



AMN Reviews: FIMAV 38

Part 3 By Irwin Block, May 24, 2022

VICTORIAVILLE, Que. – Telling stories without words, using only his voice, hand gestures, and body language is the unique art form that Japanese vocalist Koichi Makigami brought Saturday to an early afternoon concert here at the Festival International de Musique Actuelle.



Koichi Makigami at St-Christophe d'Arthbaska Church - Photo credit: Martin Morissette

Rather than amusing his audience with vocal twists and turns, Makigami delivered a display of vocal contortions that included controlled shouts, grunts, low and high pitch utterings, and call-and-response exchanges with himself. He did it without a mike, then rested his vocal cords by blowing into a flute and a Jew's Harp to add some minimalist music to the show.

He then chanted as he walked from the altar down the nave in the sanctuary of a 19th-century Roman Catholic Church to connect more intimately with his audience.

The follow-up, a more technologically complex offering, featured Swedish national Mats Gustafsson (baritone sax, flute), American vocalist/guitarist David Grubbs and Chicago-based trumpeter Rob Mazurek.

Titled *The Underflow*, the focus was sonic explorations with Gustafsson and Mazurek using electronic devices to inject various textures and densities into the group mix. Two songs by Grubbs with a folky feel contrasted with the dominant drone backdrop.

The early evening show featured the A Trio – Lebanese nationals Mazen Kerbaj (trumpet), Sharif Sehnaoui (acoustic guitar), and Raed Yassin (bass), considered pioneers of avant-garde music in the Arab world. They used a range of techniques and devices to produce a signature soundscape.

Yassin and Sehnaoui strummed and stroked their instruments with what looked like sticks while a seated Kerbaj held his trumpet between his knees, with the bell facing up, and blew into it using a plastic tube. Inside the bell he placed a plastic cup and put objects inside to produce a rumble sound. Meanwhile, the bass player held a miniature autoharp near the strings to create a sound texture and later the trumpet player used what looked like a sax mouthpiece to blow into his horn. They played with the instruments rather than playing them, and the audience appreciated how they created their own musical dimension.

In the early evening, a visual rather than musical treat was presented – a striking video and electroacoustic soundtrack developed by Franck Vigroux, a French composer and media artist, to accompany dancer Azusa Takeuchi, who performed a version of the Japanese dance form called *butô*. It's meant to unfold very slowly, and the dancer, naked above the waist, slowly emerged from the shadows and simulated mist. At first, concealed under a pile of sticks, she eventually returned to her original place under the sticks. Called *Forest*, it was an arresting and quietly powerful performance.



Photo: Martin Morissette, FIMAV 2022

Mary Halvorson « Amaryllis & Belladonna » - Photo credit: Martin Morissette

The big event of the festival was electric guitarist Mary Halvorson's Amaryllis & Belladonna project – original compositions for electric guitar and string quartet and another set of new works for sextet, recorded and recently released on the Nonesuch label. The winner in 2019 of a MacArthur Fellowship, Halvorson used her time to create her most ambitious project to date and is now touring with nine other musicians to promote and perform the music.

In the first third of the 90-minute show, Halvorson played the music from Belladonna with the Mivos Quartet – Olivia de Preto and Maya Bennardo (violins), Victor Lowrie Tafoya (viola), and Tyler J. Borden (cello) – and we heard some lovely melodies with engaging harmonies, rhythm, and energy. Halvorson's inventive and lively compositions transcend barriers separating contemporary classical from avant jazz, or other labels.

Given its instrumentation, the sextet had a jazzier, finger-snapping sound and we heard strong solos from trumpeter Adam O'Farrill, vibraphonist Patricia Brenna, and trombonist Jacob Garchik. When all ten played together, Halvorson's guitar work and improv, and that of vibraphonist Brenna, stood out. The biggest crowd of the festival so far gave the group an enthusiastic standing O.

The midnight show called Bloodmist brought together New-York based Jeremiah Cymerman (clarinet, electronics), Mario Diaz de León (electronics), and Toby Driver (electric bass) and their ambient noise sounded accessible enough, though lacking in a distinct signature that would set them apart from others who mine similar territory.

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