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The Purest One: Iva Bittová with the Bang on a Can All-Stars,

by Sharon Mesmer

I first saw Iva Bittová perform in Prague in 1994 with a German band called Slawterhaus. In one of those rare and beautiful moments when life folds in upon itself as perfectly as a parietal lobe, my boyfriend and I had shared a train ride with the members of Slawterhaus from Berlin to Prague, and Dietmar Diesner, their sax player, put us on the guest list for their show that night. We didn't know anything about them, or who they were performing with; they just looked cool and had a trombone and were German. Getting off the train, we were met by a friend who announced excitedly that that night he'd be going to see this amazing Czech performance artist named Iva Bittová who was performing with a German band called Slawterhaus.



Bang on a Can All-Stars . Photo by: Nick Ruechel

What she did with her voice that night—wrapping it playfully, erotically, sometimes aggressively around words and music in ways that were very modern and at the same time very ancient, almost religious—was an absolute revelation. I wanted to do the same thing when performing my poems in public, although I knew that doing so would be just a pathetic imitation of an inspired original. After that performance, sadly, I somehow missed Bittová's subsequent appearances in the States. So it was fourteen years from that Prague performance to the one on February 13, and it felt like I hadn't missed anything (or a whole lot)—she was still the shamanic orator casting spells of sound around words, pushing and pulling them into funhouse mirror shapes one moment, and speaking-in-tongues intensity the next.

Reading the program before the concert that night, I discovered that Bittová would be performing most of the songs from her 2005 CD with *Bang on a Can, Elida*. In the program notes, she contextualized the work this way:

I once received a book of poetry from a fan in Prague after a concert. The book was written by the Czech poet Věra Chase...A few years later, I was searching for inspiration for my new music, and I found her poem

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“Elida.” I was inspired by the provocative and somewhat erotic nature of the poem. Also, I feel there is some humor in the lyrics, which I always like:

*No one has touched me like you so far
I haven't met that right one yet
With a look and scent that is pure through and through
No one equals your smoothness
Made out of bones and perfume
The purest one*

I thought about this person in the poem. Then—surprise! I remembered that my grandmother’s favorite soap was called “Elida.” Perhaps this poem is not written for a person after all.

Ah—the “Songs of Songs” of soap! This seemed such a good fit with Bittová’s playful, sexy, revelatory aesthetic. As a poet who has worked with musicians, I was interested in seeing how she was going to interpret Chase’s poem and the lyrics of Richard Müller and Vladimír Václavík. And since I never owned the CD, “seeing” the words performed first instead of hearing them would be a fresh revelation.

The first half of the Merkin show consisted of world premieres of commissioned works by Tristan Perich (*All Possible Paths*), Erdem Helvacioğlu (*Lossada Toka*) and Ken Thomson, (*seasonal.disorder*). Bittová’s contribution was not (or at least did not seem to be) part of the commissions; she was listed as a special guest. Her first offering was a series of solo improvisations in Czech. She started out crouched down at the edge of the stage, giving voice to sounds in a way that reminded me of the Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq (in particular the piece “Surge,” usually sung by two people, in which Tagaq takes both parts). As Bittová stood up and roamed about the stage her improvising grew more complex. She accompanied herself on kalimba, her voice moving into what sounded like bird calls. Then she walked over to the center of the stage, picked up her violin and played it to accompany drawn-out vowels, sometimes guttural, sometimes soaring and lyrical, which recalled medieval polyphonic hymns where the extended vowel sounds are meant to suggest a moment suspended in eternity. Then she stopped, stomped her foot, and Bang on a Can took the stage.

Unlike the “poetry with music” projects of, say, Kenneth Rexroth, Bittová’s articulation of words doesn’t just sit on top of the music; it connects deeply with it as another kind of music. She doesn’t exactly sing, but she also doesn’t recite over the music—her voice is half instrument, inside the music at all times. “*Malířri v Paříži*” (“Painters in Paris”) began with a witchy, *Sybil*-like incantation that, alongside a piano, stretched the meanings of the lyrics:

*Painters in Paris in the sunshine
Are painting human faces
All faces with faith
All faces sinful...*

Bittová's interpretation played off the rather "busy" sounds of the Czech words *malíři* and *Paříži* ("painters"/"Paris")—bouncy and playful, it seemed like a show-tune from another planet's Broadway. She also dueted on kazoo with BOAC's clarinet player, Evan Ziporyn. The rather frenetic pace of the piece subsided with the sad, melodically pretty "Bolíš mě, Lásko" ("You're Hurting Me, Babe"). In English translation, the lyrics are rather mundane:

*My head hurts
'Cause of you babe
My eyes are smarting
'Cause of your stares...*

In Czech, though, the crisp consonants paired with the lilting piano sent the sadness (expressed by the open vowels) into a new place, a place of brisk efficiency which offset the melancholy.

"Samota" ("Sadness") was a simply sung and orchestrated piece (just Satie-esque piano and minimal bass), matching sound with content at every step. The middle section—

*I suffer without you
Like a fish without water
Like butter without bread
I don't feel so well*

—was sung/spoken without accompaniment twice. The song dissolved into "sung sounds" that partook of the words but expressed the theme—loneliness—more dramatically.

"Hopahop Talita," done without Bittová, began like a stripped down "La Cathédrale Engloutie," then broke out in klezmer clarinets and staccato drums. Bittová returned, clapping and chanting "Zapískej" ("whistle"):

*Look at me
My bones are like a flute
Whistle
Kiss me
My lips taste good
Like the earth*

She played violin while the guitarist, Mark Stewart, played a light-hearted electric guitar that sounded almost like a koto. It was here that I began wishing that every poet I know who's ever done a reading, or plans to, could've seen the show, could learn from Bittová the true performative possibilities of language. Describing what she does is difficult, like describing music to someone who's never heard it. She shifts between speaking, incanting, and singing, and the sounds of each word are given intuitive colorations that move the perceived meanings up and down a trajectory of joy and sadness. In "Zapískej," lines like "It is not possible to step inside with dust on your shoes / It is not possible to step outside with dust on your shoes" were delivered with a wonderfully delicate force, after which the music settled into a meditative mode. Her voice returned more than halfway through, again with sounds more than actual words.

The last piece, “Elida,” began with powerful, whining violins and Bittová’s voice almost falling over in a swoon, propped up only by the words themselves. Electric guitar whirled beside the violin, then came a drum solo, then the clarinet again, trading off with violin and electric guitar and lending an oldworld cadence to the very modern problem of how to express one’s love for a bar of soap. The way she set this poem, which seems like free verse, even in Czech, is the lesson all poets should take. Why are we always forgetting the musical—and by musical I mean truly melodic—possibilities of words? Of the sounds of words? I know very few poets whose work I would describe as “musical.” It’s as if we’re afraid to relinquish control of words, to send them away from us, to allow them their own lives, their own personalities and experiences. Diamanda Galas does this, as does the Sami singer Mari Boine and the aforementioned Tanya Tagaq, though Bittová seems less invested in catharsis and history—her vocalizing seems to be always asking questions: What if we did it this way? turned it around and played it like this? What if we expressed the joy of sadness, which is the joy of being human? In his book *Shamanism*, Mircea Eliade wrote: “The purest poetic art seems to recreate language from an inner experience that, like the ecstasy of ‘primitives,’ reveals the essence of things.” Which is exactly what Bittová does.

Poets, take note.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Mesmer’s latest poetry collection, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, was reviewed in the February Rail. Her next collection, *The Virgin Formica*, will be out soon from Hanging Loose Press. She was a recipient of a 2007 New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in poetry.