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Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville 2019, Part 2-2

The first two days of this year's FIMAV lived up to lofty expectations, and, if anything, Saturday's and Sunday's programs looked even more promising, with artists such as Roscoe Mitchell Vijay Iyer, Tyshawn Sorey, The Ex, and John Butcher on tap.

Unfortunately, I had to miss Saturday's first concert by Thomas Korber with the Konus Quartett at one o'clock due to the need for sleep after an all-night writing session. So my day began with Kim Myhr's septet and their performance of material from his album "You|Me." I found the performance curious, as the main theme of each of the pieces played was remarkably similar, a repeated two-or four-bar figure strummed on electric or acoustic guitar with variations in speed and volume while the three percussionists added color with drumming and washes of electronic sounds.



Not the Music is a duo comprised of Eric Normand (electric bass and electronics) and Philippe Lauzier (bass clarinet and electronics). They have been playing together for six or seven years now, and it shows. Their 5 o'clock concert at the Colisée B was beautifully textured, a slow-moving flux of sound that was almost tactile—sensuous and languorous—as they explored extended techniques on their instruments and manipulated various effects.

The black box at the Carré 150 was packed full for the performance by Roscoe Mitchell and Moor Mother (Camae Ayewa). This was easily the most controversial of the festival, with widely divergent opinions on what constitutes music and/or poetry. Mitchell opened with harsh cries of pain from his soprano sax before Moor Mother started her poem, "The Black Drop." An incantation full of allusions and repetition, the piece explores the pain and bewilderment of being black in America, where slaves had to learn "a new language of pain." Mitchell moved from saxophone to a set of small gongs. I was transfixed by the harsh beauty, power, and emotion contained in the words and music. While I don't know who all of the people who attend Victo are, what I do know is that in a way, they're my people, part of a loose tribe that exists here and there around the world, and these people know that we must listen to such stories.



In sharp contrast, the Vijay Iyer Sextet is the closest to a mainstream jazz group that I have heard in twenty years of attending FIMAV. In a different context, I would have admired the obvious musicianship of Iyer, Steve Lehman, Mark Shim, Graham Haynes, Stephan Crump, and Tyshawn Sorey, all of whom except Shim who had appeared at the festival in previous years, but here, and especially after the Mitchell/Moor Mother performance, the music and slickly aggressive performance just felt out of place.

French guitarist Julien Desprez presented no such difficulties, as the midnight concert by his power trio Abacaxi was everything that one would expect or hope for in a midnight concert at Victo: noisy, abrasive, and fun. Desprez danced around on his effects pedals as he hammered away at his guitar, while his bandmates, bassist Jean-Francois Riffaud (aptly named) and drummer Max Andrzejewski laid down slow heavy metal riffs.



Saxophonist John Butcher's solo set on Sunday afternoon at the beautiful Église St-Christophe d'Arthabaska was highly anticipated. In the end, it proved to be worth the trip to Victoriaville by itself, as Butcher, alternating on tenor and soprano saxophones, played four pieces that explored the technical possibilities of his instruments and the acoustic possibilities of the church. Piling overtones on top of overtones in the high reaches of the room, exploring fragments of sound as they began to break apart, maintaining and then releasing control of the sounds, Butcher was magnificent and inventive, sensuous and rigorous—in short, what one hoped for. One friend remarked jokingly on leaving the church afterward, "Typical John Butcher." Yes, typical in the sense that it was the best concert I had attended in a couple of years.

It felt like a quick turnaround to the concert by the Tyshawn Sorey Trio (Sorey, bassist Chris Tordini, and pianist Cory Smythe) at the Colisée A at 3 o'clock. Smythe's playing inside the piano was consistently inventive, and Sorey established and maintained a meditative mood in a performance that was more spare than busy.

One of the frustrations of performances of electronic music is the fact most in the audience have no idea what the musicians are doing to produce the sounds. Lionel Marchetti plays a reel-to-reel tape recorder with a variety of devices, and Xavier Garcia uses a computer hooked up to a keyboard/rhythm pad. The duo set up in the middle of the concert space at the Colisée B, affording the audience an up-close look at what they were doing. It didn't hurt that the music was full of whimsy and surprise, a sweet aperitif for the closing evening of the festival.

Joane Héту has been an important person in Montreal's very active experimental music community for over thirty years, with a respectable list of recordings and frequent performances of ambitious works. Her ensemble Joker is a "noise choir" that she uses to explore the possibilities of the human voice. The performance at 8 o'clock Sunday evening was a world premiere of a piece titled "Les Lucioles," in which Héту "plays" her ensemble, choreographed in their movements and gestures and sounds. This is an ambitious work, requiring the utmost of precision and attention to detail, and while I do not know exactly what it was about—and maybe it wasn't supposed to be about anything other than what it was—this was a crowning achievement for Héту.



The evening and the festival concluded with a double concert at the Colisée A, with Indonesian duo Senyawa joined by Keiji Haino opening for Dutch stalwarts, DIY legends The Ex, ever a crowd favorite at Victoriaville.

Happy to report, Haino meshed much better with Senyawa, vocalist Rolly Shabara and Wukir Suryadi, who plays a homemade guitar/cello hybrid that he calls a bambuwukir, than he did with Peter Brötzmann and Heather Leightwo nights earlier, as the trio engaged in heavy, doom-like shamanism.



The Ex, playing new music once again as per custom, were great and great fun, once again. Drummer Katerina Bornefeld fuels the band with a beat so righteous and heavy that they don't need a bassist. The three guitars of Terrie Hessels (the sole remaining original member), Andy Moor, and Arnold De Boer, the band's singer, engaged in a complex interplay over the pounding beat, and even the old folks danced in the aisles.

So another FIMAV came to an end. People at Victo don't usually dance, but there was reason to, as the overall quality of the performances was perhaps the best many of the regulars have ever seen. The 35th edition felt like something of a summary of the previous 34, and was even marked by the publication of *Musique Actuelle: Typologie d'un Genre* by Montreal writer Rejean Beaucage, which focuses a great deal on FIMAV and its role in nurturing Quebec's mystique actually movement. Well done, and looking forward, as always, to the next.

Credit photo : Martin Morissette

