



AMN Reviews: FIMAV 38 Part 2

by Irwin Block, May 22, 2022

Victoriaville, Que. – Keeping it eclectic is one of the reasons this festival of new and off-the-wall music has maintained a loyal following among North American fans.

Witness the five concerts Friday, Day 2 of the 38th Festival International de Musique Actuelle, and you have the answer to why it continues to attract crowds to this quiet town 100 miles northeast of Montreal.



Quasar - Friday May 20, 2022 at Église St-Christophe d'Arthabaska – Photo credit: Martin Morissette

It began in the beautifully renovated main sanctuary of a 19th century Roman Catholic Church where the Montreal-based saxophone quartet Quasar performed in sterling fashion a program of contemporary classical.

Their horns – Marie-Chantal Leclair (soprano), Jean-Marc Bouchard (baritone), Mathieu Leclair (alto), and André Leroux (tenor) – mirrored the gilded decor of the church and the immediacy of contemporary composition.

Playing with precision and nuance, the ensemble worked through the program and its range of sounds, from tiny to extreme, chosen to fit the acoustics of the space. Most memorable and having the fullest impact was XAS by Iannis Xenakis, a tonally and rhythmically varied piece that engaged us in its complexity and power.

Two of the composers, Canadian Wolf Edwards and American Donald J. Stewart, were in the audience and came on stage to thank the musicians for playing their work – compositions that reflect contemporary aesthetics.

Next was a show called No Hay Banda, a double-header featuring pieces by Montrealers Ida Toninato and David Navab. They were similar in that both started as minimalist and developed into fuller sounds. The irony in Navab's case is that the band featured a huge reconfigured Casavant pipe organ at centre stage, yet we heard nothing from it until the last five minutes or so of the concert when Navab released a fraction of its enormous potential. The musicality of the show was enhanced, even rescued, with the improvised work on bass and contrabass clarinets of veteran Montreal-based Lori Freedman, a frequent performer at Victo.

Drummer/composer Sean Noonan calls himself a rhythmic storyteller, and in his early evening show, with electric guitarist Ava Mendoza, electric bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma, and vocalist Malcolm Mooney performed from their 2019 vinyl release, Tan Man's Hat.

Mooney's spoken-word role was to enrich the aural mix with the sound of his voice because even with two mikes it was difficult to decipher the verbal content.

Noonan enjoys both a power-drumming role, at which he excels as he pushes the music forward, and that of a jester, as he shouts out from behind his extensive kit, phrases like "long-distance call – intergalactic phone call."

Mooney responded, "It's impossible, Is it possible? Wrong direction, the direction we're going." The drumming was powerful and intense, all the while Tacuma, a member of Ornette Coleman's "harmelodic" ensemble, laid out a deep and constant rhythmic canvass, as Mendoza's guitar work becomes progressively more focused and inventive.

The show should have ended when Noonan introduced the band, calling himself "William Shatner," then called the song The End of the Inevitable. Over-the-top, for sure, but Noonan's show hit home with a crowd that trooped out all smiles.

Quebec-based electric guitarist René Lussier assembled an octet and composed the music for his return to the Victo stage – a mix of folk and country tunes with some quirky arrangements, featuring such accomplished Quebec instrumentalists as Alissa Cheung (violin), Robbie Kuster (drums), Julie Houle (tuba), and Luzio Altobelli (accordion).

It was a fun concert with catchy melodies, convincing one older gent to start dancing alone near the stage. For a change of pace, Lussier called on Japanese improviser Koichi Makigami to liven things up with some of his vocal pyrotechnics. Lussier earned a rare encore call and warm standing ovation.



Mopcut - Friday May 20, 2022 at Colisée Desjardins – Photo credit: Martin Morissette

The midnight show was the Noise Rock trio known as Mopcut, featuring American vocal improviser Audrey Chen and Austrian drummer Lukas König, both also using synthesizers, and French electric guitarist Julien Desprez.

Together they create walls of sound that have an orchestral scope and impact with Chen's vocalizing contrasting with the synth-driven soundscapes, the rhythmic drive and resonance provided by the drums, and Desprez's relentless guitar work. The last piece was all fire and brimstone for the ears, enhanced by orange and blue lights that closed the show. It was great – a festival highlight!

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