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Taking over as artistic director of a major festival is a daunting task, but Scott Thomson has the extra pressure of tackling the 40th edition of FIMAV, a festival whose founder, Michel Levasseur, has programmed since its inception. Kicking off with three Québec-centric performances made a statement about the depth of local talent available, and the massive scale of the opening show also helped bridge the eras with a piece whose origins date back to a pre-pandemic promise.

Pascal Germain-Berardi, originally from the small town of Joliette in Québec, is the director of the Temps Fort company in Montréal. *Basileus* is an oratorio drawing together four ensembles that Germain-Berardi had been working with since 2017. These include a full complement of brass from Ensemble Horizon, Sixtrum, a six-piece percussion ensemble with a full array of gongs, tympani and smaller percussion instruments and Ensemble Forestare encompassing more than a dozen electric and acoustic bass and guitars. Filling out the back line was the Growlers Choir, a dozen death metal vocalists that provided both the menacing chorus and exposition of the text, written by Sebastien Johnson. The story of *Basileus* is best described as an epic poem channelled through a perverse *Game of Thrones*-style mash up of blood spilled and bloodlines combined. It's also very metal. Told in four acts, it involves an all-encompassing war on land and sea that has torn the world apart. Focus is on a family of characters; the Matriarch, the Son Agis and the Daughter Ades, all given voice by soloists Sarah Albu, Dominic Lorange and Charlotte Gagnon respectively. Finding a path to the other side of this conflict involves sacrifice and some questionable parenting choices, leading to the birth of Sol/Sol Supreme... offspring of Agis and Ades.

The impact of fifty artists thrashing the audience with wave after wave of musical drama cannot be overstated, yet Germain-Berardi's compositions allowed for enough space and articulation of all parts to keep any segment from being lost in the tumult. In so large a group, it's difficult to isolate anyone for individual praise, but the members of Sixtrum managed to impress with their frequent explosive punctuation and frantic dashes from instrument to instrument. Sarah Albu as the Matriarch covered the imagined space between traditional opera and guttural metal with a performance that any fan of Xasthur would approve of. By nature of their top central stage placement and sheer stomach churning charm, the Growlers Choir were the foot soldiers who carried the day. The theatricality of their throat-shredding mania set a tone that asserted both the bone-snapping stakes of mythical war and the elbow-in-the-ribs of traditional opera.

As a way to close an imaginary circle for a festival whose origins grew from a willingness to present the Montréal Symphony Orchestra alongside avant-garde iconoclasts like René Lussier — and as a way to hand over the keys to a new generation with a spectacle that's been a few years in the making, — the impact of *Basileus* is hard to top.

<https://exclaim.ca/music/article/pascal-germain-berardi-basileus-concert-review-fimav-2024-may-16>