

FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE MUSIC ACTUELLE DE VICTORIAVILLE

By **Tristan Geary**
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At 83, **Roscoe Mitchell** walked onto the stage to rapturous applause. He looked regal, dressed in a striking purple suit and matching hat. Peppered across the stage were illuminated works of art created by this legendary founding member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, his boyish frame now perched like a Buddha on a high stool. Mitchell was the literal and spiritual center of the 40th Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV), four days of mind-expanding music (May 16-19) held across two sleek concert halls, a hotel ballroom and a church in Victoriaville, Quebec. The concertizing Mitchell then launched into an improvisation on the bass saxophone, an instrument standing as tall as he was sitting. Meandering through chesty low notes and wispy upper registers with a probing curiosity, he arrived at tonal centers, picked them up, examined them and departed from them as gracefully as he greeted them, as if they were passing thoughts to which he'd mastered the art of non-attachment. Circular breathing allowed for lengthy phrases, increasingly stirring the longer they sounded. It felt like the whole concert was delivered in one continuous breath, a single thought with bold digressions and eager homebases.

But two days and 11 concerts before Mitchell took the stage, FIMAV 2024 launched with the world premiere of **Pascal Germain-Berardi's** *Basileus*. Held upstairs from the smaller cabaret hall where Mitchell played, over 50 musicians crowded the stage, including three electric guitarists, eight acoustic guitarists, a battery of percussionists and a volley of brass instrumentalists. The sound combined opera and heavy metal, deploying the epic quality of both. The lead singers switched between traditional operatic voice and gutbucket growling. Delivered in French, the plot revolved around a family confronted with a bitter power struggle in a time of war. There was rarely a moment where the timpanist wasn't playing, and the percussionists darted around their setups like worker bees in a hive. The music churned as if a lumbering war machine. Particularly exciting was the Growlers Choir of eleven singers who, towering at the back of the stage, acted collectively as the narrator, furthering the plot with growled, screamed and whispered libretto. In the audience, metalheads with gnarly band T-shirts sat next to bespectacled avant-garde music enthusiasts, creating a curious hang. At the end, the audience screamed back, giving a standing ovation.



The festival was structured with no overlaps in the music, often with less than an hour's rest to recalibrate one's ears between concerts. With the echoes of the thunderous percussion of Basileus still felt in the air, festival goers filed into the downstairs cabaret hall to hear **Quatuor Bozzini**. As if the festival's new Artistic Director Scott Thomson (this year replacing the since retired Michel Levasseur whose 39th edition of 2023 was his last) was pranking audiences, the string quartet's performance was the pure opposite of what listeners had just experienced. If the previous concert blew your hair back, this concert required lean-in listening; Jürg Frey's String Quartet No. 4 never rose above a whisper. The quartet floated out gossamer harmonies, barely scraping the strings. Some of the notes lasted upwards of 15 seconds, leaving ample time to contemplate the overtones. At times dissonant, but replete with satisfying resolutions, the music was, as Thomson admitted during a press conference, intended as "an ear cleaning experience after something so grandiose." More than cleansing the aural palate, it was an act of hypnosis: a late-hour start and the music's somniferous character, led some audience members into dreamland.

The next day, **Sakina Abdou**'s solo saxophone concert was held in the serene, vaulted church of Église Saint-Christophe D'Arthabaska and was one of the standout concerts of the entire festival. Abdou made use of the church's multiple floors and hidden crevices, beginning the concert with a soaring two-note refrain from an unseen location. The instrument echoed hauntingly in that special church-like way. Abdou, still hidden, moved around the upper levels, developing the yearning two-note riff into more complex gestures. The sound cascaded from above, as if the horns of angels were blaring down from on high, but a pained, tortured kind. Eventually, she made her way down the church's central aisle, busying the sound as she moved along. At last visible, steps away from listeners, the sound rose to eye-watering volume levels. Arriving at the stage, Abdou bounced between searing altissimo notes held bafflingly long, and guttural, distorted saxophone growling. After a pause, she switched from alto to tenor, exploring some low-end ideas. She pushed the instrument into multiphonic territory, emitting two somehow independent lines simultaneously. The saxophone achieved a split personality, hard not to associate—when surrounded by biblical imagery—with heaven and hell. It was the perfect setting for the music, and Abdou used it to its full totemic potential. She then retreated back down the aisle, to hidden alcoves, playing remnants of the blues.



Electronic music was well-represented at FIMAV, whether through standalone sets, or as a core texture of electroacoustic ensembles. The height of electronic music wizardry came from **Amma Ateria**. A solo set held in Centre Des Congrès' dark, windowless hotel ballroom (perfect for immersive listening), Ateria's music told the sonic story of recovering from a concussion. The music reflected the shiver-inducing feeling when thinking about head trauma. Is this what it sounds like to go under? The abstract, self-made projections that backlit the electronicist, evoked silky hospital sheets and a probing doctor's searchlight over a patient on a table. But the squeamishness of the sound and subject was at the same time calming; not just clinical, but anesthetizing. The slowly enveloping sounds: droning, watery, metallic and bassy, wrapped the audience up in a hug of some dark abyss, loud enough to rattle the ceiling panels of the room.

That evening, the eight-piece, fashion-forward band **Natural Information Society** also played. Lisa Alvarado (harmonium) wore an angular art pop getup with striking reds and a dashing beret. Nick Mazzarella (alto) was attired in a smart, no-frills gray suit; Josh Berman (trumpet) favored high-waisted pants and tucked in gingham shirt; Jason Stein (bass clarinet) was in lumberjack chic; Mikel Patrick Avery (drums), with well-groomed beard and hipster cap, had a humble coolness; Joshua Abrams (guimbrì) wore a flowing, multilayered outfit, jangling necklaces and a shin-length denim coat and Ari Brown (tenor), the legendary octogenarian Chicago saxophonist

was the definition of class, with an old school loose leather jacket and deftly placed pork pie hat. Likewise, old school was Mai Sugimoto (flute, alto) in concert black. Composed by Abrams, the music was earthy and unvarnished, working up a galloping, bop-in-your-seat momentum from his guimbri (a three-string bass lute), along with Avery's drumming, the engine of the ensemble. The music evolved like a species, with each passing section sprouting new limbs and appendages. Alvarado provided a cloud of harmony, on top of which saxophones, flute, trumpet and bass clarinet blended and wailed with a freewheeling energy, but never lost touch with the music's patient pacing. Brown was the beloved guest of the ensemble, and offered many evocative solos, commanding yet inviting.



Later that evening, midnight hangers-on were treated to **Bazip Zeehok**, the Dutch experimental punk trio fronted by longtime FIMAV performer G.W. Sok, founder and former frontman of the band The Ex. The trio, featuring Lukas Simonis (guitar) and Gert-Jan Prins (drums) brought a refreshing punk attitude to the festival. Short, snappy, and thrashing pieces defined their set, with the instruments wailing underneath Sok's words. A cross between a poetry reading and a punk show, hard-hitting lyrics were a welcome change in a festival of instrumental prowess.

On day three came the festival's pinnacle of acoustic free-form improvisation, the **Roaring Tree Trio**. Featuring Craig Taborn (piano), Mat Maneri (viola) and Joëlle Léandre (bass), the three performers launched into the music as if picking back up on a conversation they were just having and eager to get back to, with each revealing strong, distinct personalities. Taborn was probing. His phrases had a sharp wit and juggled pointed lines and aching chords. He was vigorous in his improvisation, overflowing ideas with no note left unplayed, even strumming the interior of the piano. A contrast to Taborn's kinetic energy was Maneri's pacifying viola. He was the group's peacekeeper, offering slow-moving, delicate ideas that, while never boiling over, maintained a simmering suspense. The boundaries between Léandre and her bass dissolved as she hung on to its neck. She swept the strings arco in all directions, creating otherworldly sounds. She kindled many fires with the other two, scene-setting with swirling textures. At other times she preferred the nuclear option, dropping explosive ideas and machine-gun like lines. A particularly commanding solo interlude from her had audiences groaning in satisfaction at every mind-expanding idea that topped the last. Together, the group kicked around the music, sometimes unanimously, sometimes solo to no answer, and at other times paired-off, with the third chiming in from afar.



Standout concerts from the final day included **Nate Wooley's** program-length work *Columbia Icefield*. The trumpeter introduced the piece with a moving speech about his north star trumpeter and friend, the late Ron Miles. The music followed with similar stirring gravitas. It moved, as its title suggests, glacially, capturing the sheer power of the nature the work is an ode to. Guitarist Ava Mendoza added a distorted fire-and-ice edge to Wooley's

soaring playing. Pedal steel guitar from Susan Alcorn emitted round shapes and pads of sound while Ryan Sawyer steered the intensity through percussion, dialing the flame that kept the music cooking. The result was music that captured the tectonic tranquility of its subject as well as its elemental might.

The final concert of the festival saw Norwegian guitarist and composer **Kim Myhr**'s eight-piece band send audiences into the aisles dancing to deep grooves and hefty backbeats. Strummed bliss from multiple guitars gave the music an indie-rock feel. Innermounting intensity from Eve Risser on keyboards offered a platform for improvisational merrymaking from all, with the eight members moving in sync within the dense sound and groove.



Other performances included: electroacoustic high energy outfit **Le Double**; accordion-forward improvisation from **Splendide Abyse**; a solo set held in the church from Nicole Rampersaud; timbric adventures with French pianist **Sophie Agnel** and U.K. saxophonist **John Butcher**; the satisfying grit of the **Bill Orcutt Guitar Quartet** (with Mendoza, Wendy Eisenberg and Shane Parish); psychedelic and dizzying beat-making from **The Dwarves of East Agouza**; baffling extended technique from saxophonist **Don Malfon**; the DJ-meets-improv world of **Kavain Wayne Space/XT Trio**; and the hip-hop drenched sound of **Sélébéyone**, the multi-continentailing jazz rap group.

FIMAV ended on a triumphant note, with a pang of bittersweetness from the sweeping sound of Kim Myhr's *Sympathetic Magic*. Mitchell, returning, played four improvisations before the audience begged him back for a fifth. Towards the end he switched between soprano and bass saxophone, pinging the distinct sounds off of one another in short, punctuated phrases. His concert ended without pretense or grand ceremony. The aftermath of Mitchell and the whole festival was a lingering feeling of mystery, a contemplation of improvisations, their sound, their many parts, their formulas. You want to bottle them up and take them home with you, but the harder you try to pin them down the more they dissolve into the air. Luckily we have next year to get another fix.

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