



# Scott Thomson Takes Over At FIMAV: Seeking A Balance Between Continuity And Change

By Mike Chamberlain | May 7, 2024



Courtesy David Lobato

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At the 2023 edition of the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, all the talk was about the future of the festival after founding artistic director Michel Levasseur announced that he was stepping down after 40 years and 39 editions of the event. Who would take over as artistic director? Who was even qualified to direct such an eclectic, forward-looking festival, given that one of the requirements would be having a strong local presence in a small city of 50,000 two hours from Montreal? How would the programming of the festival change under a new director?

When the festival announced that the new artistic director would be Scott Thomson, who had taken over the direction of the Guelph Jazz Festival in 2017, the pleasant surprise was a full-circle moment for the two festivals, as founding artistic director of the Guelph festival, Ajay Heble, was originally inspired by FIMAV when he started that festival in the early '90s. Thomson started his association with Guelph as a volunteer, even before he became a musician. In the intervening 25 years, Toronto native Thomson took up the trombone and eventually moved to Montreal, where he has been involved in both playing and organizing musical happenings since 2010 in addition to his recent work directing the Guelph festival. While it might not seem obvious for an anglophone from Toronto to take over a festival based in the heart of francophone Quebec, Thomson's experience and deep ties to the music communities in Quebec and Ontario made him a logical choice to take over from Levasseur at Victoriaville.

Thomson, a youthful 49-year-old with a perpetually positive demeanour, came to music late. Following the 1999 Guelph festival, during which he drove the shuttle van for musicians from the Toronto airport to Guelph, Thomson dropped out of university and spent the winter in Burkina Faso and Mali, where he found the audience experience much more participatory than in North America. He decided that he wanted to make music, so on his return, he purchased a pawnshop trombone and gave himself five years to make it or break it musically. "Twenty-five years later, I'm still playing the trombone," Thomson said.

"Along the way, I joined bands and got involved with different initiatives that drew out more of my interest in producing and presenting. That started especially with the Association of Improvising Musicians of Toronto, of which I was one of the founding board members along with Ken Aldcroft, Joe Sorbara, Nick Fraser, Rob Clutton and myself, and then later on, in 2007, I opened a room in Toronto called Somewhere There, where I was presenting music. At first it was three or four nights a week, and eventually it was seven because there were so many people who wanted a place to play. " Thomson cites the experience of working with Anthony Braxton with the AIM of Toronto orchestra as being formative and drew not only on his musical work but his organizational work as well.

After moving to Montreal in 2010, Thomson dropped his organizational activities to focus on composing and playing, but he started becoming active again as an organizer in 2016, when he and Montreal bassist/bandleader Nicolas Caloia brought together musicians from Toronto and Montreal to work with Roscoe Mitchell.

"That was a wonderful project, but it was also very difficult because Ken Aldcroft died about a month before that," Thomson said. "Ken was a dear friend and an important collaborator for me. It threw me into a period of reflection about what I wanted to do. You don't always have time, right? So you should do the things that are important. I realized, based on my experience, especially in Toronto, that I should be more involved in organizational activities, because it seems to be a skill of mine."

"When it was announced that Michel and Joane [Vezina] were going to retire, I thought about who would be a good candidate for that job. In terms of sensibility and experience—not just programming but general directorship—who would have the capacity, the freedom to move to Victoriaville, or to be there the majority of the time, which I am, to be able to speak French, have a good working knowledge of Quebec's history in musique actuelle—the list is quite short. Moreover, I have the experience of replacing the founding artistic director in Guelph, so I've lived through that already. I've enacted it, which presented a whole bunch of challenges as well, so I knew what it would take, and that process is still very much ongoing."

One of the issues might be that for a founding director to hand over the reins of the festival would be like having someone adopt one of his or her children.

"I don't see it that way," Thomson said. "I understand why they might, but I don't see it that way because it is in a sense very much theirs, but it can't only be theirs. It has to be for them and the people around them. If they were to think about it that way then they would expect that for it to survive, it would need to change. How much it would change would depend on the person, but it can't be exactly the same. It's impossible, and it would be unreasonable to expect. So the metaphor of adopting a child has a little bit too much of the continuity, where that change would not be reasonable. And I think it needs to be reasonable. And they know that as well. But I know how hard it was for Ajay. I know how hard it is for Michel. I'm sympathetic to that. I want it to survive. I want it to thrive. I want the festival to reflect my artistic vision but within a continuity with what has been established throughout the history of the festival, and this is a very fine balance to try to achieve. And there are people around me within the various communities who may have other expectations, so it's a question of working as carefully as possible to achieve that balance and knowing that not everybody is going to be 100-percent happy all the time. Because people care about it. They're invested in it. I want to respect that but also be cognizant of the fact that there'll be some excitement, there'll be some questioning, there'll be a little bit of disappointment here and there. I think that's part of the transition process. People are invested, and it shows that it matters."

Reading the festival program like tea leaves telling us the future of the music is a popular conversation trope for the people who go to Victoriaville regularly. Reading the tea leaves of the program for the 2024 year's edition, which runs from May 16-19, it appears that continuity rather than change prevails, with perhaps more emphasis on acoustic and electroacoustic music and less on electronics than we have seen in past editions. There are performances by Roscoe Mitchell (solo), Nate Wooley, John Butcher and Sophie Agnel, Joëlle Léandre, and a number of others familiar to FIMAV audiences, as well as a program of solo performances at the Ste-Christophe-d'Arthabaska Church as in recent years. True to tradition, the festival will open with the world premiere of a large ensemble piece by a Quebec musician, Pascal Germain-Berardi, who is unknown to Victo audiences. There are also the usual midnight concerts that tend to the loud, avant-rock end of the spectrum of adventurous music, and there are sure to be discoveries among the performers unknown to Canadian and Quebec audiences, such as Don Malfon from [Barcelona](#) and Amma Ateria from the Bay Area.

The fact that Thomson has experienced Victo as both a performer and audience member will inevitably influence his direction of the festival. Even long-time festival attendees, people who come back year after year from places like [New York City](#), Arizona and Texas, have their complaints and disappointments that they discuss. But that is an integral part of the experience of a festival that presents 19 concerts over four days with no overlaps so that everyone can see all the performances. Not everyone is happy all the time.

"And I've been one of those people," Thomson said. In fact, he has performed at Victoriaville on eight occasions, something that will not happen again as long as he directs the festival. "I've played concerts that people loved, and I've played concerts that people were indifferent to. But that kind of exchange—just to sit around after a concert and talk about what was good about it, what was maybe not as good about it, that's what makes it festive."

"It's a core element of the experience. This festival offers a different kind of social life around the music that is very special."

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