



CLASSICAL MUSIC

**Joyful Noise**  
 Avant-garde vocalist Iva Bittová  
 takes New York, lending  
 experimental music a small-town flavor.

BY ALICIA ZUCKERMAN

**O**NE MIGHT IMAGINE that the powerhouse performer Iva Bittová—a forward-thinking composer who sings and plays violin simultaneously, whose small frame emits huge amounts of sound and energy onstage—would feed off the energy of the big city, that she would, in fact, need it. But that's not even a little bit true. "I need silence," Bittová explains in her heavy accent from her house in Lelekovice, a village in her native Czech Republic. "I need quiet. I like to sing with my birds around my house. It makes me happy. I am somehow a very simple person... I am not really in a hurry to be in, like in, you know? To be in? To spend lots of time in the city—noisy restaurants and talking? I'm a more, like, silent, introverted person."

For a quiet person, it seems Iva (pronounced "eeva") Bittová is making a lot of noise. Though the 46-year-old has been performing for the past 25 years, she's seen a significant rise in her profile over the last few. In Europe and Japan, she's performing with D.J.'s one minute and her own arrangements of music by Leos Janáček with a string quartet the next. Two summers ago, she sang the role of Donna Elvira in the opera *Don Juan in Prague* at Bard SummerScape, and her last New York City gig was at the Knitting Factory. The Bang on a Can All-Stars (a leg of the new-music collective Bang on a Can) recently recorded an "all-Bittová" CD with her, titled *Elida* and due out in June, and when they make their Carnegie Hall debut on Friday, she'll be onstage as well.

IVA BITTOVÁ  
 WITH BANG ON A CAN  
 ALL-STARS. ZANKEL HALL AT  
 CARNEGIE HALL,  
 FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 7:30 P.M.

She started playing violin as a child but got "fed up" and quit by the time she was 12. Her mother was heartbroken, and, set on having her daughter pursue a life in the arts, enrolled her in a drama school. Bittová went on to have a successful career in avant-garde theater and starred in several Czech films, but "I was really the whole time not happy, and I was sure that my position in my life was to be as a musician, not as an actor." So at 22, she returned to the violin, taking lessons and practicing "eight, nine hours a day," she says. "Really I was in love with it... This is my language. I feel such a strong freedom in music."

It might be useful to think of Bittová in terms of Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and Björk—to a point. There are shades of each of those better-known artists in her music, but Bittová says none of those comparisons is quite right. "They are strong women, and they have their own way in music, which is what I like to do. I like to be strong in my own way in my music," she says. "My father, when I was very young, he always told me to just to be your own, just don't make a copy of any other artists—it's really a very important saying from my father to me. I was always looking for something special, you know?"

Like those other artists, Bittová employs what's often called extended vocal technique—using the voice in ways that go beyond the realm, literally the range, of traditional Western music. There are moments on the forthcoming CD when she screeches like a pterodactyl (or what we imagine one sounded like); at other times she's guttural, like she's speaking in tongues. But most of the time, it is much more mellifluous. Her sound is invigorating, urgent, and also soothing; it is a fusion of Old World and new-music sensibilities—plaintive violin coupled with minimalist vocal lines, infused with the spirit and language of Czech, Slovak, and Moravian folk music.

She's curious about what it'll be like to play against the rumble of the subway in Zankel Hall on Friday night. That'll be "something strange," she says, while acknowledging that Carnegie will be the most important venue she's ever played. Ultimately, though, New York is not her kind of town, and she'll be happy to get back to her garden, her two sons, and her classical violin lessons in Lelekovice. "Meeting other musicians in New York, I am a little bit sad that they are really in a hurry always, every day. I like to feel more like time has stopped and just to feel music and to play forever, if you have a good moment." ■