlantic.

"It's an exploration of folk music, starting in the 16th century," she said. "It crossed the ocean with the immigrants, and it became transformed into American music."

When Baez heard the album's world premiere — John Duarte's "Joan Baez Suite" for guitar — she offered to sing on the album.

"She joins me on 'Wayfaring Stranger' and 'Go Away from my Window,'" Isbin said. "And (fiddler) Mark O'Connor joins me in a piece that he wrote."

One of the challenges classical guitarists face in the wide open spaces of modern concert halls is simply being heard. The guitar is an intimate instrument, more at home in a living room. Isbin has solved that problem by creating her own wireless sound system: a microphone that attaches to the sound hole and a small speaker that sits discreetly behind her.

"The idea is to create a balance for the orchestra so that everybody can hear me without realizing that it's amplified," she said. "Especially with the Rodrigo, which is so beautiful and filled with the essence of Spanish passion and soul, I want to be able to have access to all my colors and dynamic range."

Isbin has helped the guitar gain prominence in the concert hall by commissioning several concertos by composers such as Tan Dun, John Corigliano and Christopher Rouse.

"I've done over 50 performances of the Rouse and 60 performances of the Corigliano," she said. "The Rouse concerto received the Grammy for best classical album."

When the glamorous guitarist recorded Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez" with the New York Philharmonic in 2004, it marked the first time that the Philharmonic had ever recorded with a guitar.

Isbin also broke through the guitar's glass ceiling by launching a guitar program at the Juilliard School of Music in New York in 1989.

"I received wonderful guidance, and that's why it's important for me to teach as well," Isbin said. "I take just three or four students a year, and I've had people go off to become the premier players in their country."

When she performs works such as the Rodrigo, Isbin said she draws upon the techniques of transcendental meditation that she has practiced since she was 17.

"I'm at one with the music and the composer, and the audience is on the journey with me," she said. "It's about feeling and passion and emotion."

Despite her instrument's reputation as the stepchild of the classical music world, she finds that the guitar carries a certain cachet among concert-goers as hip and accessible.

"A concert with classical guitar will draw people out of the woodwork," she said. "The guitar lovers have a vast range of styles that they all appreciate."

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