

Sharon Isbin
USA

Interview.

‘As a woman you don’t have models.’

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Lance Bosman

Sharon Isbin

**“As a woman
you don’t
have models”**

There was something about Sharon Isbin's demeanour during her recent concert here that added a positive physical dimension to her playing. With each phrase that she motioned in, her countenance seemed to shift—from a puckered brow at one moment, that in the next softened to a smile. This expressive presentation, combined with an able technique and refined musicianship has topped two international guitar competitions. Though winning these, she pointed out, came secondary to the benefits gained for the preparation that they entailed. Bound into her guitar activities, and indirectly projected through them, is her determination to contribute towards furthering opportunities for women. As Sharon sees it, one woman's accomplishment is another's incentive. But before we got round to this point, there was the question of the physical side to her playing. Was this involuntary or a deliberate exertion to enhance her music? Lance Bosman.

One of the things that strikes me about a violinist's or pianist's performance is that body movement plays such an important role. A guitarist is stuck to a chair, and with the guitar balanced, there's a limit to the amount of motion that you can create. In producing the sound you don't have a wide bow sweep or follow the motions of a pianist; the left hand is the only thing that creates great visual movement. So what the guitarist has to do is think of the motions that other instrumentalists use; if you don't you're missing out on something. This is the one thing that's really never taught, but you have to move with the guitar, you have to move with your body, and feel the phrasing.

Over this year I've been working in modern dance, and I feel that it has brought life so much more to the music that I'm playing. It's not something stagnant, and if you play it that way it's harder to communicate the life that's inherent in it. It wants to jump out of the chair and jump out of your fingers. The same thing goes with breathing; a singer has to feel expiration in a phrase, and naturally that's transformed from the work into the phrasing. If you play a study, say by Villa Lobos, and just sit down and go through the arpeggios without breathing into each swell, each motion of the phrase, it will sound staid, dead. Similarly, if you've got a rising phrase or a falling phrase that a singer would naturally breathe into or exhale, and you play that on an instrument without breathing motions, it doesn't have the movement, the life force behind it.

I've tried experiments just sitting down playing a phrase where the first time I wasn't conscious of any breathing, any body movement. Then I'll play it again breathing into it and exerting my body towards the music. It makes a tremendous difference and people listening to it can tell the difference. It's not just something where you can, say, play this note louder or softer, it's living the music and not just being an external part of it. A good performance is where I don't lose consciousness of what I'm doing but I lose consciousness of the technique so all the components will flow naturally, they develop a character and impulse all their own.

Once you know the instrument well enough, you know the technique, then the note production will take care of itself. In preparing for a concert one of the most important things for me is to practise without the guitar, to go through the entire piece in my head without the score, mentally tracing the finger movements. When you practise at the guitar different aspects of the memory come into play — motor memory, the automatic response of the fingers, and you're not necessarily training your mind at that point. To make your memory secure, the impulses must be solid. Also when you work away from the guitar, you're freed from the technical side, you work in your head.

Do you decide what fingering you're going to use at first on the



guitar and then mentally practise that away from it?

Yes, because that's the fingering that I would use for the performance. I think it can only be realised on the instrument. The problem is the different possibilities for fingering; you can start at point A and work from there or the middle of a phrase or its ending. There are certain sections that can only be fingered one way, there are others where there are numerous choices. You have to know basically where you're going, the things that you want to produce, and work around those. It would be difficult to do that entirely in your head; the sound of open strings, the sound of shifting, and the technical possibilities open.

I originally began practising mentally to strengthen my memory, but now I find it has a strong musical basis. Many musicians work pieces over in their mind, and I've gone into it for interpretation as well as to avoid memory slips. And that aspect of the performance doesn't get enough work when you're physically playing it through; it needs isolating. Even though I've performed a piece many times, I still work this way before playing it at a concert.

Practising scales and arpeggios, to do those mechanically is really not going to help very much; you have to muster the same degree of concentration that you apply to a composition. It goes back to the idea of mental precision, it's not just how your finger lands on the string but how your mind directs the finger to it. The aim is to make scales a challenge by changing rhythms, speed, attack. Each time you play an exercise you set a goal and then direct your playing towards that goal instead of following habit.

Did you find it a problem switching your mental tuning straight from Brouwer to Bach in your concert—I mean, the idioms are so far apart?

I put myself in one mood for Brouwer and another for Bach. The kind of concentration is different. If the piece is written out exactly, I'm not in for any surprises; but if I'm playing one that's much more improvised I get the feeling that it's springing out of itself more, not knowing exactly what's coming next. I'm never sure where the accents will fall and what the tonal colours will be, and that adds to the excitement.

Regarding competitions, are people being fair to themselves, vying like that against each other?

There are so many variables when you talk about competitions: for one, the piece you're playing, does it suit you the performer? Some players have an affinity for certain works and not for others. The performance itself, what if a finger nail breaks or if you're sick that day? Then again, you're not just playing for the purpose of making music but showing yourself to be one over somebody else. The only way is to forget about these things and take competitions for the value that can be gained in terms of discipline. When I prepared for the Munich competition I never worked harder in my life. In the ten days before that competition I wanted to make so sure, however nervous, that I would still be able to play; to do that demands a preparation that ensures resource. I also benefited from learning the repertoire that was required. You can't think how too much of them as competitions, you can't enter them expecting to win. It's a matter of wanting to take upon yourself the challenge of preparing, getting up there playing and doing your best.

How do you cope with the pressures involved in travelling and concert performances?

Fortunately I feel my career has progressed in phase with myself and my playing. So far I haven't had to face experiences too challenging for my level at the time. With each new experience I expand myself to meet the expectation at the end of it. Though I certainly have been exposed to the possibilities of pressure; first of all I could have left school but I didn't because I want to take a masters degree. Of course, you do have to make accommodations in a life that involves travelling and commitments to others; but you don't give yourself up—in performance, yes, but not that quality that makes you your own person. I would like to teach as well as perform, combining them in such a way that I have the freedom to travel when I need to. I also have the stability of being in a university environment; I don't believe it's necessary to live in an aeroplane, or give a 160 concerts a year. At the beginning you have

to make a lot of sacrifices—financially and playing jobs not necessarily prestigious, but it's all experience: it's a question of carefully selecting as you go along.

From a woman's point of view, do you encounter prejudice?

I'm a feminist in that I believe strongly in my identity as a woman, and what that means living in a society created mainly by men, particularly being a guitarist—even my life's work is a man's heritage. If you look at the history of performances of classical guitar, the most widely known have been by men. That situation is beginning to change through younger players, but it is still largely dominated by men. As a woman you don't have models, I never had a woman guitarist to model myself on, consequently I've looked to other musicians, other art forms for that inspiration and direction. . . in literature and those performances in which women are prevalent. I think that it's important that everybody should have the same opportunity. The guitar has suffered even more from a denial of careers for women. It's time for art to stop being so isolated and snotty from the world we live in. At Yale where I'm a student the women's community is really beginning to get active; I've been very much a part of that, and through performances I've done what I can to further their ideas.

It's not just music I'm talking about. At Yale I'm combining political with musical; if I give a benefit concert it won't have to do with creating women guitarists, but creating a women's centre on campus, so that there can be a stronger sense of identity and sharing within a male structured community. Women as guitarists will have a lot more to offer—not more than men, but different types of things. It's exciting to think that this will be freed.

And you think we'll see more women guitarists?

It's gonna take longer for women to enter the field of the guitar. I think that the society in which we live is turning backwards, turning hypocritical. It's not just the music, why isn't there a woman president? Why are scientific fields still dominated by men? It makes assumptions about people that just aren't true. So far as the guitar goes, I can't think why it should suffer more than other instruments other than the fact that its heritage is male—from Spain, the instigators of technique have been men.

Perhaps it's due to the fact that there are more opportunities for men to circulate, make contact without domestic ties?

If you think of the family structure it's still very hard for a woman to have a career and a family at the same time. When you think of the concentration and the travelling. What husband . . . well there aren't many that will take the role of a wife, take care of the domestic duties. Society offers little in terms of support for a woman who wants a career. And it's getting worse, the notion of equality; you look at the wage difference now, even though more women are working in the States.

I thought women in the States pulled more muscle than they did here?

That's probably true, I think the States is freer than many places. Even so, I'm sometimes under more pressure to prove myself because I'm an anomaly; but I'm an artist and that ultimately wins out. I don't want to be promoted as a lady guitarist; I'm a musician, that's what I want.

That there's such a marked minority of women composers; isn't it possible this art is not generally part of their nature?

A lot of women's aptitude is suppressed by social conditioning. You have to push yourself to promote yourself. What about writers like George Sands who had to give themselves male pseudonyms in order to get work out?

I'm not thinking about the 19th century, but recent decades. Does it matter now what gender the name of a composer falls into, or of someone trying to gain recognition?

But wait a minute, this has to do with an attitude that's still very prevalent today. Even though literature has advanced, music is still behind in some respects. You can have the glamour of an opera singer, but to respect a woman intellectually, and that is what a composer is, somebody who has a mind, women have denied their minds for so long.

Okay, it takes a history, a heritage to establish something. It just doesn't spring out of the blue like that. Men have had the opportunities and advantages for so much longer, well it's obviously going to take women longer to enter the field. The demands for a woman are still greater if she wants a career. Even though there are more opportunities, there is still the matter of her finding the confidence. If you don't have the models to look to, it's harder to get that confidence. Once a few women become established as guitarists, it will proliferate. But you need somebody up there to show you that it can be done.

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