

Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville
Victoriaville, Quebec, Canada | May 18-21, 2017

In Canada, the Monday closest to May 24, the birthday of Queen Victoria, is a public holiday (in Quebec it has two names: Journée des Patriotes or Fête du Dollard—it's complicated), and the Victoria Day long weekend is the unofficial start of Canada's summer. The Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV), held from the Thursday to Sunday of the Victoria Day weekend, can similarly be seen as an unofficial kickoff to the summer festival season. The 2017 Victo was the 33rd, and as the years move along, the festival has developed traditions (both formal and informal) of its own, among which is the ability to continue to evolve and surprise.



Senyawa – Photo credit Martin Morissette

As usual the weather was changeable and frequently quite cool at night. The opening evening started at a humid +30C and ended a good 20 degrees celsius colder just a few hours later at 1:00 a.m. The pertinent information for this review is that, in those few hours, the collision of the cold and warm fronts caused a windstorm that resulted in a brief power outage during Colin Stetson's set. Apart from that, the weather was spring jacket friendly, ending in a gloriously sunny final day on Sunday. In a way, the weather matched the levels of the performances as the weekend went along, culminating in the

shining brilliance of Anthony Braxton's solo performance on Sunday evening.

This edition of the festival, more than any before it, featured performances that employed visual images as an integral part of the presentation. In the regular program were Karl Lemieux and BJ Nilsen, Novi_Sad, and Michaela Gril with Maia Osijnik and Matija Schellander. Outside of the concert program were three films by Bruce Conner with soundtracks Terry Riley and short films by Alexandre Larose and Daïchi Saïto, which were presented in the Carré 150 cultural centre's black box room on an actual 35mm projector. The films were shown at times that did not interfere with the concert schedule, and this may be the beginning of a new thing. As FIMAV's artistic director Michel Levasseur said at his end of festival press conference, incorporating a film festival into the larger festival has long been a dream of his. With the facilities of the city of Victoriaville's new cultural centre, Carré 150, Levasseur has the most flexibility in terms of performance spaces that he has ever had to choose from, and he is taking good advantage of the available options.

A most successful series was the 1 p.m. acoustic concerts on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, thanks to the concordance between performers and space, Église Saint-Christophe d'Arthabaska, a historic greystone structure from the 1870s, with a beautifully decorated interior and impeccable acoustics. It is the church where Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's prime minister from 1896 to 1911, attended services during his holidays from government duties in Ottawa, and it was from Laurier's pew that I took in the performance of Tristan Honsinger (cello), Josh Zubot (violin), and Nicolas Caloia (contrebasse) on Friday. The three are all well-known to the Victo audience, but this concert was their first appearance as a unit at FIMAV. Comprised of Honsinger compositions from their recording *In the Sea*, the set was tight and detailed, intelligent and playful, full of romance, the arco playing resulting in beautifully layered overtones.

I have to admit that the idea of a tenor saxophone quartet is not so appealing to me on the face of it, but Battle Trance, who played Saint-Christophe on Saturday, showed that such a configuration need not be monochromatic. The compositions of Travis Laplante are full of surprising twists and turns, and the playing was totally on top of the challenge. Again, the acoustics of the church allowed the quartet to fill the room with sound. Finally, on Sunday, Jean-Luc Guionnet, better-known as an alto saxophonist, totally demolished all standard preconceptions of what a church organ can do. Guionnet used a range of extended techniques to make the organ do things its makers or current caretakers certainly never envisioned and might not have been happy with, but which was totally enthralling in its power and joyful play of musician, instrument, and space.

The theater space in the Carré 150 was chosen deliberately for its seating arrangement to allow the audience to view dancer Bill Coleman in his opening concert performance of *Dollhouse* with sound accompaniment by Gordon Monahan, who used a variety of large handmade devices, including a realization of a rainstorm. (Little did we know what the weather was going to do a couple of hours later).

Coleman's depiction of a series of hapless characters through movement was accomplished through a series of intricate body movements and sound tricks with objects (including plastic cups inside his pants and jacket) and contact mikes. Dollhouse was an unusual choice for a festival opening show, but Levasseur has made a practice of avoiding an obvious choice for the first performance. Less successful was the performance of sound and visual artist Kasper P. Toeplitz and dancer Myriam Gourfink, who danced on a raised stage behind a glowing interactive table. This was a head-scratcher. Staging similar to Dollhouse would surely have helped.



In fact, the first two days of the festival produced only a couple of highlights – the Honsinger/Zubot/Caloia trio and Senyawa, an electrifying duo from Indonesia. Wukir Suryadi plays homemade three-stringed instruments in a heavy rock style while vocalist Rully Shabara does a kind of high speed rap in a number of Indonesian dialects. Brilliant and inventive, and totally enthralling, Shabara and Suryadi owned the house for their set in front of the very proggy Ex Eye. This was one of several times that FIMAV seemed like a world music festival. On Saturday evening at 8:00, violinist Gunda Gottschalk and

«Sky and Grassland » Photo credit Martin Morissette

accordianist Ute Völker and the three Samdanamba sisters from Mongolia presented a thoroughly charming set of Mongolian folk songs that they call Sky and Grassland. The accompaniment was simple and direct, and the vocals were heartfelt and soulful, a testament to the way that music can touch the heart despite language barriers and cultural differences.

The program for Saturday and Sunday looked promising, and a healthy number of concerts lived up to hopes. After Battle Trance opened Saturday's program, Nate Wooley's Seven Storey Mountain V took the stage at the venerable Colisée A. This project keeps expanding, and for this concert included the Tilt Brass Octet, who opened the set with a piece composed for them by Wooley. Wooley is at heart a minimalist, but in the Seven Storey Mountain project, he has applied his vision to larger groups of musicians. Individually, each musician plays a subtle and detailed solo line within the larger compositional structures and improvisational dynamics. This was a fascinating performance, somewhat limited by the volume at which the room sound was set, which limited the upper end of the group's dynamic range. The music and performance were otherwise deeply satisfying.

Following the performance of Sky and Grassland at 8 o'clock came a duo of Terry Riley on piano, synthesizer, and melodica and his son, Gyan Riley, on guitar. Those hoping to hear a classic Riley piece might have been disappointed, but the honest, clear, and direct musicmaking that the pair engaged in was a joy of incisive melodies and delicate interaction. Yes, it was kind of like a jam session, and no, it wasn't less interesting for that fact. After all, it was new music.



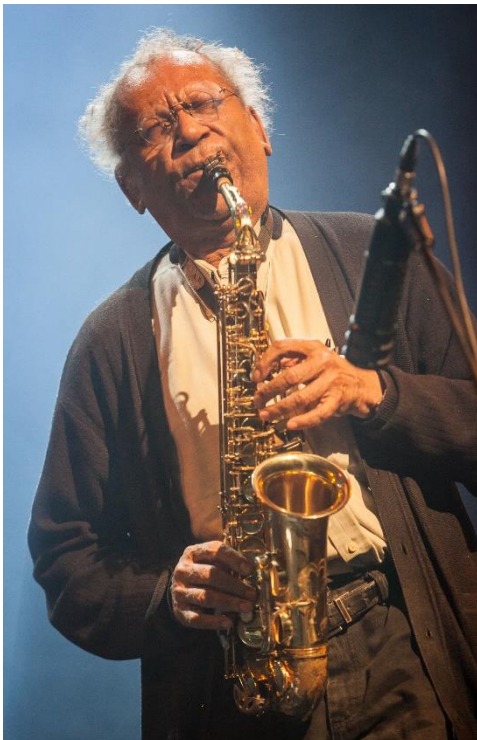
Nate Wooley « Seven Storey Mountain V » Photo credit Martin Morissette

In recent years, the midnight shows have featured highly inventive rock-based groups whose performances grab the audience by the throat and never let go. Such was not the case this year. The two short film presentations by Karl Lemieux and BJ Nilsen were much more interesting visually than sonically, and Bent Knee, Friday night's offering was an anomaly for FIMAV, considering their apparent commercial pop aspirations. According to people I trust, I missed a very interesting set by Maia Osojnik and All.The.Terms.We.Are. on Saturday, but lack of patience on my part at the end of a long day of music and a slow beginning to the set induced me to leave early. My loss, apparently.



The Nels Cline Four Photo credit Martin Morissette

drummer Tom Rainey, tore through a set of 8 or 9 of Cline's compositions that were closer to straight jazz than anything else at the festival. Cline seemed to be channeling sheets of sound era Coltrane and Lage filled the holes between the hellfire of notes that Cline played. Colley and Rainey were both nimble and powerful, and the concert was the best one of the festival to that point. But only to that point.



Anthony Braxton Photo credit Martin Morissette

Anthony Braxton has played numerous times at Victoriaville, most recently with a sextet in 2011, but this was the first time he had ever done a solo set at the festival, apparently as a favor to Michel Levasseur. The music presented was a beautiful gift to the audience, some 70-plus minutes of solo alto saxophone in which Braxton played around with fragments of standard melodies, exploring both the possibilities within the music and the emotionally expressive power and range of his horn. This was a set for the ages, everyone in the audience rapt throughout. Coming on the heels of Nels Cline's incendiary set, this was almost too much, and it left Rene Lussier with an unenviable task. What might have been regarded as an interesting new project by Lussier—guitar, tuba, accordion, two drummers—in a different time slot felt like a letdown after the previous two performances. Perhaps a 3 p.m. time for the performance would have been more appropriate, given how sated the audience was by that point.

And that was it for another edition of FIMAV, save for the goodbyes to the festival going friends that we only see once a year. Michel Levasseur declared at the final press conference that the festival team was very pleased with the festival, considering the rise in attendance from 2016 and the quality and variety of the musical performances. With great flexibility in venue options and the prospect of an ongoing film component in the program, Levasseur has the tools he needs to keep FIMAV as vital to the global avant/experimental music community as it has been since its

inception over thirty years ago.

<https://www.allaboutjazz.com/festival-international-de-musique-actuelle-de-victoriaville-2017-by-mike-chamberlain.php?page=1>



As mentioned earlier, Sunday was a lovely late spring day. Following Jean-Luc Guionnet's restructuring of the concept of organ music, we took advantage of the fine weather to visit the outdoor sound installations that have become a fixture of the festival. The evening program concluded with three performances: the Nels Cline Four at Carré 150 at 8:00 and a double bill of Anthony Braxton solo and René Lussier's latest project to close out the festival at the Colisée A at 10:00.

The final evening will go down as one of the best ever. Cline and his musicians, guitarist Julian Lage, bassist Scott Colley, and