

Outside Comes Back Inside at Victoriaville

By Josef Woodard
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The guitar quartet Dither commanded attention with their tight-yet-flexible teamwork at this year's FIMAV.

Festival International Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV) in Quebec boldly explores and extolls music of the avant-garde, experimental and otherwise “outside” nature. It has done so, with a dedicated intensity scarcely seen in the Americas, for nearly 40 years now (minus the COVID-nixed 2020 festival and one other year in absentia).

This year's festival, held May 16–22, arrived with special emotional baggage, given pandemic strictures of the past two years. Michel Levasseur, the fest's stubbornly visionary founder/director, presented a stripped-down and distanced model in 2021, a rare pandemic-era festival presented live and without streaming or other hybrid compromises.

Real-world interventions did play into the carefully laid plans this year. Spanish avant-vocalist Fátima Miranda canceled a month before the festival (replaced by innovative Japanese vocalist Koichi Makigami) and the much-anticipated Ukrainian group Dakh Daughters canceled on very short notice, due to Visa problems and the war at home (replaced by FIMAV regular William Parker, with guitarist Ava Mendoza and standout drummer Francisco Mela).



One distinction this year: a wealth of music stands — at a festival often accentuating pure, stand-free improvisation — and inventive variations on the “chamber” music theme. High-profile guitarist-composer Mary Halvorson returned in duly grand, marquee-commanding fashion, leading both a string quartet and her sextet (special kudos to trumpeter Adam O’Farrill) in a rich set of new genre-blurring compositions. Quebec’s eloquent rascal guitarist-composer Rene Lussier was also in ensemble mode, with a new octet piece, *Au Diable Vert*, a wildly engaging stew of Acadian, free-improv abandon and progressive impulses.

In unorthodox quartet news, the fantastic guitar quartet (mostly electric) Dither commanded attention with their tight-yet-flexible teamwork, redolent of past FIMAV-spotlighted Fred Frith Guitar Quartet. The next morning at church, the vintage Église St-Christophe D’Arthabaska, the saxophone quartet Quasar issued a gripping set of new works, and Iannis Xenakis’ rare saxophone piece. The church’s special ambience was even more ideally

suiting to composer Simon Martin's mesmeric minimalist work *Musique d'Art* (2022). Echoes of Morton Feldman found personalized redirection, just as Feldman inspired another earlier FIMAV visitor, Tyshawn Sorey.



Canadian artists with remote international roots framed the four-day festival. To open, Montreal-based Egyptian vocalist Nadeh El Shazly navigated sleekly with her supple voice over a bed of rustling instrumental textures. Closing on Sunday night, Vancouver-based oud player/guitarist Gordon Grdina led two separate quartets: a Middle Eastern/fusion group featuring cellist Hank Roberts and bassist Mark Helias and a post-fusion outfit featuring German drummer Christian Lillinger. Lillinger proved why he is one of the more fascinating young drummers, through his creatively restless yet precision-gearred fresh approach to a kit. He was a star of FIMAV 2022, albeit from the sidelines.

Another star was certainly Makigami, whose considerable power as a vocalist includes an ability to channel multiple personae in real-time mosaics. His dazzling but fairly meditative solo performance at the church closed with a slow procession up the aisle, entrancing us with hypnotic throat-singing. Elsewhere, he also humored the crowd with his comic/Cubist vocal antics at the opening reception, and snuck in a cameo on Lussier's set.

Among other themes this year was a certain dogmatic embrace of things non-digital, which could be seen in *Train Again*, the senses-seizing new film by proudly analog experimental Austrian filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky, part of a late-morning experimental film program. Musically, the trio of Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui and Raed Yassin mustered up a dizzying, strictly acoustic sonic palette using extended techniques on the "conventional" tools — guitar, double bass and trumpet — which Kerbaj put in service of the outer limits.

Other high points this year: the Zappa-colored fusion comic relief of talented crackpot Sean Noonan's *Pavee Dance* (with the nimble Mendoza and bassist Jamaladeen Tacuma in tow); and the painterly noise rock of another midnight special, *Mopcut*, featuring raucously luminous vocalist Audrey Chen and new avant-guitar avatar Julian Desprez, at once abstract, rocking and detailed.

Tom Surgall, a filmmaker and musician, presented his impressive and important film *Fire Music: The Story of Free Jazz*, in one of the festival's concert slots, with strong contextual links to music presented in the past. Over the decades, kingpin figures of the film's overview — including Cecil Taylor, Anthony Braxton, Peter Brotzmann, Bill Dixon and AACM-connected musicians — have graced this festival's stages and sometimes the catalog of the in-house Victo Records.

But whereas the film ends on something of a deceptive grave assessment of the current avant-garde scene, implying that free-jazz has retreated from active public spotlight, the following burst of inspiration concert by Colin Stetson and Mats Gustafsson served to prove that free-jazz is very alive and very well, and evolving before our ears in real time. These masters of baritone and bass saxophonic turf (along with alto sax, flute and electronics) conjured up a powerfully persuasive set, with empathetic dialoguing and a pageantry of loamy low timbres.

FIMAV is fully back in its own outside land, not a moment too soon.

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