

Review of Anthony Braxton record's: Solo (Victoriaville) 2017 – Victo 130

By Greg Buium, December 2017

The thinning out of the Victo catalog in recent years has been a source of sadness, and concern. The Quebec label is now down to a single, annual release. It's chastening – watching another creative-music company struggle. With just one Victo disc a year, there's a cruel irony at work, too: now every album is a must-have, a genuine festival highlight.

At the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville these moments often happen at a hockey rink. It's true. Among the greatest legacies of founder Michel Levasseur's event is its transformative power; every spring this rural town's workaday venues are turned into perfect art spaces. Hence, the Colisée, home to the Tigres de Victoriaville of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, has become host, at some point over the past three decades, to nearly every major name in creative music, from John Zorn to Cecil Taylor.

Last year, on the occasion of Les Disques Victo's 30th anniversary, Levasseur managed to secure a special gift for the Colisée finale: an Anthony Braxton solo concert. Braxton's connection to the FIMAV goes back to its early days. Solo is his 10th Victo recording, more than any other artist. This was Braxton's first performance alone in two years (the last had been in Tuscaloosa during a residency at the University of Alabama) and his third since 2012 (in Antwerp, Belgium). The last time he recorded on his own goes further back: a dozen years, to Solo Live at Gasthof Heidelberg Loppem 2005 (LocusLoppem).

Solo (Victoriaville) 2017 is, indeed, a gift: Braxton on alto saxophone, playing eight original alphanumeric compositions and improvisations, and "Body and Soul." In these much-diminished days for the poor compact disc, Victo has produced a fine physical product: an exceptional sounding CD in a coarse-cardboard case, a gatefold in the style of an old record album, with Stuart Broomer's sage (and substantial) liner notes.

"In a world (albeit a small and highly specialized one) awash with solo improvisations," Broomer writes, "Braxton might make a special claim on our attention for reasons of history alone." After For Alto (Delmark, 1969), Braxton would forever be among the pioneers of improvised-music recitals.



Anthony Braxton
by Martin Morissette



Anthony Braxton
Solo (Victoriaville) 2017
Victo 130

Nearly half a century on, he is still exploring the "languages" (intervallic, timbral, diagrammatic) of that masterpiece. To my ears, there's been a softening. Not regarding substance, but rather in tone, in delivery. On Solo (Victoriaville) 2017, even when there is the burr and agitation, uptempo, as he queries musical grammar ("No. 392b"), Braxton's sound is warmer than you might expect. At times, it feels even fragile. But even in its deepest discord, the music never pushes you away. The long tones to start ("No. 392a") spur a measured, yearning meditation. You hear the wind coming through the horn, the placement of a note, fingers to keys, a palpable, tactile sense of sound.

Midway into the 62-minute set, the trills and overtones of "No. 394b" preface an allusion to something familiar (Broomer suggests "Everything Happens to Me") and then Braxton's gorgeous hymn, "No. 394c." There's so much space now between gestures that you're gradually immersed in the emotional effect. When "Body and Soul" arrives it feels like an extension of Braxton's soundscape: despite the fragments and fractures, we now hear the melody as part of something larger, a conversation – about sound and structure tradition – that Braxton has shaped for most of his adult life.

<http://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD61/PoD61MoreMoments2.html>