

JazzTimes

24th Annual FIMAV (Festival de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville)

Venue/ Various Venues

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After more or less taking a holiday from jazz programming last year, FIMAV (Festival de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, aka “Victoriaville”) returned to the jazz cause with a passion this spring, if not a friendly vengeance. Amidst the traditional count of 24 shows in five days, the biggest name on the 2007 roster was Anthony Braxton, coming back in two contexts—the Diamond Curtain Wall Trio and the sweeping 12(+1)Tet—after appearing in three shows here in 2005. Other marquee stealers included frequent FIMAV flyer John Zorn (pictured), bravely and boldly going solo, and Marilyn Crispell, premiering a dazzling new quartet, with drummer Andrew Cyrille on the other end of the stage from the tasteful provocateur of a pianist (and former Braxton bandmate).

Sneaking in beneath the big three was the festival’s surprise jazz delight: the Cor Fuhler-led Corkestra, a captivating, fresh and witty Dutch ensemble crossing the Atlantic for the first time. In this octet, featuring compelling Dutch saxist Ab Baars and the unusual timbre of Nora Mulder’s cymbalum, structures are present but porous. Scored fragments are shuffled and cued between players, with plenty of room for improvisation (a format, actually, which mirrors the m.o. of Braxton’s 12(+1)Tet, but with more triads and codified “grooves”).

If Braxton/Zorn/Crispell delivered on their expected respective promises, Corkestra was the hot ticket for many of us seeking out fresh diversions and notions.

Victo, as this festival is commonly called, remains this continent’s premiere avant-everything festival after 24 years braving the fringe culture trenches. Thus, the festival is constantly re-tweaking the stylistic menu, whose basic concerns are avant-garde jazz (free, structured and the blend thereof), genre-non-specific improvisation, art-rock of all kinds and geographical origins (Japan is a popular source), and noise (i.e., the sonic caterwauling wall of Keiji Haino and Merzbow, closing the festival rather anti-climactically). The festival also enfolds experimental and computer music, beat-liberated electronics, the occasional contemporary classical entry and examples from the “other” category.

Dominating the attention, naturally enough, was Braxton, whose recent wellspring of new energy there has generated a palpable excitement of late. In Victoriaville, much buzz surrounded his 12(+1)Tet (which just released a nine-disc box recorded at the Iridium in NYC). For just over an hour, timed by his prominently-placed, jumbo hourglass onstage, the ensemble navigated its way through thorny unison lines and assorted pairings-off from the drive train of the whole: it seemed as if the makeshift suite was a microcosmic community, or a real-time musical parallel to Myspace rather than a traditional leader-led band. One of Braxton's more invigorating projects to date, this group is a marvel of chaos and control, in peaceful coexistence.

Similar mixtures of freedom and structure exist in his trio. Expertly manning a wild range of high to low saxes, plus laptop textures, Braxton also played the benevolent leader, sharing the space with his fetching musical mates, the wonderful young trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum and an especially strong guitarist, Mary Halvorson. Mixing up Derek Bailey-like abstractions with literate musicality, Halvorson was easily the best guitarist in town this week. She broke with the curse of guitarists here who can usually go "out," but are lost on "inside" terrain.

Braxtonian ideals could also be found in Crispell's notable new band, grounded, but lightly, by the deft and subtle Cyrille and also featuring the estimable bassist Mark Helias (also a Braxton alumnus) and the impressive Danish saxist Lotte Anker. The pianist, like her band, goes in many directions, including atonal "action painting" and authentic lyricism.

As for Zorn, hearing him solo is deceptive: a fascinating bunch of personalities, Zorn can keep up multiple internal conversations in the course of a performance, using extended techniques and "voices" which recur in snippets amid the crazy continuum. Strangely, it's only when Zorn played "straight" that conviction seemed to wander, as if he was just playing *at* the music. Straight is not his strong suit, but no matter: he's got his own post-free lingo(s) to draw on.

From said "other" zone this year, we got theatrics and avant-vaudeville. From Germany, we got a taste of the gnarly improvisation-meets-interpretive dance of dancer Fine Kwiatkowski and table guitar and electronics mangler Hans Tammen. (This festival used to include dance in its early years. The jury is out as to whether dance really belongs in this particular festival environment). Another German act broke its own sets of rules. Larry Peacock (no relation to Gary Peacock) is a cheeky post-modern feminist trio, in male drag and teeming with a sure sense of satire, theater and droll mime.

In other comic relief news, the "dualistic banjos" act of Eugene Chadbourne and Kevin Blechdom was a heretical hoot, but also a musical one, from off-bluegrass to proto-Pink Floyd. It all ended with a mock-shootout ("that's how we settle things in America," mugged gun-totin' Chadbourne, new music's court jester).

Closer to home, two intriguing multimedia projects came from nearby Montreal, two hours southwest of this bucolic, normally quiet town. Saxophone quartet Quasar had its collective improv manipulated live, in both sight and sound, by onstage digital artists Alexandre Burton and Julien Roy. Later, Joanne Héту's three-act musical theater project "Filature" melded ensemble designs and improvisations with Pierre Hébert's elaborate visual projections, to memorable ends.

Rock's outer limits were well represented as well. From the oldsters, we got that ZZ Top of the art metal set, the Melvins (about as old as this festival), and a much looser conglomerate, Acid Mothers Gong, makers of an epic masturbation party. Rock improvisation can seem dull and pointless, due to the simplistic nature of its vocabulary and the silliness of the posturing.

Then again, how do you account for the wild charm of the duo Magik Markers? Their late-night show at Cegep had a mythic power, even though guitarist Elisa Ambrogio plays in one key, mostly with one chord on her open-tuned guitar, which she abuses in cathartic ways. The White Stripes and Sonic Youth are natural comparison points, but this odd, feedback-happy act makes its own mark.

In the realm of neo-prog rock, where odd meters and tight ensemble roadmaps rule (call it math problem rock), we got the dazzling Japanese band Koenji Hyakkei and the trippier but also taut Vancouver band Fond of Tigers.

Perhaps the big disappointment this year was the last-minute cancellation of pianist John Tilbury, for health reasons. It would have been a rare North American appearance, and his Victo debut. Alas, the remaining three players proceeded with show-must-go-on fervor, and the resulting improvisational hour was the festival's most hypnotic show, an essay in drones and timbral chiaroscuro. Electronics and double bass ultra-long tones came courtesy of Christof Kurzmann and Werner Dafeldecker, but the real magnetic center was Stevie Wishart on hurdy-gurdy. Yes, hurdy-gurdy, an ancient-to-the-future touch.

In all, Victo number 24 was a strong and well-balanced diet of music from the left end. It's hard to imagine how they'll top it, come the 25th birthday party next year.

(Photo by Martin Morissette)