

*Martin Smolka*

2001  
**Czech  
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New Music Marathon

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6



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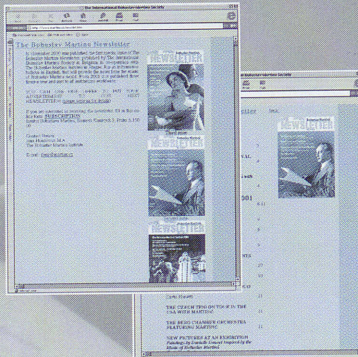
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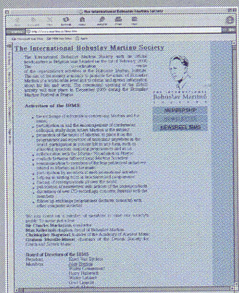
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# Not to write new music, but simply music

**MATĚJ KRATOCHVÍL**

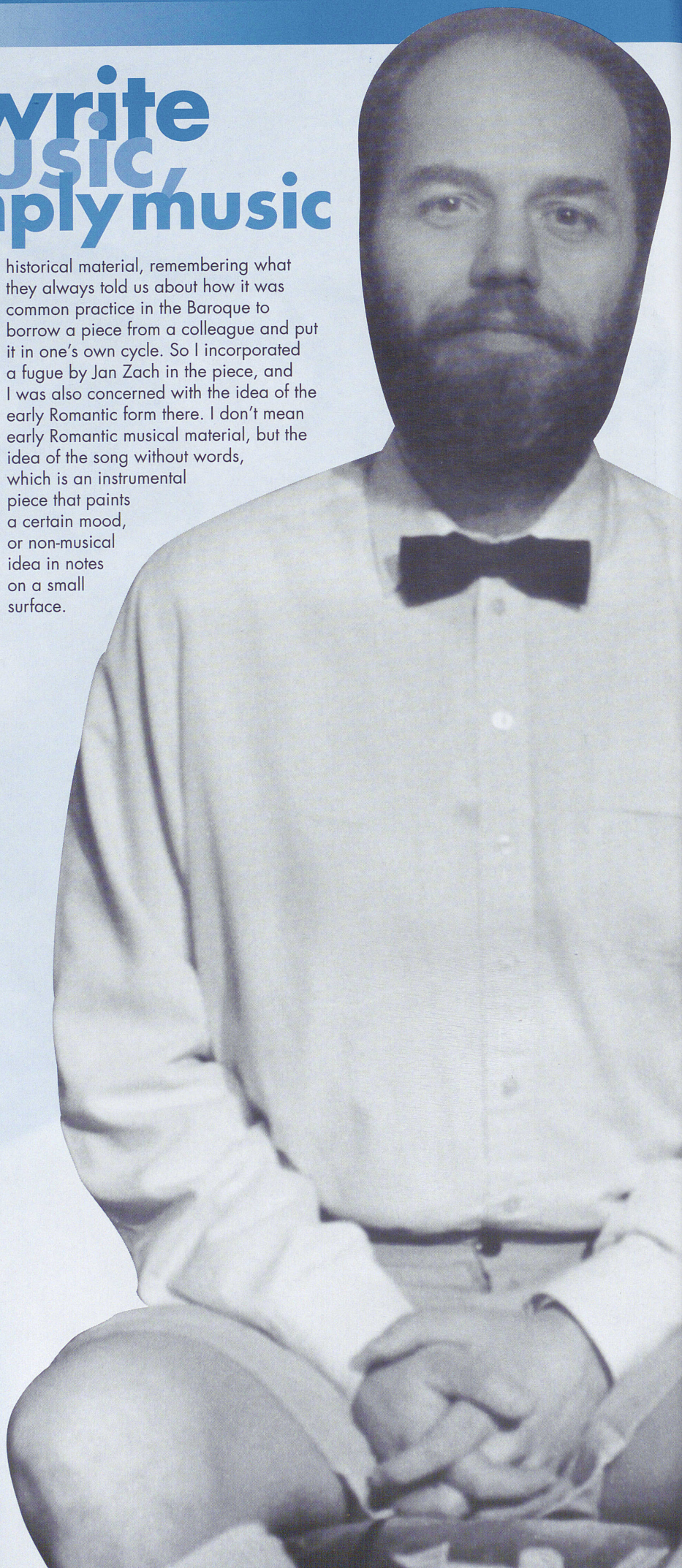
**Martin Smolka** (born 1959) is undoubtedly a hard-working man. In the mid-Eighties he co-founded the group Agon, today probably the most important Czech ensemble playing contemporary music, and wrote a series of compositions for it. He has always had more than enough commissions, of course, including from abroad and from famous groups and festivals. At random, we could mention Donaueschingen, Stuttgart or New York. This year his pieces *Drahý Šebesto* [Dear Sebastian], *Octet* and *Lieder Ohne Worte* were performed at the Prague Marathon of New Music. All this is more than enough to warrant an interview.

## **Can you sum up your recent work in any way?**

I find it hard to talk about what I'm doing just at the moment because for me composing is the kind of adventure in which the result is unknown. And even if I learn a lot about a piece when I'm composing it, I only get some kind of definitive report about it when it's performed. I would prefer to talk about the last two or three years. What is common to most of the pieces is a kind of fixed idea that just now I'm not on friendly terms with new music. I have spent twenty years feeling an inner solidarity with the avant-garde. One reason was the fact that I was working with Agon, where it was necessary to keep up with what was going on in the world and to keep on searching for more and more new repertoire. I don't know how it's just a matter of age, but I have the feeling that the 20th century with its longing for discovery is played out, and that now, at least for me, is not the moment to write new music or contemporary music, but simply music. If you think of it as a task, then it's paradoxical. It means to write non-contemporary music today.

I approached the task from various sides. At this year's Marathon of New Music I presented a piece that is a collage of Bach's notes and recitation of text about him from some decayed 20th-century commentary (*Dear Sebastian*). They also played *Lieder ohne Worte*, from 1999 when I was also partly working with

historical material, remembering what they always told us about how it was common practice in the Baroque to borrow a piece from a colleague and put it in one's own cycle. So I incorporated a fugue by Jan Zach in the piece, and I was also concerned with the idea of the early Romantic form there. I don't mean early Romantic musical material, but the idea of the song without words, which is an instrumental piece that paints a certain mood, or non-musical idea in notes on a small surface.





The work has movements called "In the Prompter's box", "Cry", "Butterfly" and "Angel" (that is the Baroque fugue).

I worked with historical material in another way in the piece for orchestra Remix, Redream, Reflight. Remix is one of the techniques of contemporary pop music, where you take a song and remix it. You take old recorded material and manipulate it very freely on computer while adding new material. I decided to do the same with fragments of my favourite classical and romantic pieces, for example bits from the Second Movement or Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, the last movements of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony, Mahler's Adagietto from the Fifth, Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique and a Beethoven wind octet. The original idea was just to take the closing chords, cut them together and make a loop that would go on

forever, as in some of today's disco music (which by the way in some forms resembles my dear old minimal music).

Later, when I was working on it, this simple concept became complicated and didn't satisfy me, I made cuts of most of the individual chords, but not the last ones, and most of the suspended and passing chords, and messed about with them in different ways, either putting them into repetitive loops or for example alternating one chord from Mahler with one from Mozart and another from Beethoven and so on. Then I added my own music. On the one hand a sort of plaintiff glissando runs through this collage of historical chords, and on the other hand there is also a string unison, practically a cantilena, that I allowed myself for the first time in my career. Out of loyalty to Webern I had always regarded it as

unacceptable in the present time. And so although here it is as it were deformed by quarter-tones, it is just an attempt to revitalise the large string cantilena. In other works, such as Eight Pieces for Guitar Quartet from 1998 and others, I left history to one side. But just for myself I tried to re-lay the foundation stones for situations that the 20th century, especially the second half, has avoided or directly made taboo, and which I, however, regard as an intrinsic part of music. I mean melody, rhythmic pulse and perhaps also the major and minor triad. I tried to begin all over again from scratch, from nothing at all. This effort led to a movement which consists of pure variations on one major or minor triad, but altered on all degrees with the quarter-tone or even six-tone. There is a one-minute movement on a single note, and then a one-minute movement within a range of a single minor third, a movement where the guitars disassemble a single harmony in all kinds of different ways, and so on. We could also find such pared down music in the choral piece I wrote last year for Donaueschingen on texts by David Thoreau Walden - The Distiller of Celestial Dews, where voluntary poverty is also a basic idea of the text.

### **Some of your pieces make great demands on performers. How do they cope?**

While I was working with Agon, especially in the first years, then the work definitely included finding unusual instrumental possibilities in collaboration with players. I often used things that they themselves offered during experimentation or we found together. Naturally they were capable of playing them, and even with a written composition we would still be making their own improvements and corrections. There were people who were a wonderful help in this respect and had a gift for discovery. Kamil Doležal the clarinettist, or at the beginning Vojtěch Havel the cellist and many others. At the very least part of the ensemble was always made up of reliable people who understood all kinds of weird ideas. At the same time it was never an idyll, and someone always wanted to work differently, for example faster, or more "professionally" and so on, or wanted to play another piece altogether. Sometimes there were dramatic clashes and departures.

As far as the difficulties of playing quarter-tones and other problem techniques are concerned, I'm a little spoilt because I have had a series of performances abroad, mainly in Germany, where contemporary music

takes a different form, far from classical romantic musical practice, and also enjoys greater respect. It has a whole range of specialised performers whose feats on their instruments are unbelievable. They've even been known to complain that a piece of mine is boring because it's too easy. I once experimented with Veronika Kopelentová on the flute and we found some special sound tones. Later they were to play the piece in Oslo and the flautist there gave up after an hour of vain efforts to get the sound, saying "I would need a cheaper flute". Later when I was writing for an American living in Germany, the trombonist Michael Svoboda, who had been among other things a long-term member of the Stockhausen Ensemble, he responded to my lengthy questions about the instrument's possibilities by stating that he could play from C2 to C7 (i.e. a whole octave above the normal range of the trombone!) and in that range he could play anything. It was a sort of laddish bravado, a throwing down of the gauntlet, but it was not too far from the truth. And so I wrote things for him that other trombonists considered impossible.

Two ensembles in Germany have already studied Lieder ohne Worte. It meant a great deal of work, but it was clear that they were up to the task. The difficulty of the matter is mainly a question of the bassoon having to play extremely high, the high jumps in every part, the fast tempos, and on top of that the quarter-tones and the harmonics that are unfamiliar to strings. In Germany they played the piece with honour and with what you might call sporting commitment. After two rehearsals with players here I had the impression that they were suffering; that some of them were being required to play things they had never played before, and in which they had no experience, and that it was actually just torture. Here one starts to think about what and how to write on a rather different level. If I worked more with these performers, I would meet them half way and not jump around so much. Trying to give someone pleasure should be a major part of the music, not trying to torment people.

### **Do you have a particular work method?**

I try to work every day, but I'm frequently very unsuccessful. I sit and suffer and console myself with something that Hermann Hesse wrote. He said that absolutely every artist has problems with temporary incapacity and the resulting depression and defeatist moods, and feeling that he can't do



anything. You don't always have days when you're visited by the ability to carry on the work successfully, at least I don't. I struggle with myself. Especially when I am studying and looking for a path, I engage in rational composition and try out a series of constructional methods. Later I made a realisation of *Variations I* by John Cage; I tried his method of spending a week with a ruler, measuring millimetres and then converting them into pitch, colour and other parameters. But I have to say first of all that you need to be fit for this kind of work and this kind of inspiration, and second, that I have never relied on what emerges from this sort of rational composition. I have always checked and rechecked the results again and again, either actually playing it or reading the notes concentratedly and playing it in my head. And I think that in this way you get to know your material very thoroughly, and it's at this moment that you get something we might call inspiration. Don't imagine that I get a whole piece in some lightning flash of

inspiration. This has only happened to me once or twice with small pieces. In some particularly happy moments. More often I collect fragments that occur to me and then try to put them together. Constructively, intuitively or perhaps just playfully. I turn them over and over until I really know them and it's only then that the ideas start to swarm. And I have to be writing. If I don't write a lot I don't get a lot of ideas. That is my experience. Of course it doesn't always apply. Sometimes you say to yourself that you are going to write, you write a great deal, and the ideas come running, but sometimes you write so much rubbish that it then takes you even more effort to get rid of the stuff.

**Do you think that in the Czech Republic one can speak of a generation of composers with a similar pattern of development and style?**

I don't really think so. That sense of group identity or solidarity of fellow-

believers was something that existed under the totalitarian regime and it crossed generations. In the times I remember the theoreticians of New Music Vladimír Lébl, Eduard Herzog, and the composers Marek Kopelent, Zbyněk Vostřák, Petr Kofroň, Brno fellows Josef Adamík, Alois Piňos and Jarda Šťastný stuck together. Those of us who did Agon, that means me and Miroslav Pudlák, were generously accepted into the group on the grounds that we were in some way promising. But it was more a community of inquisitive and tolerant people... and people who didn't conform to the Composers' Union.

We influenced each other very strongly inside Agon. In the Eighties we wrote a sort of fine, hushed, introvert music. And then after the revolution we pulled ourselves together and began to write a sort of resounding, dynamic, "hard" music. But when you listen to it, you hear various different idioms. I don't think you can generalise.

**What are your composing plans at the moment?**

I have several commissions. One - which I am embarking on with particularly great pleasure - is a piece for four singers, the Neue Vokalisten Stuttgart, and string quartet, the legendary Arditto Quartet. I'm at the stage of looking for texts, and so I have a table covered in all kinds of literature and I'm ear-marking different possibilities.

Another piece of work waiting for me is a chamber composition for an instrumental combination quite standard in contemporary music: flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, violin and cello. It is for a Munich project called Klangspuren. One nice thing is that they are not only commissioning a new composition, but letting the composer plan a whole programme choosing works that have had some key importance for him in his career. I have already done this part of the work and I enjoyed it enormously, although it was quite a puzzle, because the instrumental combination offered is limited, and there is more or less no older music available for it. And so I put the programme together from all kinds of crumbs, since actually I have so many great masters that they would never fit into one evening. From Janáček to my teacher Kopelent, and models like Morton Feldman. I'm also embarking on big opera plans.

Thank you for the interview.

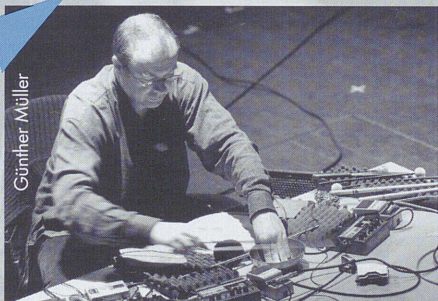




# A COMPACT MARATHON

TEREZA HAVELKOVÁ

What was this year's Marathon like? This is the eighth time we can ask the question, and if asked in some previous years I would clearly have answered with the word, "diverse". This year, however, I am compelled to use another word - "compact". This year the programme design focused very obviously on two themes – the music of the 20th-century American avantgarde and contemporary music of Central Europe with a strong representation of Czech and Slovak music. In terms of performers the Marathon also drew mainly on home – or more precisely Central European resources. The absence of such big names as Elliot Sharp, Gavin Bryars or Icebreaker made it possible for the Marathon to focus on the domestic scene, which has tended to be overshadowed by such visitors in recent years.



Two festival evenings in the Archa Theatre were preceded by an evening in the Inspirace Theatre, the Academy of Music stage studio in the cellars of the Liechtenstein Palace. In the latter two operas were premiered: *Dementia Praecox* by Michal Nejtěk on motifs from S. I Witkiewicz's stage play, and *Divka a smrt* [Death and the Maiden] by Marko Ivanovič, an adaptation of a short story by Ray Bradbury. Although both were degree compositions by two fresh graduates of the Academy, and the performers and production teams were mainly students, these were no mere school exercises. Both (approximately) forty-five-minute operas were music dramas that worked well and revealed clear aesthetic views, while the direction by Jiří Heřman, stage design by Pavel Svoboda and costumes by Tereza Šimová were all mature and compelling. The musical-aesthetic kinship between the composers and the joint production team made for an evening that was a meaningful whole.

The festival in the Archa Theatre itself also opened with a chamber opera. *Coronide* from Vít Zouhar as performed by the Damian Ensemble has already become an established piece at Czech festivals of contemporary music (this year it has been staged at the Brno Exhibition of New Music

and the Forfest in Kroměříž) but this was the first opportunity to hear it in Prague. The event confirmed that this Baroque-minimalist *jeu d'esprit* with effective costumes by Vendula Johnová appeals to audiences, but the Archa Theatre with its dry acoustics surprisingly showed how much in the opera was truly "Baroque" – *Coronide* works even better in the "natural" setting of historic buildings with longer resonance. Another two blocks of Czech music were based on another music drama genre, this time melodrama. *Bosé nožky* [Bare Little Feet] from Peter Graham using a naively philosophising text by Marie Filipiová was tremendously refreshing. It was a stroke of genius to have the actress Milena Dvorská collaborate with Agon on the project – her modulated delivery added a new dimension to the naive, but often clairvoyant text of the melodrama.

Martin Smolka's melodrama *Drahý Šebesto* [Dear Sebastian] did not give so fresh an impression. The idea of setting an again entirely naive-sounding 19th-century text concerned mainly with the figure of J. S. Bach against a Bachian piano prelude distributed to chamber ensemble instruments was witty, but when it became clear that the musical element of the melodrama offered nothing much more than the notorious little pieces that many of us have at fingers from our times at children's music school, there was nothing for it but to wait and see what the text would be like. This, unfortunately, did not add any sharper point to the enterprise. Not even the *Octet* and *Lieder ohne Worte & Passacaglia* proved to be among the best works that I have heard from Martin Smolka. On the other hand, to a considerable extent I blame the rather dim impression I had of the whole Smolka block on the Agon ensemble. With the best will in the world I could not call their performance precise, and the listener often had a problem finding the music in the tangle of notes coming from their instruments. This made the performance by the young Czech contemporary music Tuning Metronomes in the Ligeti block all the more of a delightful surprise. In this case appearing as a wind quintet, they played both Ligeti's *Six Bagatelles* and in the more difficult *Ten Pieces for Wind Quintet*. Mikuláš Škuta and Nora Škutová's performance of the composition *Monument, Selbstporträt, Bewegung* for two pianos was also of a very high standard. Ligeti's block was therefore an excellent tribute to the composer and the slightly less than an hour of his music was among the best experiences offered by the Marathon this year.

The Slovak ensemble Opera aperta presented a brilliant level of performance in the Czech metropolis. They showed their finesse not only in pieces by Vladimír

Godár, but also in a wonderful performance of Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. The group did particularly good service to Godár's simplistic and at the same time distinctively emotionally loaded music, since while this music works very well as film music, I find its concert performance problematic. If the ensemble had not been so good I am not sure that the music would have held the attention of the listeners. Two Germans, the pianist and composer Steffen Schleiermacher from Leipzig and the pianola player Wolfgang Heisig from Dresden came to Prague to play the American avantgarde. Heisig's programme of pieces for pianola by Conlon Nanarrow was definitely an "attraction" even before the event, while Steffen Schleiermacher's programme of compositions by George Antheil, Henry Cowell, Dana Rudhyar, John Cage, Carlo Rugglese and Leo Ornstein for piano and prepared piano caught the fascination of the audience only when already underway. Schleiermacher is without a doubt a top performer (who only plays contemporary music) and in his interpretation the American avantgarde of the 1920s to the 1940s came across as completely natural, meaningful, vibrant and present.

The closing performance, from the Slovak group of improvising composers Vapori del Cuore with guest Günther Müller disappointed me, alas. In Brno I had had the impression that their collective improvisation in real time was meaningful



and organic, above all thanks to the musical sensitivity and discipline of all concerned. Unfortunately this impression was not confirmed at the Marathon. One possible reason may be that the guest Müller was insufficiently integrated with the group, or perhaps it was a case of collective indisposition. The fact, however, remains that this time the individual passages overlapped with each other clumsily, partly because of a perceptible lack of balance between the acoustic and electronic elements of the improvisation. Uncertainty and unpredictability of results, however, are natural aspects of collective improvisation. So how was the Marathon? Definitely instructive. And it also showed that a good festival could be created using "home" resources.





# Days of Contemporary Music 2001

## PETAR ZAPLETAL

Into the thirteen days between the 6th and 18th of November 2001, the organisers of the annual DAYS OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC Festival (The Association of Music Artists and Musicologists, the PŘITOMNOST Society for New Music and the Prague Conservatory) managed to pack ten concerts, and the programmes covered almost seventy chamber works mainly by Czech composers (each concert included one piece by a foreign composer, and the final morning matinée was presented music by three Americans and one Icelandic). This is too short a review for it to be possible to mention every piece, however briefly. I shall therefore just try to highlight and comment concisely on the works that rose above the average. Such works were primarily compositions by experienced and already well-known composers of the oldest generation, for example the *Two Toccatas for Piano* by **Viktor Kalabis** (1923), which was written in 1999 as a preparatory study for a commissioned piece for entrants to the Carl Czerny Young Pianists' Competition. The distinguished composer does not discover new ground in this music, but makes rich use of his experience; he works brilliantly with the sound values of the instrument to give an

impression of great refinement, and perfectly masters the formal structure, in which latent resonances of his great model - Bohuslav Martinů - are anchored in motoric movement. One agreeable surprise was the performance of a fantasy variations by the grand old man of Czech composition **Jan Hanuš** (1916) *Chuť žít (Zest for Life)* for solo violin, already opus 127 from the eighty-six year old composer, was impressive as the persuasive testimony of an artist whose life has encompassed such a great arc of time, and also showed that a deeply concerned performer - in this case the excellent violinist Petr Maceček - can have a practically decisive effect on the final impact of a piece to which he is committed. Another exceptional experience was the performance a melodrama by **Jiří Teml** (1935), *Halasení (Hullabaloo)* on verses by one of the leading Czech poets of the last century, František Halas. What was admirable was not just the fact that Teml was reviving a specific form of combination of words (recited by Otakar Brousek with feeling for adaptation to the music) with music, which is today cultivated only very sporadically, but especially because Teml managed to avoid easy illustrative approaches and in the musical part of the work sought something more like an individually

formulated expression of the inner content and meaning of the verses. A third notable achievement was the performance of the *Quartet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon* by **Josef Rut** (1926). Here the composer, who uses a compositional system of his own that is thought out in every detail, impresses with the pure lines of the woodwind harmonies, expressiveness and calming lyricism, transparency of form and ingenious metrics. It demonstrates to listeners that Rut's composition method is not an end in itself, but for all the sophistication of its rules also opens up a space for spontaneous music-making. **Lukáš Hurník**, a member of the middle generation of composers, presented an original work at the festival in the form of *Reverse Variations on a Theme from Mozart*, in which the quoted theme appears only at the end of the piece and Hurník wittily succeeds in avoiding cliché imitation. His father **Ilja Hurník** (1922) also brought an original work of his own to the festival - the five-part cycle *Christmas for Children's Choir, oboe, bassoon, viola, cello and piano*, conceived as a kind of counterweight to the mass of existing seasonal music. In the second half of this concert, after a series of "purely" instrumental evenings, it was refreshing to hear the



Kühn Mixed (choirmaster Pavel Kühn) and Children's Choir (choirmaster Jiří Chvála) in pieces by **Pavel Trojan**, **Jan F. Fischer** and Arvo Pärt. For me the most powerful work of the programme was the soberly simple and emotionally very moving music of *Two Prayers* by Arvo Pärt. In the first half of the same programme (18th Nov. ) I was captivated by the *Oboe-Quintet* from the Czech teacher, choirmaster and composer **Antonín Tučapský**, who lives in England. Even though there are perceptible traces of the model of Bohuslav Martinů in the work, all four movements have powerful strong dramatic drive. An expressive tutti predominates, and this maintains the listeners' attention throughout. The final concert (18th November), devoted to the work of composers from the USA and Iceland, included four pieces for string quartet. The composers drew on very different stylistic idioms. There was "romantically" coloured stylisation (the *Second Quartet* by David L. Post), a minimalistically austere collage "fragments" (the *Third Quartet* by Peter R. Farmer), dancing rhythmic subtexts and smooth transparent phrases with a degree of jazz influence (the *Fourth Quartet* by Elliot M. McKinley), pronounced cantilena melody and energetic "fugue carousel" with an uninterrupted flow that could perhaps be prolonged indefinitely without our finding anything unusual or groundbreaking in the music (Farmer). The most impressive piece of the programme - at least for me - was the *Second Quartet* by the Icelandic composer Erik J. Mogensen. The one-movement Liljin's Song (the subtitle of the work), inspired by the verses of the 14th-century monk Eysteinn Asgrimsson, uses folk elements in highly stylised form, so that they are no more than "sensed" behind a "curtain" of strong internal tension in the actual musical treatment. Unfortunately, however, the rather unclear, mosaic structure of the piece tends to fragment an otherwise sympathetic impression into a quantity of episodes. Generally one can say that this final concert brought no exceptional or above average experiences to the audience. On the other hand, quality of an unusual kind was to be found at a concert that was not originally scheduled as part of the festival - perhaps as a result of some misunderstanding among the organisers - but then served sui generis as a "replacement" for a cancelled concert by graduates of the Prague Conservatory. The Society for Sacred Music happened to hold a concert on the same day (8th November) presenting six pieces with a sacred theme by

contemporary composers, and at least three rose above the average standard I have mentioned. First and foremost there was the *Three Psalms* for Soprano, Mezzo Soprano, Baritone and Harpsichord by **Svatopluk Havelka** (1925). It is an excellently structured and formally balanced piece, full of fresh ideas, and colourful, in which a highly individual rhythmic model plays an important role. It is a work that requires no external effects to convey its message. Unceasing tension, dramatic musical events, and mature oscillation on the line between major demands on the listener and lapidary comprehensibility, were the chief characteristics of **Ivan Kurz's** *Veni Sancte spiritus* for children's choir and string quartet. **Jiří Teml's** *Psalm 136* was in some ways similar in form; it is at first informed by nervous excitement and a moving reverence of expression, but then the atmosphere blazes in the jubilation of the exultant children's voices. Another success of the evening was the chamber cantata *Quo credibit?* by **Lukáš Hurník**, in which the solo baritone worked as a very effective opposite pole to the colourful values of the children's choir. Throughout the festival the role of the performers was hugely important. Not only did they selflessly accept parts that will clearly not become frequent pieces of their usual concert repertoire, but in most cases they gave performances that testified to a great deal of time and effort spent in rehearsal. I have already mentioned the violinist Petr Maceček;

there should also be high praise for the technically and musically outstanding performances by the Slovak harpsichordist Enikö Ginzera, the Prague Wind Quintet, both choirs (the Kühn Mixed and Children's Choir) and the pianist Daniel Wiesner, who took part in the performance of several pieces and always displayed a mature feeling for the different demands of each work, absolutely reliable technique and sensitivity to the requirements of ensemble playing. The Martinů Quartet, whose members rehearsed and perfectly presented the works by the foreign composers at the final matinée, brought off a difficult task with ease and finesse. Several self-sacrificing people headed by composer Jaromír Dadák ensured that organisationally the festival went smoothly, and this time care was taken with the length of the programmes, so that the number of pieces never exceeded an acceptable level. The level of concert attendance varied slightly, and the hall was never completely full for any of the programmes. On the other hand, it is understandable that it was mainly the musicians themselves who came to hear the concerts, and that they did not find it easy to attend nine or ten evening concerts in the space of sixteen days. There was, however, a puzzling lack of interest in the matinée of works by guests. On the 18th November only forty people came to the Bohuslav Martinů Room in the Liechtenstein Palace, the beautiful venue for most of the concerts.



Daniel Wiesner, Martin Kos, Jan Nykrýn, Jiří Krejčí and Simona Hečová (from the left) performing Antonín Tučapský's Oboe-Quintet



## JAROSLAV PAŠMIK

Who is the woman with the most charisma on the Czech scene? Not media glamour, but a natural charisma that springs from her personality and creativity? I would probably not be too wide of the mark if I venture to say that it is Iva Bittová. This violinist, composer, singer, actor, mother of two sons, and lover of nature and the country life, set out on a professional musical career perhaps fifteen years ago. The violin became her fate. Her original approach to the instrument, which she combines with song in the creation of her own repertoire, soon made her famous throughout the world. People love her

*How was the music for the CD Čikori born?*

We tried to create the pieces together, and not to bring ready-made arrangements. Sometimes we had to be tough about the activities of some members who would bring along jazz compositions, for example, that hadn't "emerged" from the group as a whole. We filtered out these kinds of input, but without getting each other annoyed. Otherwise it's true that when something emerged in the group, then it was usually me who determined the way it was developed. When something wasn't good, then I insisted that it had to be played some other way.

I adore Chet Baker. As a singer and as a trumpeter. That was actually another reason why I wanted a trumpet.

*What brought the young drummer Miloš Dvořák into the group?*

It was Jaromír Honzák. As far as a drummer was concerned, my original ideas were a little different. For a time we rehearsed with the Brno marimba player Martin Opršál, who is slightly from a different musical world, but that didn't matter at all. The problem was more than Martin is a very overworked musician, and in the end he left Čikori for time reasons, and I am very sorry about it. Then Jaromír brought us Miloš, who took a long time to get his bearings and didn't feel entirely at ease. But after a time he had a kind of breakthrough and when we made the recording he was actually the most creative contributor. His role is very strong.

*Polykačka nožů [The Female Knife Swallower] is a very interesting piece.*

*Formally it's a kind of mirror, isn't it?*

Yes. Originally we played the introduction in unison with the trumpet, but then we had to backtrack for performance reasons, because František didn't feel quite happy about something in it. In the end I begin by myself

with voice and fiddle. The middle section emerged out of playful improvisations in rehearsal, and you can really hear that everyone is feeling happy about it.

*A steel drum is used in the composition Křídla [Wings]. How did it get there?*

I got a steel drum as a present from one of my sisters. It is tuned in a very peculiar way. I very much wanted to use it in a composition with Čikori. Once when we were rehearsing I asked Miloš straight out to go and get the drum in the next room. He thought up an introductory motif on it, and we built the whole piece around it.

*The texts on Čikori are very different from the texts on Inferno.*

That is deliberate. We were going for different moods. The texts here are more provocative, provocative in a hidden

# Iva Bittová

## VIOLIN, VOICE AND ČIKORI

**"With a view of the garden - everything in my heart - I play into the violin..."**

(Quotation from the end of a book on Iva Bittová published last year by Academia Press)



music in Japan, America, Germany, Holland, France, Canada and many other corners of our planet. Iva naturally has her public in her homeland too, although Czechs tended to overlook her music until the last few years, when she broke through here as well. Concerts in the Rudolfinum, invitations from President Václav Havel to perform at prestigious events, and interest from the serious media represent some kind of recompense for years of neglect. At the beginning of September this year Iva Bittová released the CD Čikori with the Brno company Indies Records. It is also the title of the group she has been giving concerts with for the third year. The CD is their first, and if it has been a long time in preparation, this is a reflection of the great integrity of the project. Our review of the CD is accompanied by an interview with the inspiration and moving force behind it.

*A trumpet already appeared on your double album Bílé Inferno [White Inferno] (Indies 1997). In Čikori it is used quite intensively. Is there some link between your inclusion of the instrument and your father, who was a trumpet player among other things?*

Yes, the trumpet is always associated with my father. I try to play it myself. I'm fascinated by its sound. Thanks to my father I have a special relationship to the instrument. František Kučera, who plays on both projects, also uses a flugelhorn, which has a tone colour that combines wonderfully with voice, violin and viola.

*The style of play and the melancholy mood that the trumpet brings to the Čikori CD is very reminiscent of the trumpeter and singer Chet Baker. That's no accident, is it?*



way. You know, my life in the village is almost too idyllic and equitable. I know the world isn't like that.

*You recently returned from Canada where you were appearing in a festival of contemporary music.*

*How did you come to be there and how many concerts did you play?*

I was in Canada for the first time ten years ago, playing in Vancouver at a folk festival in a duo with Pavel Fajt. People in the city somehow remembered me. They invited me several times before but unfortunately I didn't have the time. It was only this year when

I received an invitation to the Vancouver New Music Festival that I could make it again. I played one solo concert there, and also - at the request of the organisers - an improvised concert with two local women musicians, a cellist and clarinettist. I had a very good feeling from the first concert, but unfortunately the second didn't do so much for me.

*Were they "classical" musicians?*

Yes, they were trained classically and now embarking on various kinds of improvisation and experiment.

*You work with many foreign musicians and also dancers. What kind of collaboration have you found the most inspirational recently?*

Last year I recorded the CR Dance of the Vampires with Nederlands Blazers Ensemble, and my work with them has opened up a whole range of new possibilities for me. This orchestra invited me as a guest performer, and accompanied me. Since I had no experience of such a project I asked them to try and arrange some of my repertoire for wind orchestra themselves. A Dutch arranger took up the challenge and I very much like his work. At the moment I'm personally more engaged with work on longer compositions with string quartet, but as I said, collaborating with the Dutch opened up new horizons for me. Incidentally, originally I wanted the project with the Nederlands Blazers Ensemble to be presented at this year's Prague Spring, but unfortunately there wasn't enough money for it.

*Some time ago the prestigious German recording company WCM made you an offer. Why didn't it work out?*

The head of the company Manfred Eicher unfortunately wanted to dictate

conditions that I couldn't accept. I offered him material that was already complete, but he wanted to rework the material in his studio. I like my things, especially the solo work, to be free of all technical



effects. He stuck to his position. I'm going to offer him another project.

*What about the project with the Kronos Quartet? You wrote a piece for them. Have they rejected it?*

No, they haven't rejected it. They simply haven't called. The matter is still open.

*Two years ago you played at the Prague Castle for the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution.*

*Who made you the offer?*

The initiative came directly from the president.

*Last year you appeared in a music-dance performance with Čikori and the dancer Lanka Flora at the Duncan Center dance conservatory. You were a great success when you danced there. What is your attitude to dance?*

I really love dancing. From when I was five to when I was twelve I went to ballet classes. My mother wanted me to be a ballet dancer, but then she thought better of it. It's tremendously hard physical work and a huge strain on the body. But those years left me with a strong dance foundation and a great attraction to dance. I very often get news from dancers all over the world who find my music very inspiring and use it for dance.

*How large is your team?*

*Are you your own manager?*

All the information basically goes through

me, and people contact me directly. For many years now I've actually arranged everything by myself.

*It's not long since the time you suspended concerts in the Czech Republic because untrue articles about your personal life were published in the tabloids here.*

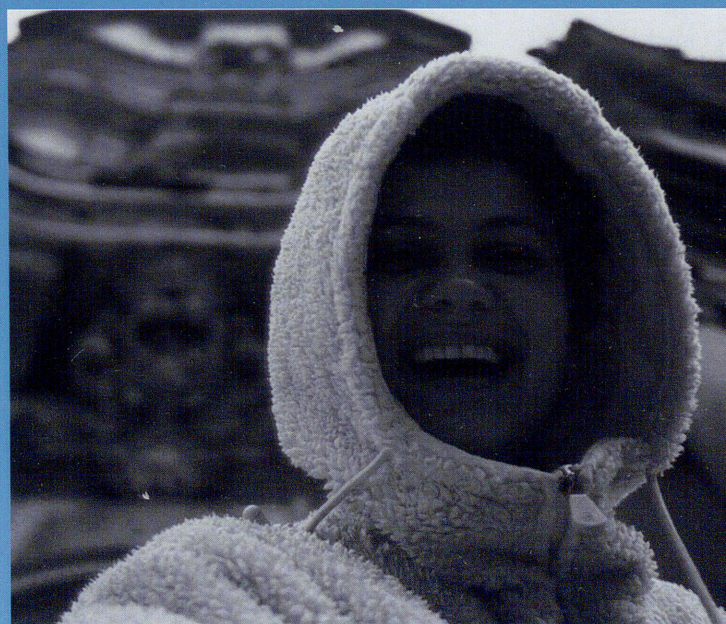
*Would you like to comment?*

I don't like it when people don't speak openly. They ought to be honest about their motives for writing and what they're trying to say. Sometimes I have the feeling that people are trying to settle accounts or punish someone through the media. It's not fair.

*What media do you actually read? At the moment it looks a little as though you mainly follow the popular press.*

Well, the popular press hurt me.

Naturally I don't buy the tabloids or support them in any way, although I'm someone in the public eye, and so it gets to me. Just imagine that you live in a village where you're trying to create certain values, costumes, concerts, and you're working with children and so on. Obviously people are all reading the tabloids like mad, and I can't go from house to house explaining to them what's true and what's a lie. Some rubbish and lies already appeared in May. I wrote at the time that if it happened again, I would stop playing. It happened again, and so I stopped playing in the Czech Republic. There's no point in taking a tabloid to court. The people around me say that my fans don't read tabloids. Yes, but unfortunately they will have to suffer like me, because it hurts me and I can't concentrate on my work. Someone who has never experienced the pressure directly has great difficulty understanding it. I knew I had to react in a way that would make people understand.





## OSTRAVA DAYS OF

**Summer Institute for Young Composers, Musicians and Musicologists**  
**13th August - 2nd of September 2001**

**TEREZA HAVELKOVÁ**

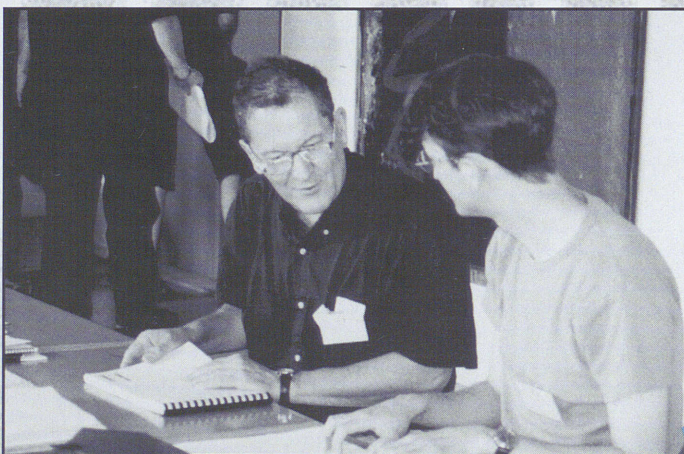
The composer Petr Kotík, who is unusual in never considering the possibility of failure or opposition, decided to hold a kind of "Darmstadt in Ostrava". His idea was to invite several outstanding people to be lecturers and create an informal environment in which students could use their help and inspiration according to need and inclination. And also to invite the Ostrava Janáček Philharmonic so that students would have the chance to experience working with an orchestra and the opportunity to hear their own orchestral pieces. The whole project including composition courses and a final festival embodying the results would take three weeks. The tuition fees would be 2,000 USD. Are you already smiling at such unrealistic, doomed ambitions? If so, then you are taking the same view as most of the Czech music community. In fact, of

Finland, France and the USA. A look at the list shows that the principle line of encounter ran between the states of Eastern Europe and the English-speaking world. Although three weeks may seem a long time, the participants on the courses said themselves that they scarcely had a moment's rest. The programme was packed with alternating lectures by hosts and guests and their own presentations, as well as rehearsals for a final festival that contained both orchestral and chamber works involving many students as performers. For the whole period they had the use of the wonderful new building of the Ostrava Conservatory, with a concert hall that is envied even in Prague. Even in the evenings the students carried on practice and seminars, or got to know computer notation programmes in a special computer class (led by the percussionist Chris Nappi). The organisational side of the whole event also deserves a mention. The selfless staff of the institute office headed by Renáta Spisarová, Dita Eibenová and Petra Drtinová provided all the participants with services and facilities at a very professional standard. Is this just one long hymn of praise? I'm

**The Festival Week**

**IVO MEDEK**

For the "outsider" the most visible and impressive of the three weeks of the first year of Ostrava New Music Days is the final week, which included all the concerts and some of the seminars by host and guest lecturers. Since I myself had a performance on the 28th of August at the other end of the republic, I was unable to get to the introductory concert and so missed not only the compositions of Young, Lucier, Wolff and Brown for three orchestras, but also the historic first "live" badminton played at the premiere of Martin Smolka's *Observing the Clouds*. There was still much worth hearing in subsequent days, however, since more than forty pieces by students, lecturers and guests were played. The spectrum was so wide - from the Darmstadt and New York schools to various syntheses of different movements - that anyone even slightly well disposed to contemporary music could choose something to his or



Lecturer Petr Kotík with one of the students



Chris Nappi, Christian Wolff, Petr Kotík and Alvin Lucier

course, reality has proved Petr Kotík right. The following people turned up in Ostrava: Christian Wolff, Alvin Lucier, Jean-Yves Bosseur and Petr Kotík himself as main lecturers, and as composer-guests Maria de Alvear, Phill Niblock, Somei Satoh and Martin Smolka, together with many other guests mostly from the ranks of performers and music reviewers. The provision of scholarships, in amounts varying depending on student country of origin, meant that this was not an event exclusively for "rich" Americans, and the group that assembled in Ostrava was very diverse, including people from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Belarus, Canada, Britain,

afraid that I really can't help it. In the Czech context the event was absolutely unique. While other fine composition courses are held in the Czech Republic (for example in Český Krumlov), the Ostrava "Summer Institute" is unprecedented for its ambition and scale. It is exceptional in terms of length, quantity and reputation of lecturers and number of students, and for the way it links composition and performance and presents the results to the public, thus also becoming an important cultural event for the Ostrava region. The Ostrava city authority were well aware of its value, and gave the institute major sponsorship. The miracle happened. We can only hope that it will be repeated.

her taste. Another interesting aspect was the juxtaposition of pieces by composers of different generations, often at the same concerts. I would need a whole issue of Czech Music to consider the individual concerts in detail and so I shall limit myself to a few comments either of a more general nature, or relating to things that were exceptional even by the very high standards of the event. As a composer I was naturally most interested by compositions that can be heard in abundance at the Darmstadt courses and certain important new music festivals, but are rarely or never heard in Czech concert halls. Apart from pieces



# NEW MUSIC 2001

by well-known and internationally often performed composers (Kurtág, Feldman, Nono, Wolff, Lucier, Brown, Niblock, Bosseur), these were on the one hand works by people who have not yet acquired the same degree of fame but have nonetheless earned themselves a place among recognised composers with a characteristic idiom, and on the other hand - and in particular - the works of the students on the course, the youngest generation of composers.

I would like to mention two pieces from the first group. *As Far as We Know* by the Spanish composer Marie de Alvear (also known in the field of multimedia) was based on the confrontation between the "traditional" sound character of new music and "traditional" folk song evocatively performed by the composer herself. It was simply a pity that the continual regular alternation of the two levels soon became rather monotonous. The second composition was *Kyokoku* by Somei Satoh, in which the solo part was taken by the baritone Thomas Buckner. If I were forced to assess this piece from the point of view of the development

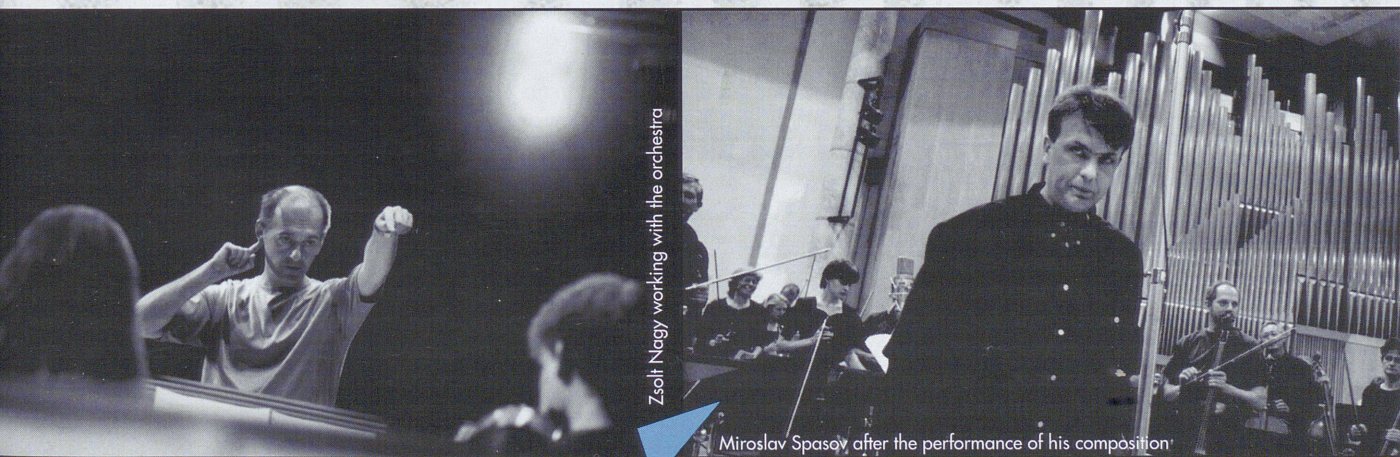
Saunders, Tim Parkinson, Peter Flint, Nic Gotham and others will soon become known on the international scene. Two young Czechs presented their work - Sylva Smejkalová with her chamber piece *Zrození [Birth]* and Markéta Dvořáková with her *Concertino for Soprano Saxophone, String Orchestra and Percussion*. It was greatly to the credit of both that their works were definitely not pushed into the background by the strong competition.

The achievements of performers and conductors - once again, not only guests and lecturers but also students - represented a no less interesting side of the concert programme. To praise the Arditto Quartet is to bring coals to Newcastle. Its unique status on the world quartet scene is generally known and I have already encountered their wonderful interpretations of contemporary music on many occasions. Nonetheless, it "caught and held" me all over again, this time in a way I had not expected. It was by their interpretation of someone we believe we have a patent on, once and for all - Janáček, and

recent realisation of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* at the Prague Spring is still a very fresh memory). This was not just because of results that confirmed his leading position in contemporary music, but because of his inexhaustible energy and approach to the rehearsal of pieces with both the Philharmonic and with the students of the Janáček Conservatory who took part in performance of many works by the course students. He was ably seconded by other conductors, especially Petr Kotík or the young Nathan Fuhr.

If we add to all this the participation of other internationally famous musicians (Joseph Kubera, S.E.M.), it is clear that more was happening in contemporary music in one week in Ostrava than often happens in one year in the whole republic.

We can only hope that in 2003 the enterprising organisers headed by Petr Kotík will be able to maintain a standard as high as the one they have set themselves this year, and find a way to include as many Czech participants as



Zsolt Nagy working with the orchestra

Miroslav Spasov after the performance of his composition

of new music, I would probably have to write it off, but from the perspective, or rather in the ears of the listener, it possessed something extraordinarily evocative. Zsolt Nagy, the well-known conductor and expert on new music who was sitting next to me, probably put it best when he whispered to me after a few minutes of the piece, "Complete triviality that acts brilliantly on the people's subconscious".

It is very difficult to pick out a few pieces from the second group - the students - because there was a whole series of compositions of a more or less exceedingly high standard. I believe that names like Miroslav Spasov, James

specifically his first string quartet. It was the first time I had heard them perform it, and turned out to be so ravishing that I almost had the feeling of looking straight into the soul of the Master, full of emotion and passion. The performance of Feldman's *Viola in My Life IV* by Taiwan-born Liuh-Wen Ting, was another extraordinary experience.

Among the students I was most impressed by the performances from singer Erin Flannery and harpsichordist Enikő Ginzéra, and the performance (and piece itself) from drums player and composer Matthew Welch.

Among the conductors, Zsolt Nagy was once again outstanding (his part in the

possible. But the very fact that the concerts involved the collaboration of dozens of Czech performers - from the Ostrava Philharmonic and the Conservatory - whose every encounter with new music (and with such experienced conductors) is a valuable broadening of musical horizons, represents one of the most promising aspects of the courses from the point of view of their potential impact on Czech musical culture.

Last but not least, we should thank the organisers and cross our fingers for the future of the event.



# The Magic Word Alternative

**PETR BAKLA**

In relation to festivals of all kinds and similar events we regularly encounter attempts to define what in this country we call "Alternative Music". Usually it is a case of one of the organisers trying to explain to a journalist from a non-music publication (or worse to the public, for example in publicity materials or just before the opening concert) what Alternative Music really is. As a result we get various bombastic, metaphor-rich, generally panegyric and above all completely vague definitions of alternative music (and if the interviewee happens to be a musician, he or she usually adds that "I don't much like the word *alternative*", and starts a detailed explanation why. Well frankly, it's because it no longer seems to him or her quite classy enough.)

The main argument for such confused definitions-non-definitions is supposedly that alternative music simply can't actually be defined, and the alternative is just what escapes definition. If I were not aware of the social and economic contexts, I would add cynically that this foggy approach is based on commercial considerations - it's a way of attracting the largest number of curious people. Since I am aware of the contexts, however, I won't do it. I shall do

something else. I shall try for a definition on the basis of the claim that alternative music is a genre as definable as all the others (i.e. with all the similar attendant problems, which don't mean that the task of definition should be abandoned). I shall be concerned with Czech alternative music. The quality of the Czech alternative scene (=not at all the alternative scene as a phenomenon) makes it relatively unusual in international context and what applies to the Czech alternative scene does not apply, for example, to French alternative music.

This article will try to identify some of the characteristic features of the Czech scene. Like any other deductive attempt at a framework account of an artistic genre it will necessarily entail elements of simplification and generalisation. The fact is, unfortunately, that the alternative community is particularly sensitive to any attempts that seems to be forcing everyone into a line, however theoretical. I don't want to ridicule alternative music or reduce it to the banal, but we should be aware that the misty halo of the unique that floats round the alternative scene doesn't do much for it in practice. For people outside it seems more like a joke. The fact is that if most funk, for example, sounds exactly the same to the ear of the alternatively orientated listener, then the same is true the other way

round. I shall try to describe exactly what makes this undifferentiated impression on the ears of outsiders, and what insiders quite logically fail to notice. Perhaps by this route we shall arrive at a more concrete picture.

In no case do I deny the existence of unclassifiable individual identities. I even admit with pleasure that in the landscape of alternative music these exist to a higher degree than elsewhere. Here, however, we shall be concerned with the alternative mainstream, which has developed in the wake of the exceptionally individual father-founders who presided at its birth. (I ask pardon of the mother-foundresses Iva Bittová and the ladies of the group Zuby Nehty, since their successor community is more modest in its visibility, if it exists at all). What I have in mind are the groups The Plastic People of the Universe (PPU), DG307, Psí vojáci (Dog Warriors), Dunaj and the associated (especially E) bands in which Mikoš Chadim has appeared and still appears (Extempore, Mch Band) and Už jsme doma (Already Home). It is these bands that have had the biggest influence on Czech alternative music both in terms of quality and quantity (they have by far the most successors). It was they who thought up the cliches on which the mainstream draws, and they who developed them into meaningful form. What creates a genre is its average. The basis of the grey average which predominates in alternative and which is the subject of this article (and the only subject!) is the same as the basis of the grey average predominating in jazz, blues, rock, folk, pop, world music or classical music. It is an instrumental-style usage devoid of content. It is this phenomenon that causes ninety percent of compositions or songs in the genres just mentioned (and any other) to be as like as two peas. What is in one respect or another interesting (and in the best cases lasting) in the individual genres is precisely what in some way rejects the genre, and/or what originally established or constituted the genre, and this is precisely not the subject of my article. The times when alternative music was "big beat that was different from big





beat" are gone. In short, alternative music in this country has established itself as a genre with definable basic attributes. These are the following:

## Blocks

Alternative pieces rarely have the classic bigbeat song structure of verse-refrain-verse-refrain-solo-2 x refrain, or a structure derived from it. The typical structural elements of alternative music are internal homogenous blocks.

Individual blocks usually have a repetitive structure based on rhythm. The transitions between blocks are usually breaks, not very much masked, almost exclusively expressed only by a change in rhythmic pattern or time as well (but only occasionally by a volume or pitch change). To put it plainly, when there's been enough of one barrel organ, we jump to another. Ostinato playing is typical, often simultaneous on all instruments. A melodic line is sometimes developed over the ostinato, but in most cases only the vocal line diverges if anything at all actually diverges from ostinato in a given block.

If the blocks are on the long side, the piece does not contain many (sometimes an entire block de facto consists of one block) and the time (usually 4/4) does not change from block to block - this is a feature we can attribute to fondness for the "Plastic-underground" school of thought. (The model is based on the music of The Plastic People of the Universe and this kind of work is usually greeted by the public with the comment, "We've got another Undie again". A more interesting rhythmic model, also dependent on the character of the particular material, shows the influence of more recent Pluto or the older recordings of Dunaj (the album Rosol). The result of both is a marked monotony (supposedly) compensated for by the (supposedly) "hypnotic, urgent and darkly atavistic" sound of the individually repeated figures.

If, on the contrary, the piece contains many smaller blocks with various kinds of different rhythmic patterns and different times, this is most likely a case of derivation from the work of Už jsme doma (for which the principle described is, of course, merely a functional substrate for highly individual melodic lines which the group's imitators do not, alas, attempt), or more recent Dunaj music (the album Dudlay). It is characteristic that the number of repetitions of the pattern in a block is usually odd rather than even, i.e. not 8, 12 or 16 bars, but 5, 7, 9, 11 bars, for example, and the character of neighbouring blocks is contrasting. The aim is partly to distinguish the music from

bigbeat stereotypes, and partly to achieve surprise, and a sense of the unusual ("The group's music is full of surprising turnarounds," is a favourite phrase in publicity and reviews). Paradoxically, just because priority is given to the most wrenching and awkward sudden changes, the result is again a certain monotony, especially when a larger number of pieces is involved.

Since we have just argued that alternative music relies primarily on repetition, we should now take a look at the properties of the repeated unit.

## Note Material

For alternative music the fundamental material is the minor scale (natural, harmonic, gypsy). The harmonic (and often also the melodic) basis of alternative music is the minor triad. Harmonic structure in the standard sense of the terms is not, however, characteristic of alternative music, and it is not really possible to talk of minor tonality. The harmony of the pieces is usually elementary and its explicit expression (especially in keyboard passages) is not regarded as something function, but as illustration (thickening, "atmosphere") created by shifting the generally minor chord onto different tones of the melodic mode. This is a technique taken over primarily from the Mch Band, but only externally; Chadima's later work is harmonically much more advanced than the music of his followers.)

The minor mood of the pieces is given primarily by the figurative stylisation of fragments of the minor scales, which usually at least partly contain a minor triad (or characteristic intervals, such as the very popular minor sixth), and so also fulfil a "melodic" function. If the "fountain of motifs" typical for bigbeat is the note pattern 3-2-1, for alternative music it is the pattern 2-1-4-1-4 (in number of semitones, from the bottom). A further characteristic is, for example, the use of the same figure (arpeggio style, melodic progression) in a second transposition and back again. We might describe the overall impression as one of "unending ornamentation" with a static quality that depends for its degree on the treatment of rhythm, since motifs rarely undergo any unbroken changes but after a time are just abandoned with a jump to a new motif as we have noted in relation to "block" thinking. The desired

sense of tension and nervous excitement (see the section on the Aesthetic) is achieved by various chromatic changes, such as oscillation between an Aeolian and Gypsy mode, the insertion of Phrygian seconds and the like. We can find the origin of the scheme primarily in the music of the group Dunaj. In Dunaj we also find the roots of another model of riff creation that has been taken up particularly by guitarists and is normally used in combination with the previous model. We can describe it in



terms of a parallel with punk guitar: if the punks concentrates on shifting the classic major barre chord up and down, then the guitarists of alternative with no less industry ride up and down the fingerboard with their fingers in a minor barre, likewise regardless of the note in the scale at which arrive (see above). The aim, however, is primarily to achieve a certain mobility.

## Odd Rhythms

Rejection of the supremacy of four-time bars in rock music is another typical feature of alternative music, as is having odd numbers of bars in the constituent blocks. In alternative aesthetics the rule is that the more awkward the rhythmic pattern is the better it is, in the sense of letting everyone know that it isn't in four-time (if we leave aside the rhythmically conservative Plastic-Underground tradition that actually prefers 4/4). We find an abundance of six-time bars and a quantity of triplets.

The bass ostinatos offer a good illustration not only of characteristic treatment of rhythm, but also of typical use of note material. Since an ostinato mode generally predominates in alternative music, the style of bass play is quite crucial for the result and its stylistic elements are adopted by the other instruments as well, especially guitar and cello, and are inevitably reflected in the drums accompaniment.



## The Bass Ostinatos

These are usually one-or two-bar, and can be divided for our purposes into the "PPU" type (from the Plastic People of the Universe) and the "Václavek" (from Vladimír Václavek, bass-guitarist and guitarist with Dunaj, today Klar and Rale).

The former is distinguished by the relatively small number of notes used (arpeggio play of a diminished third), which are set low, with the interval no greater than an octave and the starting note usually E1 or A1 (these are the two lowest strings on the bass guitar). The characteristic intervals apart from the universally popular octaves are augmented fourths and minor thirds. Most are in four-time, and tend to be at medium tempo. We might term the effect "hypnotic" (at least that is the general idea) instrumental colour with a suitably rumbling impression.

Ostinatos of the "Václavek" type, by contrast, are distinguished by a wider ambit (resulting from the use of all four or more strings of the bass guitar) and an effect that is nervy and "unsettling" (likewise a favourite term). The characteristic intervals are the minor third, the tritone and the minor ninth, i.e. the upper minor second. This style of play is typically alternated with the guitar style that has been described above: a harmonically played fifth with a double-octave lower note on the upper strings in guitar-slide style. We should also not forget the technique of letting the low strings resonate longer (and the harmonically played intervals in general). From the structural point of view it is then typical for the "Václavek" type ostinatos, in contrast to the strictly repeating ostinato figures of "PPU" type, to have a kind of solid skeleton (as far as rhythm and some basic notes are concerned) which can be augmented by other notes, usually on an irregular basis. In relation to rhythmic arrangement, this is often rich in quaver and semiquaver triads, with a very atypical rhythm of a kind sufficiently awkward to let everyone know immediately that isn't... (see above). Alternation of crotchet values and two quavers at the end of the bar (figure) is common. The "Václavek" ostinatos are

usually played at a sharper tempo, with the bass pitch in the middle range; they are instrumentally more difficult and so the player makes sure that they are fully audible. Of course there are exceptions, and sometimes the other instruments can be made out.

## Instrumental Structure

The classic rock band structure predominates (guitar, bass guitar, drums, vocals) but it is almost always "peculiarised" in some way: by keyboards or saxophone, recorder, acoustic guitar, accordion, percussion and so on. Recently there has been a fashion for pre-recorded materials, halfplaybacks (yes, even alternative music succumbs to modish trends) and above all any kind of acoustic instrument (this is particularly the case for bands from Brno and its surrounding area). Maximum bizarreness of instruments is a fetish with many alternative groups,



and is unfortunately connected with the notion that unusual instrumental profile is enough by itself to ensure unusually high musical quality. We are witness to an unending impotent ride round the minor scale on various different instruments headed by the cello. Nor should we forget the obsession with all kinds of ethnic instruments, usually with a merely decorative function, that has recently gained a grip. Vocals are declaimed to the point of recitation, from shouting to a quiet whisper. Normal singing unfortunately appears very rarely (the father-founders and mother-founders are shining exceptions here). The reason is clearly not so much that people on the alternative scene are bad at singing as that melodic invention is limited by the treatment of note material I have described above.

## Aesthetic

I shall now try to summarise what I have just dissected. It emerges from the analysis that alternative music is scarcely brimming with joyful optimism. The idea is an impression of gravity and solemnity. Alternative musicians generally take their music seriously, and all praise to them for doing so. Their pieces are usually dark, dramatic, nervy, precipitate, or on the contrary (a minority) melancholic and nostalgic (the unrivalled masters in the field here are the later Mch Band and the later DG307, and the more recent Cínna). In most cases there really is an authentic urge to communicate something. The "unenlightened" public often finds this music depressing, although that is not usually the intention. "Merry bands", although they exist, are in the minority. Surprisingly what I have written above applies to most of these as well. Their domain is normally weird, grotesque and black humour.

One admirable feature of alternative musicianship is the almost complete absence of the vacuous solo-ising so common in other genres. The alternative musicians are disciplined and subordinate their personal ambitions to the whole more than is usual among musicians in general. Here I would guess that Mikoláš Chadimá's book "Alternativa" is a major influence.

An analysis of alternative texts (lyrics) would require a whole separate article, and so I shall be telegraphically brief. Many of the texts come from the bands themselves and are rarely stupid. Poems rather than classic song lyrics are usually the rule. Musical arrangement of poetry from other sources is nonetheless quite common, and with some bands is banishing their own texts to the margins or completely. Favourite texts adopted include Wernisch and Reynek.

## Sociological Aspects

From the sociological point of view, one of the interesting features of alternative music is that it is multi-generational. Both musicians and public range from 15 to 50 years of age without any sense of strain. The intermingling of age-groups is similar to the situation in jazz, with which alternative music shares another remarkable feature. This is the way in



# RADŮZA - ANDĚLOVÉ Z NEBE



Radůza – Andělové z nebe  
Angels from Heaven, Indies, 2001, 50:47

## PETR FERENC

Radůza first engaged the attention of the public at the beginning of the 1990s when she appeared as a guest at concerts of the group Nerez, performed at the Lucerne before Suzanne Vega and produced a democassette with the title *Blues?* Then she seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth. Now, however, she has made a remarkable debut album produced by her "discoverer" Zuzana Navarová.

In the time between *Blues?* and *Angels from Heaven* the guitarist-balladeer has swung an accordion onto her shoulders and it has become her main instruments, especially at live performances. On the album she uses it in roughly half of the sixteen songs, with the other half made up of pieces accompanied by Omar Khaouaj on guitar, František Raba on bass guitar + double bass, and Zuzana Navarová on sporadic but highly effective percussion (and in two cases singing as well). Anyone in the Czech Republic who writes a song for voice and accordion risks comparison with Václav Koubek or Jim Čert and will usually fail to come off the victor. Radůza, however, manages to find a place precisely at the mid-point between Koubek's fragility and Čert's devilry (Čert means devil in Czech). Her accordion works strongly accent not just the essential Czech pub mood (*Dnes v noci nad světy* [Tonight above the Worlds], *Nahorů dolů* [Up and Down]) but also and unusually strongly (don't get involved with folk song) traditional music (*Svítil slunko, svítí* [The Sun Shines, It Shines]). In these songs Radůza shows the richness of her voice to the full. In the texts she presents a brisk, extrovert woman battered by life, and only in the refrain *Jednou to pomine* [One Day it Will Pass], is there a flas of Koubek's lay preaching ("Don't forget/Forever/Alone you are nothing").

In the two pieces where she uses piano, Radůza is still wilder. She accompanies herself with monotonous thumps of almost Topoesque force and her voice becomes courses. *Bílá hlína* [White Clay] about a headlong race with life beings us to the doors of a Beatnik dive, and when

Navarová strikes the drum at the end of the verse, the effect is almost as if from beyond the grave. *Lišák* [The Fox] has verses that are similar in form, but the refrain will amuse anyone who calls Radůza a cabaret singer. The piano softens, a softly tinkling guitar joins in, and the whole eight verses love song ends with the most banal "Vien avec moi / mon amour". You can almost see the wink.

The songs without accordion are often reminiscent of the music of Nerez. Four of them were co-written by Navarová, although the most Nerezesque song is *Autobus*, written without the producer. In these songs Radůza shows her other face – a sometimes forsaken girl with doubts, but at the same time a much greater capacity for joy with no thought to the transience of happy times. *Leden, je Leden* [January, It's January] and *Sedím tiše* [I sit quietly] are commentaries on grief at parting, with background colour provided by unobtrusive Latin guitar links (and also several short jazz solos) and double bass, but even their evocative "summer" sadness is knowingly undercut by self-irony ("I was so pretty / but it somehow passed you by."). The happy feelings already mentioned are described in the introductory *Cestou do Jenkovic* [On the Way to Jenkovice] (the quilts shine in the windows / milk is heating for white coffee / the holidays are just starting / outside it's fine and everything is going well.), which is my favourite track on the album, and the children's piece *Do Afriky* [To Africa] – a duet with Martin Pulitzer who to judge by his voice must be around nine years' old). Here Radůza gives rein to her memories of childhood and uses the most up-to-date children's slang, accomplishing it all with another enchanting wink and so elegantly waving away the disagreeable patronising aura so common to professional children's entertainers (who try to serve up what is good for them). Here I cannot but recall the Zuby Nehty group's album *Dítkám* [For Kiddies].

And I have just one more comparison in a spirit of pure impressionology. One song, in which Radůza herself plays the guitar – *Stojí kámen, stojí* [The Stone Stands, It Stands] - with its minimal echoed guitar accompaniment, reminds me in both voice quality and test of Dagmar Andrtová-Voňková's "echoes of Czech songs" in their quieter form; the Slav pull is still there. In the space of fifty minutes Radůza presents most of her sympathetic faces, and the regular alternation of accordion and guitar songs on the album is not just the simplest, but the most effective artistic scheme. If we know almost nothing about the girl called Radůza before the album came out, we still don't know much. But in our ignorance we can now croon some of sixteen songs that almost seem to come from heaven.

which the young venerate tradition with a zeal close to adoration. The alternative scene is quite a closed community, which young people want to enter and where they want to be accepted. (For purely pragmatic reasons this acceptance is necessary if groups are to operate properly on the concert scene, i.e., appear at festivals and in select clubs). This penetration of the new generation into the community naturally works mainly through the new music itself, which is quite logically affirmative towards the existing tradition and so similar to it and derived from it ("Can't you hear? We play it too, so accept us as one of you!") It is precisely in this syndrome that I would look for the origins of the relative lack of new discoveries that everyone complains about. The wide range of age groups involved in the community tends to cause ever more stasis in the music. Young alternative musicians, just like young jazzmen, play the same as their elders. And their elders grumble that there's no interesting listening.

## Alternative Recommended listening

You will find the roots of the current Alternative mainstream on these recordings:

Už jsme doma: *Nemilovaný svět* [Unloved World] (Re-release, Indies. rec. 2001), Hollywood (Re-release, Indies rec. 1999)

Dunaj: Rosol (Re-release, Indies 2001)  
Dudlay: (Bonton 1993)

The Plastic People of the Universe: 1997 (recording of live appearance, Globus International 1997)

Mch Band: *Es reut mich f...* (Globus International 1991), *Gib acht!!!* (Monitor 1993)

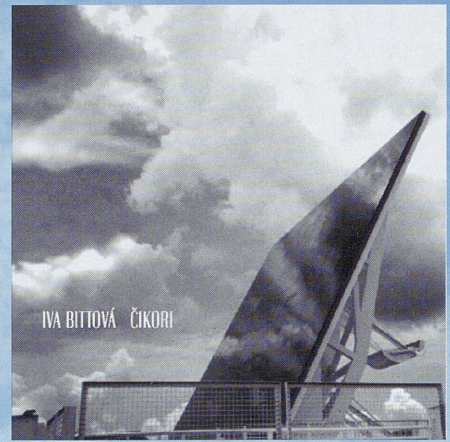
Pluto: Pavel Fajt & Pluto (Indies rec. 1996)

DG307: Concert (Indies rec. 1999)

Činna: *Čtvrtek* [Thursday] (Re-release Black Point 2000)



# Iva Bittová and Čikori



JAROSLAV PAŠMIK

Ivan Bittová and Čikori  
Indies Records, 2001  
51: 29

Long in the making, the album from Iva Bittová's band was released at the beginning of September by Indies Records of Brno

This is the second album this year from Czech violinist, singer and composer Iva Bittová. The first was *Echoes*, a joint project with Andreas Kröper, the German flautist specialising in early music, which was released in the Spring by Supraphon. The second album, called *Čikori* (a phonetic transcription of the English word "chicory") is a completely different kettle of fish.

The group Čikori has been in existence now for about three years, and its core is Bittová together with guitarist and singer Vladimír Václavek. The two were old friends from the time of the Brno group *Dunaje* at the end of the 1980s, and in 1997 they jointly produced the legendary double album *Bílé Inferno* [*White Inferno*]. Two other musicians from Čikori were also already present on this album - the trumpet player František Kučera and the double bassist Jaromír Honzák - and the percussion part was taken alternately by Václavek, Bittová and Kučera. The absence of a professional drummer was probably caused by the fact that Bittová was going through a divorce with drummer Pavel Fajt at the time. The shared percussion was, by the way, a stroke of genius, which to a certain extent determined the whole sound of the album. In *Čikori* we now find the young professional drummer Miloš Dvořáček, who replaced the original choice, Brno percussionist Martin Opršák when he had to drop out of Čikori for reasons of time pressure. Dvořáček was brought

into the group by Honzák, who had worked with him on various jazz projects.

It must be said that *Čikori* is rather in the shadow of *White Inferno*. Not that it is a bad album. Quite the reverse. But *Inferno* was a quite exceptional project both musically and in terms of the choice of texts and the team surrounding, augmenting and accompanying Bittová and Václavek (apart from Honzák and Kučera, these were the American avantgarde cellist Tom Cora, Ida Kellarová and the Lelky girls's choir). Čikori are not so exceptional or unusual. Dvořáček and Kučera are jazz musicians, and although they are among the most open-minded on our jazz scene, it is hard for them to change profiles that are partly chosen and partly imposed by expectations. In *Inferno* their influence was not so great as it has become in *Čikori*, and this influence has to a certain extent predetermined the character of the album. For better and for worse. While in terms of composition Václavek's style (complicated polymetrics) is certainly evident from the CD, it is here set in a new context, and wedged, as it were, into the idiom used by the most progressive Czech jazzmen. Of course, what is progressive in Czech jazz is already common in the international world and sometimes even passé. This is most evident in the composition "The Female Knife Swallower", where a distinctive speciality of Czech jazz-rock groups is used for the link between the individual sections. The piece has in fact already been recorded with different instrumental structure (violin, voice, tarogató, and pan-pipes) on the CD *Iva Bittová Classic* (Supraphon 1998) where the same passage sounds fresh and unhackneyed. Iva Bittová's music does not, however, aim to be avantgarde at any price, and Čikori is a quite exceptional testimony to successful

team work. All the musicians here speak with their own genuine voices, and Bittová would in any case never release a project with which she was not a hundred percent satisfied. As an "eternal soloist" she thirsts for fullness of communication, and her satisfaction derives from its fulfilment. The album is indeed genuinely communicative, sensitively realised, with no detail disregarded or allowed to undermine the shared harmony and joy. Probably only the words are gritty or disturbing. Bittová says that she deliberately chose the texts, most by the Brno musicians and lyric writer Karel David, as a contrast with *Inferno*.

One of the nine pieces on the album is highly exceptional. It is *Křídla* [*Wings*], which Iva talks about in the interview. We should also mention two other striking tracks, *Přání* [*Wishes*] and *Zapísej* [*Whistle*]. *Wishes* is built on an irregular Václavek structure (the formula is the number seven), harmonically further cut down and modulated in minimalist style by ostinato guitar. Bittová's voice has a slightly blues feel at the beginning - certainly achieving the gritty sound that she has been after. The penultimate track *Whistle* is a playful little waltz with an inserted five-time bar and following five-time passage with a melancholy solo from Kučera à la Chet Baker and solo by Iva Bittová (singing in unison with the violin). A very raw execution of the first part, a sensitive contrasting passage and a beautiful text by Václavek. Coda: *Čikori* has not yet conquered me to the same extent as *White Inferno*, which entirely enchanted my ears and soul. Perhaps there will be a breakthrough when I hear it for the hundredth time. Who knows? One thing at least is clear. I have in front of me a very authentic message from the best of Czech musicians, and despite all the reservations I have expressed, I must take my hat off to them.



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