

By Irwin Block  
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### Musique Actuelle's 40<sup>th</sup> Edition

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VICTORIAVILLE, Que. – Recovering from head trauma in June 2021, Amma Ateria, the California-based sound artist, composer and improviser set out to represent – visually and aurally – the effect and various transformations in her body.

The result is *Concussion*, a varied and gripping sonic exploration of her recovery with exploratory visuals projected on a large screen behind her as she extracted a range of sounds from her computer and electronic devices on stage at this 40th Festival de Musique Actuelle in this city, 100 miles northeast of Montreal.

The black-and-white visuals – from cloud-like clusters to flashing lights and even moments of darkness – dovetail with the soundscape, from a rumble to a whisper, and then a pounding sound. It was a measured yet engaging and artful exploration.

Splendide Abyse, a quartet led by Montreal-based woodwind player and composer Philippe Lauzier, came on stage in the early evening in slow unison playing repeated themes over varied textures laid out by percussionist Carlo Costa. Frédérique Roy played softly on accordion and chanted while Belinda Campbell played piano and Yamaha DX7 synthesizer. We heard intriguing melodies and unusual sonic interactions, the silences integral to the mix. Splendid!



Chicago composer Joshua Abrams returned to this festival playing the guimbri – a three-stringed skin-covered bass lute – and leading the Natural Information Society in its octet version, featuring Ari Brown on tenor sax. This lush-sounding group played for 90 minutes, including pieces from the CD *Space Time is Gravity* (Eremite Records). It is mainly an ensemble effort with lots of repetition and rich textures. The unique sound is established and maintained by Abrams' consistent presence and the drone-like sound of Lisa Alvarado on harmonium, propelled by drummer Mikel Patrick Avery. Ari Brown's tenor sax and Mai Sugimoto on flute rose above the group sound with their lyrical creations. Toward the end, we heard artful solos from Josh Berman (cornet), Nick Massarella (alto sax), and Jason Stein (bass clarinet).

The midnight show Friday was the Dutch anarcho-punk group, now called Bazip Zeehok, featuring G. W. Sok, formerly the writer/vocalist with the experimental punk group The Ex. Performing with the electro-rock duo of Lukas Simonis (electric guitar) and Gert-Jan Prins, Sok carried a sheaf of tongue-in-cheek lines in English that are meant to satirize. "I'm terribly motivated," he intones, deadpan, or "man in space ... he's "seen everything, done everything, but not satisfaction." The music was first rate but the satirical intent may have been lost on the mainly francophone audience.

The early afternoon show Saturday presented Canadian trumpeter Nicole Rampersaud in a solo concert at a beautifully renovated 19th century Roman Catholic church, playing pieces from her *Saudade* (Ansible Editions) CD. Alternating with a smaller piccolo trumpet, she used several mutes and various techniques, such as short bursts, or a flurry of notes, or just pressing on the pistons or bending notes ending with big clear tones that filled the church.



John Butcher, the English virtuoso saxophonist, returned to Victo in a duo with French pianist Sophie Agnel and playing tenor and soprano engaged in a masterful display of creating sonic pathways that were beautiful and engaging. They had an avant conversation, with Agnel plucking strings from inside the piano with one hand as she played on the keyboard with the other as Butcher developed various voices on his tenor, from shimmering lines to whistle-like sounds. At one point Agnel used special brushes to play inside with both hands. He switched to soprano for some playful call-and response then breathed into the instrument rather than blowing notes. An inventive and engaging encounter!

Bill Orcutt's Guitar Quartet, with Wendy Eisenberg, Ava Mendoza and Shane Parish, began their joyful gig with a handful of short, upbeat and energetic pieces that power their way into your head and heart. Then, leader Orcutt announced "We will improvise," and they did. Eisenberg's lyrical solo stood out. The gig ended with three short and punchy pieces.

The much-anticipated return here of veteran Chicago musician Roscoe Mitchell for a solo concert led to a rare full house. The fact he is so admired by the avant crowd and at 83 had chosen to play the massive bass saxophone was intriguing. He began his gig playing from a seated position on a stool and the music in the first half hour sounded like some material written during the Baroque era. He then switched to the sopranino and curved soprano saxophones. His ability to play credibly, including long lines sustained by circular breathing, was impressive. The ovation from the audience spoke for itself.



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