

Irwin Block
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Musique Actuelle's 40th edition

VICTORIAVILLE, Que. – With praise from organizers for programming that is daring and diverse, the 40th edition of this city's Festival International de Musique Actuelle (FIMAV) got underway Thursday night with the first of 19 concerts over four days.

It takes place at two venues in this quiet city of 49,000, 100 miles northeast of Montreal, where in 1983 a dedicated group of then young people decided to add various genres to their core commitment to avant jazz and improvised music to attract the widest possible audience and garner public and government support.

This year's lineup maintains that tradition under the leadership of general manager and artistic director Scott Thomson, who has taken over these responsibilities from festival founder Michel Levasseur. Thomson, an accomplished improvising trombonist who has performed here and formerly directed the Guelph Jazz Festival, promised to program music that can “surprise, provoke, challenge, and delight” audiences.

The opening shows provided what Thomson termed “contrasts” – all of them featuring musicians who live and work in Quebec.



The opener offered the massive stage presence and sound of *Basileus*, an oratorio in four acts, with no fewer than 50 musicians on stage. It was composed, developed, and directed by Pascal Germain-Berardi, with a libretto by Sébastien Johnson – a Homer-esc saga about a family during a violent time, and its members as they search for both personal freedom and control and overcoming the past.

Sung in French, with explanatory panels displayed on a large screen laying out the themes, the plot was far from easy to follow, even for native French-speakers who sat beside me and seemed somewhat perplexed. The message about the call to combat a violent and immoral world was clear enough, but it seemed that a rewrite could have sharpened the core ideas.

With such a massive grouping – 18 guitars and bass, 10 brass, 6 percussionists, with the metal-like sound from the 11-member Growlers Choir – most of the time the sound was huge and had a powerful impact, with singers Sarah Albu as the matriarch and Charlotte Gagnon as daughter standing out for their gripping solos. While the metal chorus showed it can give a new edge to operatic forms, the story itself weakened the overall result.



FIMAV 2024 - Photo: Martin Morissette

The predicted contrast came with the Montreal-based Bozzini string quartet, returning to the festival to play a contemporary piece by Swiss composer Jürg Frey, his String Quartet No. 4, one of three written by him for this quartet. The piece begins with long tones and ends with cellist Stéphanie Bozzini plucking repeated notes while the bulk of the piece sees the group develop themes that at times are harmonically pleasing, and also clash. As the composer has written, “My music is slow, sometimes static, often delicately shifting between standstill and movement. And yet, after more than an hour, this music has arrived at another place.” It was deftly delivered with sensitivity and great communication among the four musicians: violinists Clemens Merkel and Alyssa Cheung, violist Stéphanie Bozzini and her sister, cellist Isabelle Bozzini.

The midnight show, an octet led by electric bassist and composer Stéphane Diamantakiou, featured musicians from three regions of the province with a soundscape that combined acoustic and electric instrumentation, and electronics. Starting with ambient noise the melodic lead was established and maintained by Geneviève Gauthier, giving almost a human voice to

her tenor sax, while electric bassist and leader Diamantakiou pushed the tunes forward. The music was energized by percussionist David Simard and Robert Pelletier providing harmonic variety on vibraphone.

The early show on Friday presented the solo improvisations of French saxophonist Sakina Abdou, delivering her hour-long program in a beautifully renovated Roman Catholic church, built 150 years ago. She began by playing long tones on alto sax, alternating with dissonances, starting at the church entrance as she slowly emerged and began walking toward the altar. She then switched to the tenor sax. She has a big sound on both saxes and is skilled at circular breathing. After a standing ovation, she returned to the alto and sounded more playful in her 10-minute closer, with bird-like calls and a dance-like quality to her improv.

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