



IVA BITTOVÁ

PULLING MUSIC FROM THE AIR

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

It's been close to 20 years since violinist, singer, composer and overall enigma Iva Bittová left her Czech homeland for New York—not for the excitement and opportunities of the city, but the relative serenity of the Hudson Valley. There she's found community, inspiration and a new vocation, giving lessons through her Zingora Vocal School while being close enough to NYC to give the occasional concert. Looking back, she says, she was "fortunate to be in nature and a new idea came spontaneously: sing with students in the woods and bring positive vibration to the trees. We already took a lot from Mother Earth and it is important to give it back!" Even before making her home north of the city, Bittová was performing in the region. A Bang on a Can commission led to an extended stay in New York and in 2003 she was offered the role of Donna Elvira in a production of the Mozart opera *Don Giovanni* at Bard College's Fisher Center. She's a conservatory-trained violinist but her animated singing comes out of Moravian folk traditions. "I was really scared, those were all professional opera singers," she recalled. "But I was, for the first time, in nature and by the river. That was my idea that maybe I should stay here."

Born in the small, industrial town of Bruntál near the Polish border, Bittová moved with her family to the much larger Brno as she entered her teen years. It was an artistic upbringing—both her parents were musicians and her two sisters work in music and theater—and she was acting, playing violin and taking ballet lessons at an early age. Acting won out, but after ten years working in film and television, she returned to Brno Conservatory, resumed her violin studies and developed a habit for singing while practicing. "It was opening totally new space," she said. "At that time nobody was singing with violin; it was a different vibration, style. I decided I wanted to develop this technique, which was kind of schizophrenic. People were thinking that I was crazy but I just trusted myself. After so many years, the violin is leading my voice and giving me so much knowledge." That practice, that talent and innate musicality, has led her to work with the likes of guitarists Paolo Angeli and Fred Frith, bassist George Mraz (like Bittová, also Czech-born), and son Antonín Fajt, a pianist, percussionist and producer, with whom she regularly collaborates.

In the Hudson Valley, Bittová has found a secluded community of musicians. Through pianist Marilyn Crispell, she met author and clarinetist David Rothenberg, whose writing and performance often involves music made by birds and other animals. Rothenberg had been studying the scores and transcribed birdsongs of 20th century composer Olivier Messiaen and imagined using them as jazz charts. In 2019, to try it out, he convened a quartet with Bittová, Crispell and Norwegian string specialist Benedicte Maurseth (who, on the recording, plays Hardanger fiddle). Ultimately, little of the source material ended up on the recording, but the spirit survived. Rothenberg notes that Crispell stayed close

to Messiaen's harmonies, which play against the contrast in the strings. The results of the experiment can be heard on last year's *Four Fold*, released on Rothenberg's Terra Nova Music. "Marilyn and Benedicte have a kind of calm," he says, while the string players pose a contrast of tradition. "It's interesting what's similar and what's different about the Moravian and Norwegian folk music."

Rothenberg describes Bittová as: "A unique artist; there's really no one like her. I was impressed by her music before I learned she was living in the Hudson Valley. What she's doing isn't traditional folk music, it isn't traditional improvised music, it's just a course she's on. She has her own way of doing things, but she's also a really good collaborator. I think that's rare with very strong personalities." At the time of the recording, Bittová and Rothenberg were also working together in his New Cicada Trio with singer-guitarist Timothy Hill, another Hudson Valley resident. Hill and Bittová additionally started the ensemble Chimera in 2019, which will be heard this month at the Czech Center New York's Bohemian National Hall on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "I was very fortunate," Bittová remembers. "First, I met Timothy Hill, we got other musicians together, [bassist] Michael Bisio, the beautiful Steve Gorn on flute. We build up the present moment," she says of the quartet. "There's nothing to prepare, it's always acoustic, very spontaneous. We are bringing our thoughts, our music, our energy and vibration and we mix it together, and I think the chemistry comes out. Every concert is a little different and it's magic."

In concert, Bittová is something to behold. It's a bit trite to say a performer can pull music from the air, but in the case of Bittová, one can watch her do it. Her hand gestures, her facial expression can seem full of wonder, even childlike, as she engages with the most miniscule of notions—a bird's song, the wind, a trill and a breath—while playing handheld percussion or drawing some invisible, momentary interaction with her fingers. And, of course, there's her violin. "I'm very thankful for violin because this is the most difficult instrument but it is the richest in sound, color," she says. "Sometimes you can develop sounds that you don't know how they happened." She pauses, then waxes philosophical. "Every day I try to be ready," she says. "I save my energy. I try to create every day to avoid negative things. I believe that the artist usually brings out what they live. I just want to make something. Being in the nature, in the woods, no TV, little travel—to listen to your thoughts and quiet, it is very important. I know that music has to exist, it's so important, and I am a little bit sad myself. Everyone has an option. They *can* sing. It's a very joyful moment!"

For more info visit bittova.com. Bittová is at Czech Center New York's Bohemian National Hall Jan. 17 (with Chimera). She is also at Fire Museum (Philadelphia, PA) Jan. 21. See *Calendar* and *100 Miles Out*.

Recommended Listening:

- Iva Bittová/Pavel Fajt—*Bittová & Fajt* (Panton, 1987)
- George Mraz, Iva Bittová, Emil Viklický, Laco Tropp—*Moravian Gems* (Cube-Metier, 2007)
- Iva Bittová—*Iva Bittova* (ECM, 2012)
- Iva Bittová, Gyan Riley, Evan Ziporyn—*Eviyan Nayive* (Animal Music, 2015)
- Iva Bittová/Paolo Angeli—*Sul Filo* (AnMa Productions, 2016)
- Iva Bittová, Benedicte Marseth, Marilyn Crispell, David Rothenberg—*Four Fold* (Terra Nova Music, 2019)

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JANUARY 2026

JAZZ CALENDAR

TUESDAYS 8–11 PM

Weekly Jam Session
House Band:
Diego Voglino with guests

WEDNESDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM

TBA (1/7)
Or Bareket (1/14)
Aaron Burnett Quartet (1/21)
Sabath Perez Quartet (1/28)

THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM

Adam Kolker + Jeremy Stratton with guests:
Marc Copland (1/8) Steve Cardenas (1/22)
Marty Ehrlich (1/15) Dan Tepfer (1/29)

FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM

Matt Pavolka Quartet (1/2)
Ember with Caleb Wheeler Curtis (1/9)
Marianne Solivan (1/16)
Max Bessesen Quartet (1/23) Melissa Aldana Quartet (1/30)

SATURDAYS 6–7:30 PM DUET SET(S),

followed by 8 & 9:30 PM sets:
Jason Rigby (1/3) Mathias Jensen with Caleb Wheeler Curtis (1/10)
Gregory Lewis "Organ Monk" (1/17) Garvin Blake (1/24)
Stephan Crump's Passerine (1/31)

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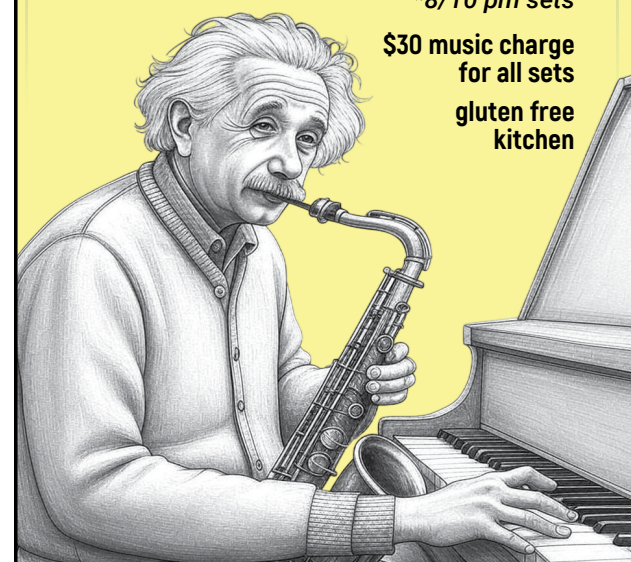
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Jan. 2-3	Ethan Iverson, Billy Hart, Joe Martin
Jan. 7	Noah Haidu
Jan. 8-10	Jean-Michel Pilc, Francois Moutin, Ari Hoenig
Jan. 11	Noah Haidu
Jan. 15-17	ELEW
Jan. 22-24	Adam Birnbaum/Todd Coolman
Jan. 28	Noah Haidu
Jan. 29-31	Champion Fulton

*8/10 pm sets

\$30 music charge
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