



voice SUSANNE MENTZER guitar SHARON ISBIN  
*Wayfaring Stranger*

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## VOICE AND GUITAR: A UNIQUE INTIMACY

Roger Pines

The combination of a sensuous, multi-colored mezzo-soprano voice performing with a virtuoso guitarist is rarely encountered in concert halls or on disc. Thus the partnership of Susanne Mentzer and Sharon Isbin is something to be especially savored by vocal and guitar aficionados alike.

It has long been a goal of Mentzer's to record the five American pieces that open this program. She frequently performs them with piano, having grown up singing much folk repertoire, both in church and at home. "Wayfaring" Stranger" and other pieces of a similar character are "something I really believe in, that I sing from the heart. It has to do with my background: my family's from the Blue Ridge Mountains, and lived there a long time. My ancestors came over in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and there's a strong Civil War history in my family, too."

One can classify "Wayfaring" Stranger" as a "white spiritual," frequently heard in southern Protestant churches, which have long incorporated folk ballads into the service. The ravishing "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair" is one of the best-known of the courting songs greatly popular in southern Appalachia (parts of Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee) over the past 300 years. "Red Rosey Bush" can be identified as a collection of "floating verses," that is, existing in several different settings. There are also many versions of "The Nightingale" (also known as "One Morning in May"), as it has come down to singers in Southern Appalachia through English and Irish tradition. "Go "Way from My Window" was written in our own century, albeit in effective folk style, by Kentucky-born balladeer/song collector John Jacob Niles (1892-1980). The three arrangements by Brazilian guitarist Carlos Barbosa-Lima are performed here in their world premieres.

In *Lieder* of Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Mentzer experiences "a different kind of intimacy" when performing with guitar accompaniment. "The guitar doesn't have a resonance that can overwhelm the voice. One's voice is even freer than ever to phrase spontaneously. "While she is partial to the long line and hypnotic mood of "Nachtstück," Mentzer finds a winningly folk-like quality in the more popular "Heidenröslein" and "Ständchen"; to her, the latter communicates a significantly calmer feeling with guitar. The guitar, which Schubert himself played respectably, was essential to Vienna's musical life early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For years *Lied* enthusiasts could easily find an enormous variety of published guitar-accompanied material. The instrument was constantly utilized for *Hausmusik*, in which one can well imagine how superbly it served Schubert songs. Throughout a vast portion of Schubert's *Lieder* output, the guitar's influence on the composer's piano parts cannot be overestimated. Not only were many Schubert *Lieder* editions with guitar accompaniment published during his lifetime; a few were actually published *first* for guitar, before the piano versions even appeared.

In "Heidenröslein" (1815), one of Schubert's more than 60 Goethe settings, the song's three strophes epitomize the utter simplicity and directness of expression that are this composer's own above all others. "Ständchen" (1828) can be found in the collection known today as *Schwanengesang*; Schubert authority John Reed describes how "the lover's passion swells up at the end in a phrase which echoes the concluding bars of the strophe, and then declines to a whisper of desire... as purely sensuous a moment as can be found in all Schubert."

*Durchkomponiert* rather than strophic, "Nachtstück" (1819) is also keenly individual harmonically. The minstrel's rippling harp accompaniment provides exquisite support for the melodic line's inexorable rise and fall. Equally moving is Schubert's depiction of the serene acceptance of death at the close.

Johann Paul Aegidius Schwarzenord, composer of "Plaisir d'amour," was also known as Giovanni Paolo Martini "il Tedesco" (1741-1816). Born in

Nuremberg, he moved to Paris in 1764. He was associated with that city's Conservatoire as administrator and composition teacher, and was employed by the nobility both before the Revolution and after. Of Martini's music, written in a variety of genres, only "Plaisir d'amour" – at once soulful and elegant – remains familiar today.

Following the prevailing trend in French folk songs, those recorded here are strophic in structure. They range through different situations also familiar in folk music internationally. When it comes to folk songs, a certain universality can be expected (take "Que ne suis-je la fougère" – "If I were a fern" – vs. the text that opens "Red Rosey Bush"). We have common themes here, whether mother counseling daughter in matters of love in "Maman dites-moi"; the gathering of flowers as a symbol of fleeting youth in "Jeunes fillettes"; the nightingale as messenger from the lover in "Le rossignol." Rhythmic vigor and textual incisiveness are equally crucial, in keeping with French music in general through the centuries. The second group was arranged by Mátyás Seiber (1905-1960) especially for Sir Peter Pears and Julian Bream.

Sharon Isbin firmly believes that the guitar's roots can largely be traced to folk music: "In most Western and Latin American nations, it has long been considered the voice of the people – it is a "natural" for this kind of music." And Susanne Mentzer, who is planning future live performances of folk songs with Sharon Isbin, concludes that "I just have a very personal interest in folk music. I always have. I'm happy that my first solo disc is folk music. It's a side of me that I want to share."

Roger Pines, program editor of Lyric Opera of Chicago, is also a contributor to many publications internationally, including *BBC Music*, *Opera News*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and *The Opera Quarterly*.

## SHARON ISBIN ON RODRIGO'S "ARANJUEZ, MA PENSÉE"

Joaquín Rodrigo (b.1901) has been blind since the age of three. I first met him and his wife Victoria Kamhi in 1979 when they invited me to their home in Madrid, after hearing that I was a winner of the Queen Sofía Competition. I played his famous "Concierto de Aranjuez" for them, and we have shared a long, warm friendship ever since.

"Aranjuez, ma pensée" is Rodrigo's own arrangement of the Adagio theme from the concerto, with lyrics by his wife. He composed the melody of this work during the sleepless nights spent grieving over the stillborn birth of his first child and his wife's ensuing illness. He wrote it as he reminisced about their honeymoon in the majestic gardens of Aranjuez, the magnificent 18<sup>th</sup>-century site of kings and courtiers. It is both a love song and a song of painful yearning. Guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza premiered the concerto in 1940.

In July of 1997, Rodrigo experienced the devastating loss of his wife. I would like to dedicate this performance to her memory, and to that of my brother Neil who had requested it for his memorial service one year before.

Sharon Isbin complements the performance of "Aranjuez, ma pensée" with three solo guitar pieces. Enrique Granados (1867-1916) actually wrote no music for guitar, but the Andalusian-style "Spanish Dance No. 5" has become universally popular in transcription from the original piano version (part of 12 dances, Op. 37, finished in 1900). Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909) was in many ways the father of the modern Spanish guitar, as both teacher and performer. "Capricho arabe" projects a mesmerizing grace and melancholy, colored by its distinctive Moorish-style ornamentation. Regino Sainz de la Maza (1896-1981) was for decades one of Spain's most renowned guitarists. The effervescent "Zapateado" is one of the liveliest of traditional Spanish dances.

R.P.