

By Stuart Broomer
Fall 2023



FIMAV 2023 - Photo: Martin Morissette

EVENTS

Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, 39th edition. May 18–21, 2023.

FIMAV, or Victo, is a unique institution: a festival in farm country 160 kilometres east of Montreal that presents a range of outside musics—avant-jazz and rock, electroacoustic and noise, etc.—from multiple cultures. Having weathered the COVID-19 years to return to its full dimensions in 2022, the thirty-ninth edition presented nineteen concerts in four days, along with an engaging collection of sound sculptures in the downtown core and programs of experimental films with notable soundtracks.

This year's edition also came with a shock: news of the retirement of founder and general and artistic director Michel Levasseur and his wife, Joanne Vézina, the festival's administrative director. Appropriately, the program reflected both the festival's history and the form that the event has assumed in recent years—a tribute to Levasseur's vision and sense of form—and balanced regional, national, and international performers as well as diverse aesthetics, jumping between the familiar

and the new, the raucous and the subtle, the far-flung and the nearby. The following performances were personal highlights.

At the subtle end of things, electronic musician Ikue Mori presented *Tracing the Magic* with an international sextet. Fresh, shifting textures abounded with Mori seated at a table with her computer and singer-computer musician Charmaine Lee, who generated an extraordinary stream of utterances, from vocal impressions to imitations of machines, with a cartoon-like energy reminiscent of voice artist Mel Blanc. This conjoined with various combinations of drummer Ches Smith, reed master Ned Rothenberg (alto saxophone, shakuhachi, clarinet), pianist Sylvie Courvoisier, and piper David Watson, moving through an unlikely array of musical moments highlighted by wit, energy, and virtuosity.

Subtler still, Montreal-based clarinetist Lori Freedman brought *Being-Five*, an international quintet producing elegant free improvisations that ranged from unpredictable textures and sudden explosions to *Freeze*, a piece in which the group maintained perfect dynamic balance as they blended into a complex hum, growing gradually louder to create a kind of mysterious midnight garden, with the sound pitched between silence, massed night insects, the human nervous system and the hum of the universe. The individual sounds of Freedman's clarinet, Christopher

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OPPOSITE PAGE: Dave Rempis (left) and Tashi Dorji performing at FIMAV in Victoriaville, Québec, May 2023. ABOVE: Vocalists Laura Swankey, Paul Dutton, and Christine Duncan performing as part of the Aurealities Ensemble at FIMAV 2023. Ensemble members not pictured include Lina Allemano (trumpet), Matthias Mainz (piano), Albrecht Maurer (violin), Tom Richards (trombone), Joe Sorbara (drums, percussion), and Emily Anine Wittbrodt (cello).

Williams' bass, Yorgos Dimitriadis' percussion, Axel Dörner's hybrid valve and slide trumpet, and Andrea Parkins' amplified objects were rarely individuated and then might elude identification. (Their CD on *Relative Pitch* is worth seeking out.)

Other highlights included projects featuring major Canadian figures. *Aurealities* celebrated the work of Toronto-based poet, vocalist, and improviser Paul Dutton (*Four Horsemen*, CCMC) with a nine-member ensemble led by German pianist Matthias Mainz and Toronto drummer Joe Sorbara, who first formed a trio with Dutton a decade ago. Dutton's playful, rhythmic, language-cracking poems fed both the orchestrations and the individual creative extrapolations of singers (Dutton himself, Christine Duncan, and Laura Swankey) and instrumentalists (trumpeter Lina Allemano, trombonist Tom Richards, violinist Albrecht Maurer, and cellist Emily Anine Wittbrodt).

Another artist with a long history is drummer / composer Guy Thouin, a founder of the politically charged *Quatuor du jazz libre du Québec*, which linked free jazz and radical Quebec politics fifty-five years ago. His current tentet, *L'Ensemble Infini*, brings wit and intensity to his music, whether touching on Thouin's studies in the compound meters of Asian music or the tangled wails of four tenor saxophones summoning up

the free jazz big bands of the 1960s, ably conducted by Elyze Venne-Deshaies, the band's principal arranger. Thouin's mid-concert extended solo was a model of structured decorum amid the maelstrom, while tenor saxophonist Aaron Leany stood out for his own balancing of chaos and order, and Belinda Campbell contributed apt piano throughout as well as novel electronic levity.

Perhaps as a result of recent cost increases around travel and other related costs, FIMAV presented several duos this year, two of which stood out. Guitarist Tashi Dorji and Dave Rempis build strong music out of sharp contrasts. Rempis, adept at finding perhaps the ideal approach to a range of saxophones, played alto exclusively here, beginning with cascading runs of flute-like harmonics, and generally emphasizing the instrument's innately light, fleet character even at expressionist densities. Dorji took an approach that was usually both percussive and electronic, hard-edged, even harsh, and rhythmically insistent, though at times relieved by his own lyric moments. Working from opposite poles, the two constructed a music as formally coherent as it was startling.

Collectif Tendancielle, presented by the Québécois duo of Camille Brisson (flute, effects, objects) and Isabelle Clermont (electric harp, effects, objects, electronics), was a wit-filled work of feminist theatre.



Lori Freedman's free improvisation quintet BeingFive—Yorgos Dimitriadis, Axel Dörner, Lori Freedman, Andrea Parkins, and Christopher A. Williams—performing at FIMAV in Victoriaville, Quebec, in May 2023.

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Dressed in skirts with crinolines, the players began amid a stage set, putting on and taking off masses of amplified beads, gradually voicing fluting exclamations, the whole collected and repeating until there was a din of voices and beads. The performance then turned to a dense instrumental performance largely driven by Clermont's prepared electric harp, played with great force and high amplification. Following this, the two assembled a mass of kitchen pots on a table, banging them together as the quantity of pots and degree of amplification increased. All of this was managed with wonderfully matter-of-fact aplomb—an interlude of musical political theatre driven by invention and noise.

Another duo of note was Les Marquises, whose extended performance saw Emilie Škrijelj begin as turntablist then move to accordion and electronics, maintaining a central auditory focus as drummer Tom Malmendier contributed a continuously shifting rhythmic stream, turning labour-intensive free jazz drumming into a kind of ambient sound.

An international trio performed a set of remarkable free improvisations, a continuous stream of coherent invention to which each member contributed almost constantly. Canadian clarinetist François Houle played basset clarinet, a soprano clarinet with an extension that adds lower notes to the range, providing significant warmth to his lines; English pianist Alexander Hawkins played with an unmatched, almost liquid fluency, and New York drummer Kate Gentile added continuous rhythmic movement and commentary.

No performers could more strongly reflect the FIMAV tradition than Fred Frith, whom Michel Levasseur first presented in Victoriaville before creating the festival, and John Zorn, who first appeared in 1988

in a duo with Frith and with the band Naked City. Each returned with refreshed offerings. Frith brought his decade-old trio, with electric bassist Jason Hoopes and drummer Jordan Glenn, enlivened by Heike Liss's projections of layered films and spontaneous painting, as well as Portuguese trumpeter Susana Santos Silva's lyrical, yet forceful, contributions. The festival concluded with two John Zorn concerts. *New Music for Trios* presented Zorn's recent jazz-inflected works for two different trios: The first was artfully propelled by pianist Brian Marsella, bassist Jorge Roeder, and drummer Ches Smith; the second, with organist John Medeski, guitarist Matt Hollenberg, and drummer Kenny Grohowski, somehow achieved artful complexity with rough-edged electricity. The highlight, though, was Zorn's New Masada Quartet, a return to his most admired material in a new quartet with Roeder, drummer Kenny Wollesen and guitarist Julian Lage, the latter artfully dovetailing with Zorn's lines and finding the right pitch bends to maximize the traditional scales that contribute so much to this body of work.

FIMAV will surely live on; its significance and continuity with its compound community—the city, the vitality of current Quebec music, its unique international breadth—should require it. One can only wish Michel Levasseur a happy retirement after his long commitment to his local and international communities. The festival can only become a different event. Hopefully, it will somehow remain attuned to the shifting moods of its expansive world and the complex, responsive music to which it gives birth.

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