

Irwin Block
May 20, 2024

Musique Actuelle's 40th Edition

VICTORIAVILLE, Que. – At this four-day festival of experimental and new music, the most sublime and memorable concerts can happen when the fancy drum kits, and elaborate electronics are absent from its stages.

That's what we heard Saturday night in all-acoustic setting when three veteran improvisers delighted listeners here at the Festival de Musique Actuelle with a performance that explored new ground in the moment yet flowed seamlessly as if it had been prepared and composed.



French bassist Joëlle Léandre, with violist Mat Maneri and pianist Craig Taborn, had recently recorded hHEARoes (Rogue Art) together, but at their gig we could almost hear them listening to each other and responding with notes, the communication and complicity was so complete.

Tricky techniques were absent as they showed how beautiful music can be created spontaneously by experienced players with those proverbial big ears. The classically trained Léandre most impressed with her brilliant solo piece that stands as a festival highlight.



At the midnight show, The Dwarves of East Agouza turned their concert into a party as they injected a fun-flavoured spirit into the festival scene with their psychedelic improvised music with its Middle Eastern flavour.

Formed in Cairo, Canadian/Egyptian electric guitarist Sam Shalabi, Egyptian Maurice Louca (electronics), and saxophonist/vocalist American Alain Bishop offered their take on rock and Noise, with Shalabi impressively

laying out a jagged and steady guitar, enhanced by Bishop's alto sax and Louca's varied sounds from a table of acoustic and electronic devices. Then the vibe changed when Bishop announced, "I feel like dancing," which he did on stage, and some audience members did the same, before the band reverted to its original groove – a much loved experience.

The alto sax is more than just a reed instrument, at least when Barcelona-born Don Malfon plays it. He makes the instrument sing, then takes just the mouthpiece into his clasped hands and seems to make it talk! He prepared the sax for more sound variations, stuffed something into the bell, and began extracting a variety of sounds and textures from the instrument. He made it rattle, whistle, and imitate the wind and ambient noise. Impressively, he used metal mutes that vibrate in contact with the instrument. He exploited its sonic potential artfully, though toward the end it felt like we were in a lab.



The most moving experience among the 19 concerts came mid-afternoon Sunday when trumpeter Nate Wooley led his Columbia Icefield quartet in tribute to his mentor and friend, trumpeter Ron Miles, who died two years ago at age 58. Wooley was close to tears when he recounted how Miles had encouraged him in the face of rejections and said he'd play music Miles had played or inspired him.

Wooley started with a solo that revealed a lovely, burnished tone with overtones from his voice and then entered into a lament and a variety of tunes, with Eva Mendoza (electric guitar), Susan Alcorn (pedal steel guitar), and Ryan Sawyer (drums). It was a beautiful musical tribute. Near flood lights flashed as Wooley playing Albert Ayler's Ghosts before a final note on his trumpet.

In a festival first, Chicago DJ Kavain Wayne Space teamed up with the British improvising duo of saxophonist Seymour Wright and drummer Paul Abbott – a blend of genres that for more than 75 minutes was busy, propulsive, and dramatic.

Less successful, in spite of stellar personnel, was the evening gig by the quintet called Sélébéyone – intersection in the Wolof language of Senegal – featuring saxophonists Steve Lehman and Maciek Lasserre, drummer Damion Reid, American rapper Hprizm and Senegalese hip hop artist Gaston Bandimic. It was billed as jazz meets rap fusion, but the setting in a theatre made it feel artificial. The words poured out in Wolof and French from Bandimic and English from Hprizm, but the genres-mix felt super-imposed.

In marked contrast, a big happy crowd cheered the Euro-based octet led by guitarist/composer Kim Myhr as he and his crew of three other guitarists, two drummers, a percussionist and keyboards player delivered a joyful and positive series of songs featuring repeated motifs and a full-soundscape, but always restrained. I most enjoyed the final piece when the full band let loose and went all-out.

<https://avantmusicnews.com/2024/05/20/amn-reviews-fimav-2024-part-3/>

