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Victoriaville Goes Live, Again, from the Edge

BY JOSEF WOODARD | MAY. 3, 2022



Mats Gustafsson is scheduled to perform at the Festival de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, which is set to resume operations May 18–22 in an almost back-to-normal fashion. (Photo: Martin Morissette)

Like virtually every other jazz festival in the world, the venerable, adventure-leaning FIMAV festival in Victoriaville, Quebec, got the shutdown order in March 2020. Founding Artistic Director Michel Levasseur and team worked hard to mount a traditional festival in 2021, but had to settle for a pared-down model with Canadian — and mostly Quebecois — musicians. The show had to go on, and Levasseur insisted on it being live versus a streaming or hybrid format.

“I think this was one of the first live festivals to happen anywhere,” Levasseur said. “I was very pleased with that.” Live and “in the moment” are key imperatives here.

resumes operations May 18–22 in an almost back-to-normal fashion for its 38th edition. Over four concentrated days and nights in this modest-sized city in Quebec’s agricultural region, there will be 20 concerts, with one slot now turned over to a relevant film, Tom Surgal’s 2018 *Fire Music*, about the birth of free-jazz in America). Among the featured artists are Mary Halvorson, Mats Gustafsson and Colin Stetson.

FIMAV (Festival du Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville)

One item of special interest this year is the appearance by Ukrainian vocal group Dakh Daughters, brought to Levasseur’s attention by his daughter Jordie, a next-generation part of the festival’s machinery in recent years. Despite the propitious timing of the show, on the festival’s opening night, they had originally been booked in 2020, canceled in 2021 due to travel restrictions and finally slated for this year. Even so, Levasseur says he has a “plan B” in case anything interrupts their arrival.

Most of the group left home in Kiev to live in the small French village of Cavados, which has an experimental theater related to Kiev’s Dakh Theatre, where the “Daughters” have worked.

“They moved (to France) with their kids and grandmothers,” Levasseur explained. “The men stayed to fight in Ukraine. It’s the first time I’ve worked with musicians in war.”

This will also be the first time a film has landed a FIMAV concert slot, although experimental films have been featured as peripheral program, along with a strong and dedicated sound art component in the city for many years now. *Fire Music*, directed by Surgal (also a drummer, who played the festival with Thurston Moore and William Winant years back), showcases such iconic avant-garde figures as Cecil Taylor, Bill Dixon and Sun

Ra. “We’re very close to that music, and many of the musicians have been to Victoriaville and have been on our label,” Levasseur pointed out.

The label in question is the festival-linked Victo, celebrating its 35th anniversary earlier this year with the album *Printemps 2021*, recorded live at the 2021 festival. Apart from its musical virtues, the album serves as a memento of a fragile period. “It was such an emotional time,” Levasseur said. “All of the musicians — Lussier, Robbie Kuster, Erick d’Orion, Martin Tetrault — had not played in front of an audience for 16 months. This was really the first live concert in the province in a long time.”

A bold and significant forum for improvisational, experimental and other non-mainstream avenues of jazz and other music in North America, the Victoriaville festival has established itself as a vital player in the international jazz festival circuit, avant-garde division.

“We’re still trying to present a very wide program,” Levasseur said. “Not many festivals are like this, around the world. We think it’s very important for musicians and audiences, also, to widen their spectrum of possibilities in the music. If there might be 100 people representing musicians and festivals, walking towards a new area. I feel like we’re in the first row. That’s my hope. We’re not ahead, not far ahead of the others, but we’re in the first row.”

Deep into its legacy, FIMAV seeks to continue balancing maintaining a sense of history it has helped to nurture, while seeking out new sounds and figures in the music. “We represent some history now, which was not the case in the first 10 or 15 years,” Levasseur said. “We have some history, but we still represent the actuality, also. That’s the challenge.

“You have to have some history, but to keep an open mind. The danger is to become history. I’m still hoping to discover a few things in music and doing work in getting this music a little bit better known than it is.

“All the great musicians have been like this.” Levasseur cited the example of reedist-composer Anthony Braxton, who has often appeared at the festival and recorded on the Victo label. “Braxton has deep history in the music, but he’s always searching and always going further. That’s the idea there, to represent that kind of music and those kind of musicians.”

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