

FIMAV

By Kurt Gottschalk
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After a canceled 2020 and truncated 2021, the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV) returned May 16th-22nd with a serious effort to hold true to the “International” in their name, although not without difficulties. Spanish singer Fatima Miranda and the Ukrainian singing group Dakh Daughters both had to cancel (although neither, it seems, for reasons of health or political conflict).

The gaps in the schedule were filled by a pair of past FIMAV invitees: Japanese vocalist Makigami Koichi who, on top of attending nearly every set of the festival, offered his own solo performance; and New York bassist William Parker, who took fine advantage of guitarist Ava Mendoza’s presence to present a version of Mayan Space Station with drummer Francisco Mela sitting in for Gerald Cleaver. Mendoza was already booked with Sean Noonan’s Pavees Dance. The latter’s prog-ish compositions are closer to Mendoza’s own music than Parker’s free-flow and Pavees Dance gave her an opportunity to share the stage with bassist Jamaladeen Tacuma, but the leader’s cartoonishness was a distraction. The Space Station was a better deployment for her, in a set dedicated to departed Canadian improvisers Ken Aldcroft and Paul Plimley. While the excellent 2021 record was composed or chopped into distinct cuts, here they flew into orbit and circled long. What may have been most notable were Mendoza’s flights of fancy, running freer than she often allows herself in her own projects. Electric guitars have a way of demanding attention but it was also astounding, again and as ever, to witness how many ideas Parker can have and deliver in a minute’s time and how much melody and rhythm Mela has at his disposal. It may have been a last-minute addition but it was, both in this reporter’s opinion and as often noted by others during breaks, a festival standout.



Koichi appeared in the smallish Église St-Christophe D’Arthabaska, a nicely resonant chapel also hosting concerts by the Quasar saxophone quartet and music for strings by Simon Martin. He played a sequence of short, unamplified pieces for voice, jaw harp, reed flute and toys that was as charming as it was mysterious. His enigmatic, sometimes rather alien, vocal techniques are familiar to those in the know. What was impressive here was how well he incorporated the small instruments into his syntax.

The Arabic/Québécois intersect—one of the hottest fountains of cross-fertilization in recent years with circles intersecting around the “A” Trio, Karkhana and the Praed Orchestra!—was well represented in the festival, which opened with a set by Egyptian singer Nadah El Shazly, now conveniently based in Montréal, a couple of hours from Victoriaville, where her bandmates

Sam Shalabi (also Egyptian) and Radwan Ghazi Moumneh (originally from Lebanon) make their homes. Their twin twang of buzuk and oud and Sarah Pagé’s harp elaborating on El Shazly’s sung popleaning melodies made for a fusion of a highly enjoyable order. The leader’s soulful, wrenching voice remained constant, supported online in peripheral ways by the rest of the band but not in need of support, like a cry in the night, not for help but of sorrow.

The Lebanese “A” Trio is celebrating 20 years of activity but only recently is gaining notice on this side of the Atlantic. Mazen Kerbaj (trumpet), Sharif Sehnaoui (guitar) and Raed Yassin (contrabass) make extreme use of extended technique and instrumental noise, but do so with an unusual and uncanny precision and commitment to form. They had played a few nights earlier at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music (in a show produced by Issue Project Room) and the distinction between that essentially acoustic set and their meeting with the Victo sound (read: full, balanced and loud) was almost as fascinating as their own deep immersion into accidental sounds made purposeful.

Arabic influences might have begun to seem a bit suspect in this context for the festival closer, Vancouver jazz guitarist and oud player Gordon Grdina, had it not been so enjoyable. Grdina has long incorporated Middle-Eastern influences and instruments into his music and here did so with a pair of strong ensembles, The Morrow and Square Peg (uniting them into a septet at the end). Tight string lines and sensitive soloing typified both ensembles.

Like Grdina, guitarist Mary Halvorson offered the economical option of a double bill with a single leader. Amaryllis & Belladonna is a set of pieces for string quartet with her guitar and a second set for sextet, sometimes with the Mivos Quartet strings added. The overlaid guitar and strings was, at times, quite beautiful, but Halvorson's arrangements for the quartet didn't always work. With the jazzier sextet (trumpet, trombone, vibraphone, bass and drums), her playing was more confident and the compositions more complete. Proving that the sum of two parts is better than the best of both worlds, the three pieces by the combined tentet were exciting, evocative, bold, subtle and rich. While there is still room to grow, it is Halvorson's strongest and most ambitious project to date.

Swedish saxophone powerhouse Mats Gustafsson made two appearances: in a duo with Colin Stetson and a trio with David Grubbs and Rob Mazurek. The duo represented perhaps two of the most muscular saxophonists around going not just head-to-head but neck-to-neck while also complementing and supporting each other through ever shifting improvisations and some nicely staticky electronic ornamentation. In the trio, Gustafsson's consistently recognizable tone was supplemented by electronics in rather surprising pulse. With Mazurek's trumpet and electronics and Grubbs' electric guitar and voice, they circled into some at times fairly terrifying songs.



The fantastic Mopcut (vocalist Audrey Chen, guitarist Julien Desprez and drummer Lukas König) threw punch after punch in a late-night set that seemed to run a thread through disparate fabrics: Koichi's vocal extremes; the power of the abstract trio; and electric guitar mastery. Their only record is three years old already, but they remain a band to watch.

Even with the considerable international showing, Québec made a strong presence, with the ensemble No Hay Banda playing pieces by Montréal composers Navid Navab and Ida Toninato. The latter's works were especially striking, tickling the imagination as much as the ear with slow builds of potential energy. And Pangea de Futura, with members of Godspeed You! Black Emperor and thisquietarmy filled a space that Jeremiah Cymernan's Bloodmist and Franck Vigroux' Forêt only hinted at, a cosmic darkness, a heavy metal not reliant on rockism. The nine-piece band (1/3 drummers) succeeded not just by virtue of density but by fully occupying the zone they had created. It was epic and just a little ridiculous.

Guitarist René Lussier is a regular at the festival. Having taken advantage of the pandemic lockdown to write his largest-scale pieces to date, he presented new works with an octet including reeds, strings, accordion, tuba and two percussionists. Taking Québécois folk as a starting point (as he often does), he built something that grew surprisingly loud and dense, with Koichi sitting in on a couple of songs. Although it fell on the second of the four nights, it felt—at least to this cultural tourist, returning to Victoriaville for the first time in a decade—like a homecoming and a fittingly grand finale.

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