

FIMAV 38

Victoriaville, Canada

August 2022 – By Byron Coley

For my first potential super spreader event in a few years, I chose the 38th iteration of the Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville, held in Canadian dairy country about midway between Montreal and Quebec. Organisers of this event always emphasise that it is not a jazz festival, but rather one that covers a more inclusive (and decidedly French) genre that contains improvised music as well as avant garde composition and performance of all stripes. The first of the four days is quite string heavy. Things begin with a great set by the Egyptian singer Nadah El Shazly, backed by amplified bouzouki, electric guitar, upright bass and harp. The band, led by Sam Shalabi, produce long tones and lots of smudged atmospherics to back the melodies El Shazly sings through layers of reverb and effects. A brilliant opening.

Next up is William Parker's Mayan Space Station trio, with Ava Mendoza on guitar and Cuban drummer Francisco Mela sitting in for Gerald Cleaver. They play mind-melting set. Parker sings, chants and generates a pulse as only he can, Mendoza is utterly explosive, and Mela's playing ranges from Tony Williams to Milford Graves and back. The textures are often more in a free rock bag than they are jazzoid, and it is a killer. Following that is the New York guitar quartet Dither. Their own material is extremely rhythmic and harmonic in construction, although less overtly aggressive than precursors like Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham. And they finish with a bravura take of John Zorn's "Curling", which they previously recorded for Tzadik. Like I said, a lot of strings.



None of the other days has as much of a specific focus, but there are a lot of highlights arriving from a variety of different directions. My favourite thing overall is probably Franck Vigroux's *Forêt*. Vigroux is a French musician focusing lately on electroacoustic composition, and this piece is built around a composition that ranges from smooth faux-chorale segments to savage chunks of sound as boulders rolling off a cliff. But all of it is accompanied by a psychedelic sequence of video projections, as well as an amazing solo dance performance in the butoh tradition. The combination of elements is a total sensory overload, and quite unexpected.

Another stunner is *Musique d'Art (2022)* by Montreal based composer Simon Martin. Scored for a string quintet and presented in a resonant Catholic church, the music is a hypnotic sequence of sustained tones, sequentially introduced by a single player, then taken up by the others. It is almost impossible to equate the music to the passing of time during the performance. Some tones seem to hang in the air for months, creating a luxurious and all-encompassing soundscape for listeners.

Plenty of other things are excellent as well. Québécois guitarist René Lussier put together a big band that collages fragments of traditional melodies with spiky shards of free improvisation. Audrey Chen's trio Mopcut combines bifurcated post-tongue vocals with guitar, drums and electronics that all manage to confound presumptions of what those instruments actually sound like. Koichi Makigami displays his amazing glossilalic chops and intersperses that with traditional (and very non-traditional) flute, jaw harp and other breath-powered devices. Mats Gustafsson appears with both the Underflow trio, blending his and Rob Mazurek's noisy electronics with David Grubbs's Red Krayola-esque pop tunes, and also in duo with Colin Stetson, mixing roars and clicks from a large and well swung saxes. Great stuff.

But the moment that sticks with me most vividly is a portion of the first piece played by a Montreal collective called No Hay Banda. Vocalist Sara Albu does a long stretch of heavy, slow breathing into the microphone. Having been so aware of others' breath for the last couple of years, there is something astounding about it, full of menace, hope and ultimately a deep sense of humanity that really resonates.



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