



AMN Reviews: FIMAV 37 Day 3

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VICTORIAVILLE, Que – From solo improv to composed original score for large ensemble, the revived Festival de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville offered an eclectic array of bold musical adventures on its third and final day.

Cancelled last year because of COVID-19, the 37th edition of this showcase for improvised and exploratory music went ahead with restrictions – mandatory masks, 12 concerts rather than the usual 20, no musicians or fans from outside Canada because of closed borders, and fewer seats, all reserved, to maintain a two-metre separation. From the altar of the resplendent St. Christophe d'Arthabaska Church, trombonist Scott Thomson captivated his audience with a solo concert where he showcased the array of sounds that can be extracted from this versatile horn.



Thomson first improvised a melody — sliding notes, playing off the natural reverb when the sound bounces off the rounded ceiling above the altar, moulding a wah-wah sound, and exploring the horn's other sonic possibilities. He played with various mutes to bend the sound or make the horn whisper, moan, groan, talk, sing, or even weep. He was having fun, in conversation with that horn, and giving the audience a terrific buzz. (Thomson is manager and artistic director of the annual Guelph Jazz Festival, planned for mid-September.)

In the mid-afternoon double bill, Alberta-based singer Kathleen Yearwood had to cancel for health reasons. Electric guitarist Bernard Falaise, a veteran of many avant groups, filled in with a solo. With an array of pedal-activated devices, he sounded like a small ensemble – ringing bells and going from high tones to bass sounds as he plucked his guitar sitting flat over his knees. He plucked and scraped, extracting a cornucopia of sounds from his axe before ending in a flurry of notes.

Falaise then joined up with Jean Martin (drums and electronics) and Pierre-Yves Martel (electric bass, steel lap guitar, electronics) for an engaging and varied improv session, starting minimally, then deepening and broadening, with a dreamscape evolving into a wall of sound, then fading out, and devolving into something less dense, with scattered single notes. Martel added melodic content when he switched to the steel lap guitar, the music propelled at one point by strong rhythm and counter-rhythms, a balanced and well-developed program of sonic explorations.

The Montreal-based Bozzini Quartet (violinists Clemens Merkel and Alissa Cheung, cellist Isabelle Bozzini, violist Stéphanie Bozzini), which includes local composers in its repertoire, played two new pieces, the first in four sections composed by bassist Nicolas Caloia. Alto saxophonist joined in for the second piece, by Jef Chippewa, a more varied and exploratory work. The improv session, with all six musicians, was more fun to observe and hear, an exciting excursion into the unknown that ventured from restrained exchanges and collaboration to outright displays of musical passion.



Jean Derome (left) and Joane Héту (right)

The final concert was in many ways a testimonial to the growth and continued vigor of experimental and improvised music in Quebec: In parallel with this festival, which began in 1983, the Montreal-based collective Ensemble SuperMusique was established by three women at a time when avant-garde music was male-dominated. It was launched by Joane Héту (alto sax, voice), Diane Labrosse, (sampler), and Danielle Palardy Roger (percussion, voice).

They were among the 16 musicians on stage to perform four new compositions that are part of *Le fleuve*, in tribute to the majestic St. Laurent River that flows through Quebec to the Atlantic Ocean. One piece featured prose declaring that empowering women could make the world a better place. Of the four compositions, saxophonist Jean Derome's was the most musically rich and complex. The final work by Joane Héту, which she directed and narrated, was her most accomplished in a long career of pushing musical boundaries — operatic in scope with unexpected instrumental flourishes and shifts, and a fitting end to this year's impressive lineup.

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