

PROGRAM NOTES

*Commissioned by the Betsy Russell Fund for New Music
and dedicated to Joy and Isadore Russell*

I am very excited about the concerto I have written for guitar virtuoso Sharon Isbin. She has toured and recorded collaborations in a variety of genres, including Classical, Jazz, Rock, Folk, Indian and Brazilian to name a few. My eclectic background as a performer and composer served to provide Sharon with the wide-ranging musical influences she loves to explore. After our initial discussions, Sharon was approached by The Betsy Russell Fund for New Music to fund the piece.

Sharon wanted a concerto that had a global approach to the guitar and wasn't confined to one particular style. You will hear that desire realized in how I approached the creation of "*Affinity: Concerto for Guitar & Orchestra*." I struggled to find a title we both liked and thankfully my wife, Tish, came up with this appropriate name. In plain English, Sharon and I share an affinity for embracing and exploring different musical styles. As I learned from watching the recent PBS special about Sharon's remarkable career, she wanted to be a scientist as a young girl. With that in mind I wanted to include in these notes the scientific definition of affinity: *An attraction or force between particles that causes them to combine.*

This is an appropriate description of the concerto as many genres are combined to create this 16-minute piece. There are no separate movements --- instead there are simply flowing, contrasting musical areas that we chose to explore. This concerto jumps out of the starting gate with the energy of a downhill ski race. Sharon has great facility on her instrument and I wanted to feature her fingers flying from the first measure. After a few minutes the piece travels into an early Jazz style with syncopated rhythms that almost harken back to Ragtime. Then the music transforms into a romantic waltz with oceanic qualities.

In the middle of this concerto there is a very heartfelt section that evolved from a suggestion by Sharon. She knew that my father had recently passed on and that he and I were very close and frequently wrote music together over the years. She called me from New York and sensitively asked if there were any melodies my father had written that were particularly "guitaristic." She thought it would be wonderful to honor him by including some of his musical spirit in this piece. While speaking with Sharon, I was composing in the Connecticut studio where my father and I had created so much music together over the course of our lives. It was October and gazing out a window overlooking a stream surrounded by glorious old trees, I saw the wind spin a few golden leaves off their branches and they lazily circled down to the water. I told Sharon that I had just seen something that reminded me of a beautiful melody my father had written, "Autumn in Our Town" which described this time of year. A few days later I sent her the realization of this theme presented as a guitar feature enveloped by the string section. Midway through, there is a modulation while the guitar tunes its lowest string down to a low D which facilitates an even deeper and more soulful interpretation.

I wanted to follow this *andante* area by writing a completely contrasting section in a major key which I was imagining as a kind of neo-Renaissance dance in 6/8. The music gracefully makes its way into more complicated time signatures alternating a bar of 7/8 with a bar of 3/4. A different

groove is established with a new section in a fast 5/8 time signature that conveys the energy of a Brazilian samba. The guitar solo takes off over the propulsive rhythm and climaxes into a technically demanding cadenza. Percussion emerges from the guitar's final cadence and we are off to a Middle Eastern fantasy. The tempo accelerates and we land in a brief recapitulation and compressed version of the original theme. I felt it was appropriate to compose an ending that was filled with driving energy that would catapult us to the last chord.

"*Affinity*" is a real "tour de force" for an exceptional guitarist and we found the perfect partner for the premiere with Elizabeth Schulze conducting the Maryland Symphony Orchestra. Sharon, Elizabeth and I have consulted with each other during the creation of this composition and I am grateful for their feedback and input throughout this process. Recently we reunited to balance and mix the exciting performance of *Affinity* by Sharon and the Maryland Symphony Orchestra, once again led by Elizabeth, at the acoustically stunning Strathmore Music Center. We worked with internationally reknown producer Philip Traugott and multiple Grammy award-winning engineer Tim Martyn and captured a thrilling recording of this heartfelt collaboration between Sharon, Elizabeth and me.

Affinity: An attraction or force between particles that causes them to combine.

Chris Brubeck
Wilton, CT

"*Affinity* [is] a single-movement *tour de force* for guitar. The results were moving and wholly convincing. ...there were plenty of things to appreciate. Not least of these was the stunning playing of Isbin, who explored the full expressive range of her instrument." - Classical.net review of Detroit Symphony performance with Leonard Slatkin, conductor

"Combining styles from jazz to new age to pop, with a touch of contemporary classical, the work tended to be immediately audience-friendly yet musically challenging. Rhythmically varying throughout, the concerto takes off right from the beginning, with Isbin delivering rapid-fire virtuosity with infectious themes traded back and forth with the orchestra. The slow middle section is a tender jazz-based tribute to Dave Brubeck, and Isbin played with heartfelt warmth and tenderness. The finale was an infectious rhythmically driven journey through myriad styles, yet the three parts formed a cohesive whole. It was as intriguing as it was moving." - Rutland Herald, Vermont Symphony performance, Jaime Laredo, conductor

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Press Quote:

I am very excited about "*Affinity: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*" which I have written for guitar virtuoso Sharon Isbin. Like most of my compositions, this piece has taken on a personality and life of its own but was nurtured by the ideas Sharon and I discussed at the inception of our collaboration. "*Affinity*" possesses an international stylistic flair with sounds that reflect the rhythms and harmonies of South America, the Middle East, Iberian Peninsula, and America. The

spirited music bursts out of the starting gate in the first measure, eventually evolves into a beautiful andante section in the middle, and then takes us on an intense musical ride from the virtuosic cadenza to the soaring finale. This new single movement concerto, 16 minutes in length and scored for guitar and chamber orchestra (or reduced orchestra), is a "tour de force" for a truly exceptional guitarist.