

Gilbert Isbin

Lute Composer



Paul Willaert from Exit Magazine

I began playing the guitar at the age of 18, quite late. I was immediately attracted by the music of John Renbourn, a folk guitar player who was very much into early music. But there was also jazz, blues and contemporary classical music that attracted me. So I began to write my own compositions mixing all these influences. Through the years I developed my own musical language. Some seven years ago I decided to take up the lute, something I had wanted to do for a very long time. I have always been attracted to the soft and ethereal sound of this fragile instrument.

I studied and later played together in a duo with Lieven Misschaert, who was one of the first teachers to introduce the lute in Belgium. It took me quite a while to master the thumb under technique. I also studied methods, like the very fine *Method for Renaissance Lute* by Andrea Damiani.

As with the guitar, my aim with lute is to write original compositions for the instrument. I try to incorporate all possible lute techniques and compositional devices into my works: open strings where possible, monophonic melodic and polyphonic passages, chordal passages, counterpoint etc. plus exploring the register of the instrument and its most effective sonority. For me the lute demands lyricism, impressionism and "sad-joy," a mixture of melancholy and happiness.

I write mostly melodic and accessible present-day music with enhanced harmonic and rhythmic structures using compositional techniques incorporating all the influences I have absorbed from modern classical, jazz and world music, while at the same time incorporating the specific characteristics of the lute. I avoid doing violence to the instrument. What I do is really written for it, with the lute in my hands.

I get inspiration from things that occur in daily life, from reading a poem, a book, or just a title, a view, listening to music, or

improvising freely and then writing down some ideas. Ideas may occur to me from a striking chord, or playing a small melodic or rhythmic cell, an intervallic row, a contrapuntal idea or an interesting scale. Sometimes I experiment with atonality but I always rework the piece to clarify the melodic line. Mostly I write in an intuitive way. It's only when I am stuck that I refer to my list of compositional devices or variation techniques.

Apart from writing solo lute music I also write lute-songs, and pieces for ensemble (to date these include for tenor recorder, lute, viola da gamba). I also write solo lute arrangements of medieval Flemish songs. My compositions vary in difficulty from technically demanding, to intermediate level and very easy (e.g. the book *25 Easy Lute Pieces*, all in two part writing).

Most of my works have been published by The Lute Society [England], for which I am very thankful.

The two compositions I am sharing with you here are recorded on the recently released CD, *Stathis Skandalidis Plays Gilbert Isbin*. They are published in the book, *Harvest, 18 compositions for Solo Lute*, published by The Lute Society (England).

Website: <http://gilbertisbin.com/>