



FIMAV 2024

The familiar sound of the unfamiliar at the festival's 40th edition

Eric Hill

May 30, 2024

Finding a balance between routine and innovation is a challenge. As a writer who came up through an academic system of cycles and deadlines I have ever since been in thrall to order and expectations. There is a mix of irritation and comfort in knowing that certain projects are on the calendar, especially ones that carry with them the task of close critical attention but also the potential for surprise and delight. [FIMAV](#) provides one of those stretches every Victoria Day weekend.

From car rentals to email verifications about press accreditation to making sure I have not only my laptop but also my laptop power adaptor (always remember your laptop power adaptor... always); from examining Google Maps to decide where to stop for lunch along the 7+ hour drive to where you might take a break to walk along the St. Lawrence river to combat the hypnotic consistency of Autoroute 20; I enjoy the prep work, but hewing to a routine can drain some of the better parts of anticipation.

The festival itself faces this same challenge, though for its 40th edition there was one glaring shake up that stamped a small question mark on the event: the retirement of the festival's first and, to this point only, artistic director, **Michel Levasseur**. In his place **Scott Thomson**, veteran director of the *Guelph Jazz Festival* and talented artist in his own right, faced the challenge of meeting the expectations of a consistent core audience that, in my own witness over the last 25 years of attending, are themselves fans of innovation with a routine framework. To say it all started with a bang would be overvaluing "bang" as a descriptor. "Bang" doesn't really cover the sound of 50+ artists on stage adding their voices and breath and string, brassy, and percussive things to a pocket opera (technically and oratorio) involving an apocalyptic battle and a family's turmoil against that backdrop. Such was **Pascal Germain-Berardi's** *Basileus*.

A handful of discrete instrumental ensembles were supplemented by a choir from Montreal called **The Growlers** for their Death Metal vocal approach. A trio of soloists each featured in an act explaining the dissolution of an empire and the eventual birth of a new hope, albeit via questionable methods. It was an ambitious creation; one whose development bridged the outgoing and incoming festival direction. With a tone that blurred the line between high art and elbow in the ribs shenanigans, it was a blast in all senses of the world.



First of the midnight shows featured *Le Double*, an eight piece group from Québec led by Joliette-born **Stéphane Diamantakiou**.

They flowed seamlessly between ambient dub moods to jazz-adjacent rock vibes reminiscent of Tortoise and other mid-90s post-rock leaders. It was a fine way to ease out of the first day.

Amma Ateria's *Concusssion* on day two of the festival held a special place in the overall line-up this year for a variety of reasons. The California based composer and electronic artist promised a piece described in the program

as “an on-going study that was provoked by an impact to her orbital and frontal bone.” Reading the performance description suggested we might be in for some near-medical experience of brain-wave altering tones and MRI noise, but instead it was a very musical and immersive blend of sound and visual stimuli that conveyed the physical and emotional disruption of her injury.



The show was an notable outlier this year in its focus on the technology and sound, something that has often held a more prominent place in past programming.

A more typical presentation, but one that captured both my attention and admiration, was *Splendide Abysse*. Led by Montreal clarinet player **Philippe Lauzier**, this four piece featured a very deliberate and gradually evolving sequence of compositions along a the suggestion of oceanic voyages.

The group created the suggestion of space through accordion and synthesizer drones, a seascape replete with siren song, navigational beacons, the hypnotic lulling of repeated figures disrupted by a sudden surprise of land. It was a clearly controlled environment that nonetheless felt alive and teeming with possibilities.



A more obvious crowd pleaser came in the form of **Joshua Abrams**'s *Natural Information Society*. Dubbing this eight piece his “Community Ensemble,” with veteran tenor saxophonist **Ari Brown** as a featured soloist, Abrams grooved through a series of pieces, leading on guimbri and establishing an ethnographic diversity of sound.

The whole show lived in a pocket that felt warm and inclusive, a showcase for the kind of talent that Chicago seems to generate with ease and regularity.

I take a pause in the action here to make a small confession. I'm always a bit resistant to the prospect of solo shows. And especially fully acoustic solo shows. And especially especially fully acoustic solo shows that take place in an admittedly beautiful and sonically rich location like Victoriaville's Église Saint-Christophe d'Arthabaska with its dense Catholic iconography and its butt-numbing pews. But I'll certainly make an exception for **Nicole Rampersaud**.



As a fan of her recent debut solo album *Saudade*, I was curious to hear how she might adapt those electronically enhanced pieces to a purely acoustic environment. Employing a variety of techniques of both breath work and instrumental engagement she filled the space with such an array of ideas and their execution that I was barely aware of my tailbone's distant protests.

Saturday was a day for improvising duos, trios, and quartets. A mid-afternoon performance by veterans **Sophie Agnel** and **John Butcher** set a high bar for attention to detail and interplay while continually discovering new shapes. Agnel was especially surprising in her variety of dualistic attacks within and without her piano. This bar was cleared with some panache by the later trio of **Joëlle Léandre**, **Mat Maneri**, and **Craig Taborn**.



Dubbed *hEARoes*, they presented a series of pieces created and developed over the last year in a variety of live settings. While the importance of listening within improvisation goes without saying, this trio took the discipline to psychic levels, often pausing and withdrawing for full sections while the other or others worked some rich seam of sound. Léandre especially highlighted why she might be the most creative and electrifying double bass player alive currently.

A bit less edge-of-the-seat but a festival highlight regardless was **Bill Orcutt's Guitar Quartet**. Drawing from his album *Music for Four Guitars*, compositions which featured Orcutt multi-tracking himself playing all parts, the quartet was like an exploded view of the score, adapted for the live space by **Shane Parish**.



Filled out by **Ava Mendoza** and **Wendy Eisenberg**, the group were clearly enjoying themselves as they raced through Orcutt's blend of blues-tinged noisy yet minimalist music box jams. All four adhered to Orcutt's specific four string guitar configuration, creating a hybrid of raga-like drones up against melodic articulation that ranged from almost classical exploration to front porch trances. The second half of the performance allowed the group to stretch their fingers with a variety of improvisations that expanded but remained tethered to the core sound of the first half's composed pieces.



Nate Wooley is a busy organizer and composer of music. He returns to the festival with a Columbia Icefield, a group formed a few years back to help him describe in music the physical, natural grandeur of the Colorado glacial field that gave the ensemble its moniker.

A slight line-up tweak, subbing guitarist **Ava Mendoza** (back again) for Mary Halvorson, made all the difference, taking the formerly more deliberate and reserved interplay to new and slightly hotter climes. Wooley's pieces were written in tribute to and via study of his friend and mentor **Ron**

Miles who had recently passed away. The four piece rose to places of complex ecstasy and fell away when Wooley's solo trumpet pieces, which bracketed the performance, place an elegiac frame around the evening.

Closing the festival out was the ensemble fronted by Norway's **Kim Myhr**. In his easy way, wearing a tie dye shirt to match the mood, Myhr guided the energies of his eight piece through an array of drifts courtesy of several twelve string guitars riding open major chords and three percussionists putting in the time, working tones and polyrhythms over and under the fray.



The more upbeat sections touched off a side stage dance party, largely featuring many festival volunteers who felt the weight lifting off their shoulders... as did we all.

And then there was the return to the extra-regular routine that the real-world daily promises. But edition #41 is just over the horizon! What irregular regularities await?

All photos courtesy of festival photographer Martin Morrisette.

<https://indiedependence.substack.com/p/fimav-2024>

