Michel Levasseur Leaves The Building

By Mike Chamberlain
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Courtesy Martin Morissette

“ We called it musique actuelle right from the beginning. We knew what we didn't want to do: We didn't want to do a jazz festival or a rock festival or a folk festival or even an experimental music festival. ”

The run-up to this year's 39th edition of the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV, or Victo) has been anything but routine. First, it was announced in December that the City of Victoriaville had rescinded the festival's contract for the use of the Colisée des Bois-Francs arena as one of the festival's two main venues. Attempts to change the council's decision proved fruitless, and alternative venues had to be hastily arranged. Fortunately, they were, but the loss of the Colisée—not just for this year—is a blow to the festival. The second bombshell was the announcement that this would be the final Victo for Michel Levasseur, who has been the artistic director of FIMAV since its inception in 1983.

The two events are not related to one another, according to Levasseur. The festival operations have long been a Levasseur family affair, with Michel's wife, Joane Vézina, in charge of administration for the last dozen years after filling a number of other roles with the festival since 1987. Levasseur, now 70, found, he told me over lunch in an Asian restaurant in Victoriaville on a cold early spring day, that it was becoming more difficult to recover and regenerate from the end of one festival to the next. So, in November, he made the decision to step down as artistic director after this year's edition, which will run from May 18-21, though the decision was not announced until early in March.

Victo has been guided from its beginning in 1983 by Levasseur's singular vision, and the announcement of his retirement leaves the future of the festival in doubt. Victoriaville, a regional centre of 45,000 in the heart of Quebec, is not an obvious location for an important festival of adventurous music. The answer to why such a festival is in Victoriaville is simply because that is where Michel Levasseur lives. In many ways, Michel Levasseur *is* Victo.

Levasseur is a soft-spoken man, quietly proud of his life's work, as he should be. He seems almost disbelieving when he recalls the number of important artists who have performed at FIMAV over the years.

"Now that we've announced that this will be our last festival, I went back to different programs to see what we did in certain years. It's amazing what we've done here somehow," he says.

"I went back to the fifth year to see when Heiner Goebbels played here, he had Man in the Elevator, Cecil Taylor solo, we had Sun Ra, Nana Vasconcelos and Don Cherry, and all the Canadian projects and all this. I thought," he says chuckling, "how did we do that?"

The festival had modest beginnings. Levasseur had always been interested in music and the arts and while living in Scotland in the late 1970s after getting his degree in forestry from Laval University in Quebec City , he was exposed to musicians such as Derek Bailey and Evan Parker in Company, as well as Henry Cow, among other musical organizations. Although there might only be a handful of people in the audience sometimes, Levasseur did not try to make contacts with musicians at the time.

"When I came back from Scotland to here, I kind of fell in love with this area again. I never thought I would come back to live in Victoriaville, but it changed my life."

Upon returning to Victoriaville, Levasseur and several other friends interested in presenting performances of non-commercial music established Productions Plateforme, which continues to produce FIMAV today. It was part of a general culture of community activity around Victoriaville in the early 1980s.

"There were quite a lot of artists, theater, lots of musicians. Not so experimental, but lots of people playing music. Also, you had all those people from Montreal, going back to nature. Some of them are still there," he laughs. "So there was quite a lot of interesting stuff happening. So we started a small organization called Plateforme to do some concerts. We put $50 in the box, six of us, $300, to present anything that was not popular. It could be folk music, it could be classical, but we did also some modern dance, and also symphony orchestra from Trois-Rivières. And the first concert we did was Fred Frith and Tom Cora: Skeleton Crew. The first one. And that was a big cultural shock, to see the audience reacting to something like this that they had no idea of. There was a lot of energy after that concert."

Levasseur and the others felt that a festival made more sense than trying to present non-commercial music in the bars of the town, and at the time there was a lot of government money for cultural organizations. But Plateforme received no grants in 1982 for a proposed October festival with twelve concerts. After receiving the news that they would not receive a grant, Levasseur had a different idea.

"I don't know how it happened, but I thought of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, who had at that time a big program to go outside of Montreal. I took the phone, I got the administration, I had a meeting, and they were interested in the project, but the only date they had free was in December. So I came back to Victoriaville with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra wanting to come to our festival in December. Then the mayor and the deputy put in $3000 each. Then I phoned all the twelve other concerts, and no one had a tour organized, so they all moved to December. So that's how it started."

"We did the Orchestra at the Colisée. We had 1500 people there. And at the twelve other concerts in different places we had 1500 people in total. With a full budget of $40,000, with everybody being unpaid, even the sound people, everyone, myself—no one was paid. And it was a success, and we kept going, with the festival in October, until 1992."

After that, Plateforme started receiving grants.

Programs in the first three years of the festival leaned heavily toward Quebec and Canadian artists, but already by the fifth edition, people such as Anthony Braxton, Derek Bailey, Cecil Taylor, and the Sun Ra had appeared at Victoriaville. At the same time, there remained a strong representation by Quebec and Canadian artists, whose profiles were aided by appearing at what was becoming an increasingly important event. In the early years, the festival presented a lot of free jazz, but it has never been a free jazz festival and has become less so as time takes its toll on the older generation of musicians. Electroacoustic and electronic music feature prominently, as does avant-rock, but the festival is determinedly non-generic in scope. By incorporating the term *musique actuelle* into the name of the festival, Levasseur reckoned that the festival could present a wide range of musics without pinning the artistic direction to anything but his own ideas of what programming would work.

"We called it *musique actuelle* right from the beginning, Levasseur explains. "We knew what we didn't want to do: We didn't want to do a jazz festival or a rock festival or a folk festival or even an experimental music festival. We had to put a label, but at that time the term *actuelle* was used mainly in visual arts and also dance. So we called it *musique actuelle*.

The festival was held in October until 1992, then there was no festival in 1993, and since 1994, it has been held on the Victoria Day long weekend, the third weekend in May.

"We stopped after number ten because we had problems with the city," Levasseur explains. "They wanted to influence the program to make it more popular. It was a big fight. Then there was an election, and the festival became a real point in the election, and the man who won the election was for the festival. Then we moved it to May, and we made a three-year agreement to use the Colisée, which we kept doing after that. We stopped again in 2008 and passed 2009. That was more because we were tired. When we came back, we started with the project of sound installations. We started small with three installations, and it grew up, and now there are ten installations," Levasseur says of the outdoor sound installations in the downtown area of Victoriaville, which bring the experimental sounds to people who wouldn't otherwise have anything to do with such things, notably children.

After the 2009 hiatus, FIMAV was cut down to a four-day festival, rather than five days. As Levasseur notes, a five-day festival meant that many of the audience missed either the beginning or the end of the festival, and the logistics of going to Victoriaville, two hours east of Montreal, meant that a five-day festival required a week-long commitment.

Over the years, almost every important avant-garde or experimental musician has played at FIMAV: Braxton, Taylor, John Zorn, John Butcher, Peter Brötzmann, Terry Reilly, Bill Dixon Merzbow, Fantomas, the Melvins, Otomo Yoshihide, among others too numerous to mention.

"The word of mouth from the artists was very important," Levasseur says about the relationships he and the festival have formed over the years. "I think we got known quite quickly. There aren't many festivals like this in America, very few also in Europe. It's a small area. People talk a lot, and many musicians got the word from another one. And it's still happening. With John Zorn, it was Fred Frith who introduced us," Levasseur says of two musicians who have played Victoriaville many times over the years and who will coincidentally also appear at this year's edition.

When asked which musicians he had not been able to agree to perform at Victoriaville, Levasseur's first response was surprising: Jerry Garcia. He also cited Frank Zappa, Steve Reich, and Laurie Anderson. Ornette Coleman also never appeared at the festival. "Ornette was too expensive. I spoke with Denardo a couple of times, but Ornette wanted too much money. I think he got out of touch with the scene of new music. But not Cecil Taylor. He kept in touch with the scene of new music and improvised music. Bill Smith, the publisher of CODA, told Cecil about the festival. And I was surprised when Cecil tried to get in touch with us. It's really the word of mouth that was important, and it was working very well and helped it keep going. You know, people need to talk to each other."

Pristine sound production and a strict policy on taking photos, recording video, and filming are hallmarks of the festival.

"That was very important for us, and no distractions during the concerts. No photos, no people recording. Keep the rights to the musicians to the festival. It was for that but also not to disturb the audience. No filming, I was really against it. We had a few people filming and always something went wrong. The cinema people because they come with the camera and the team, it's their project. It's fucking ridiculous," laughs Levasseur, a man not given to profanity. "It's the musicians, it's the presenter organizing this. Because of some aura around filmmaking, they think it's theirs. Maybe I've been like this too much, I don't know."

The pandemic years have been trying for festival presenters. One handicap for Levasseur is not being able to attend the five or six other festivals he typically attends each year in Europe, the U.S., and Canada.

"You need to go to festivals. You need to see the musicians live," he explains. "I found it very difficult in the last three years to rely on contacts I had and websites. It's not the same, not the same at all. You go in a festival and you're very concentrated and you meet the musicians and sometimes you find out other projects. Not the one you saw but at least you saw how intense the musicians are on stage, and you trust them more. It's really tough."

Of course, there was no festival in 2020, and the 2021 edition of FIMAV was held under pandemic masking and distancing regulations, with thirteen concerts featuring almost exclusively Quebec musicians, the first festival in

North America that was presented live since March 2020, permission for which required Levasseur to use all his political connections and IOUs.

With retirement approaching, Levasseur thought the organization could find a co-director, perhaps a younger person that he could mentor, but the requirement of living in Victoriaville has discouraged possible candidates who would prefer to live in Montreal, and there were no applicants for the position. Levasseur's position is as political as it is artistic; he says that making a lineup is in some ways the easiest part of the job, and any director must have or be able to establish local connections. However, in the weeks following his retirement announcement, he says that several candidates have come forward, and he is now more optimistic about the future of FIMAV, though he allows that circumstances might make the 39th edition the final one.

The festival will change in a big way with Levasseur's departure and the loss of the Colisée, its most important venue, a highly adaptable space with which Levasseur and his team were intimately familiar.

"Basically, for the last five years, the feeling was that we should move to the big arts centre, the Carré 150. A lot of people in Victoriaville think that because there is an arts centre that everything should go there. Which is wrong, because you need diversity, and you can't do every concert in a big concert hall. The room there in the Colisée for us was our room. We had all the keys. Over the years we kind of know exactly what to do, and the people who stay there to work were very friendly. It was provided by the city. And we could do anything we want. We could transform the halls, do a concert in the middle of the floor. Very versatile. You don't find that in too many places, the possibility to do all those kinds of concerts. When we got that letter, it was because the junior hockey league decided to move the dates of the final series, and we think that the city wasn't strong enough to say they needed at least a week before the festival. When we got that letter, it was clear that we did take the good decision about something," he laughs. "I really don't have the energy to fight anymore. So many problems, so many fights. And everything we did in this town, we were the first ones to do it, the first ones to say "Can we do this?" "Can we try that there?" And you have to make friends and allies for these things. So it was clear that we took the good decision."

Whether FIMAV will continue at all is yet to be determined, but Levasseur is comfortable with his decision to retire, and he notes that the festival is in good financial shape. He and Vézina want to leave while they still have their health and can enjoy camping in northern Quebec, as they have for many years. Their decision is not related to the loss of the Colisée as a venue, having been taken several weeks before the council's decision, but the timing was felicitous for Levasseur and Vezina.

"I really didn't know when it would stop for me," Levasseur says. "Some people when the festival was around thirty years old, people on the board at that time, their minds were working a lot on making it on a permanent basis, that it would last forever. I don't see how you could think like this. You know, you could plan two or three years ahead, but you plan one year at a time. With the Covid years, it has been very stressful, and I find that we can't recuperate after every festival. I used to need maybe only a month to recuperate, and I was so energized by the creativity and the music. It gave me the energy to keep going. But the last few years have been hard, and we decided in November that for our health, for our sanity, that we needed to think about ourselves to get more time. We don't know exactly know what to do with the time. I'd like to keep the VICTO [record] label alive for another ten years if I can, but I don't want that stress of making a program again. I never lost that stress, and it's getting worse and worse. So it's time to get out."

The festival is so much a product of Michel Levasseur's vision, energy, determination, and stubbornness that it is difficult to imagine a FIMAV put together by a different artistic director. While FIMAV's future is uncertain, other things are certain: Michel Levasseur and Joane Vézina have more than earned their retirements, and they leave an extraordinary legacy.

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