



AMN Reviews: FIMAV 37 Days 1 and 2

MAY 23, 2021 ~ IRWIN BLOCK

VICTORIAVILLE, Que. – After a year’s absence because of COVID-19, the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville picked up where it left off with a 12-concert program over three days, fulfilling its mission to be innovative, challenging, and bold.

This three-day series of concerts, all indoors in three venues, is the first music festival to resume operations as the province begins to loosen up, noted festival manager and artistic director Michel Levasseur. The city of about 48,000 is 170 kilometres (106 miles) east of Montreal.

“None of our concerts are virtual,” said Levasseur with pride as he opened the first concert Friday night, an hour-long performance by singer-songwriter and composer Ayelet Rose Gottlieb at the town’s modern concert hall. The hall was half full, as public-health dictated empty seats so that spectators could keep two-metres from each other. Most of the 70 musicians live in Quebec.

In the opener, the Jerusalem-born Montreal resident offered a program of tone poems and meditations, several set to music around lyrics by children, backed by a quartet that included violist and vocalist Jennifer Thiessen and ace electric guitarist Bernard Falaise.

Gottlieb set the tone with her songs, some Hebrew, mostly English — a spiritual outreach that she said spoke to our need for flowers and joy in difficult times.

Highlights were her duets and harmonies with Thiessen, and in the second half the rhythmic spark ignited by Iranian-Canadian Hamin Honari, playing mainly the Tombak hand drum.



The most poignant moment came at the end when Gottlieb made an indirect but obvious reference to the bloody Israel-Hamas conflict as she called for the renewal of life-affirming possibilities for all humans — and for change. She intoned the words from a Moroccan prayer, and bathed in blue lights, her hands out-stretched, chanted, “Bring me all of your dreams, bring me all of your heart.”



The follow-up was a quartet of improvisers who presented an eclectic and engaging hour-long soundscape symphony at the town’s hockey coliseum, converted to concert stage.

René Lussier plucked and stroked his electric guitar and drew tonal sketches as he used a cello bow on an exploratory instrument called a daxophone – a thin hardwood strip that can sound like a human voice or a violin when the bow makes it vibrate. On both instruments we heard the grunts, growls, yelps, high-pitches, and occasional strumming as the others improvised.

Érick d'Orion on computer and electronics and Martin Tétréault on turntable and electronics provided an ever-present wall of varied sound while drummer Robbie Kuster injected the percussive punctuation. The result was a constructive collaboration, totally improvised but with a logical ebb and flow that succeeded in creating a solid and original work.

With the bar in the main hotel closed, the usual late evening hang was cancelled, but fans were fresh and alert for the next days' concerts, the latest ending by 9 p.m. in keeping with Quebec's 9:30 p.m. curfew.

Saturday was a day of tremendous contrasts, beginning quietly with Montreal pianist Eve Egoyan playing contemporary classical in the resplendent, 145-year-old St. Christophe church – the dream-like, somewhat melancholic *Asking* by Spanish composer Maria de Alvear, which gradually builds in intensity before ending quietly, and *Turn* by Danish composer Per Nørgård, a bright and harmonically rich piece.

GGRIL, the improvised music workshop based in Quebec's Lower St. Laurent city of Rimouski, came on stage at the arena venue. A 16-member orchestra played several compositions in imaginative arrangements, with unexpected dynamics, varying degrees of harmonic complexity, chants, collective shouts, and an engaging ebb and flow. The group has worked on these pieces over several years and as electric bassist Éric Normand observed, they have “evolved.”

The late afternoon program featured a double bill: First off was the duo of Tamara Filyavitch on electronics and vocalist Maya Kuroki, electronics and electric guitar. Over a wall of electronic sounds, Kuroki engaged in vocal pyrotechnics and occasional pantomime as she chanted, the words difficult to discern but part of the soundscape. It was classic *Victo*, a one-of-a-kind show, original and imaginative.

Next was a duo called *This quiet army X Away*, combining electric guitarist Eric Quach and power drummer Michel Langevin, a founding member of the popular heavy metal band *Voivod*. Metal heads turned out for this event, and the drone-like guitar sounds and relentless drumming left a strong imprint although it did not challenge our ears.

The most innovative gig of the first two days was provided by the 14-member *Growlers Choir*, assembled and directed by Pierre-Luc Sénécal – a heavy-metal choral group clad in black that carves out a collective sound based on guttural, cavernous, screeching vocals. The choir was accompanied by a pre-recorded track of electronic and percussive sounds.



The first piece called *Dayking* is based on a poem by Fortner Anderson, who read from its apocalyptic text, as the choir sang, with such lines as “waiting for an end, for deliverance.” In the second piece we heard the sound of choir members guzzling water, grunting, laughing, with controlled screams, as the recorded soundtrack provided a backdrop for the live chorale. The third piece featured a collective chant with calls to joy — and dread.

An exhilarating experience.

<https://avantmusicnews.com/2021/05/23/amn-reviews-fimav-37-days-1-and-2/>

