FESTIVAL MUSIQUE ACTUELLE
A Review Written By Steve Vickery

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The first thing you notice when visiting the southern Quebec town of Victoriaville is the weather, in particular the fresh, cold air. It is no accident that the finest of the eastern new music festivals, Festival Musique Actuelle and Newfoundland's Sound Symposium, operate well outside of the sprawling metropolitan areas. This relative isolation invites a different sort of listening, the quiet space of these towns allowing the audience the chance to assimilate the experience in an atmosphere removed from the relentless sonic grind of the modern city. The long-standing tradition of French “esprit” is still to be felt, tempered by an attitude of patience toward the often-less tourist attempting to deal with a language and culture that is not their own. The troubles of the last period concerning Quebec nationalism are addressed by most with a simple affirmative logic.

Electronics artist Bob Ostertag made his Canadian solo debut at Victoriaville an opportunity to showcase his formidable talents on the Ensoniq digital sampling keyboard, utilising as well a mass of tape samples of sound and speech, modified and manipulated through the processing stage of his keyboard. The long piece at the centre of the program Sooner or Later was a piece that carried with it a tremendous political resonance. Ostertag made use of a tape sample of a child speaking Spanish that was recorded in El Salvador. A percussive sound, innocent at first, is suddenly recognizable as the sound of a shovel. Amid tears, the child explains the contra have murdered his father, whom he is burying, summing up his short statement with the words, “sooner or later, I’ll get the bastards who did this”. The mutations of this sample were very powerful, bringing home the message of war’s stupidity in no uncertain terms. It was a remarkable sight to see Ostertag seated at the keyboard, alone on the CEGEP stage, creating a massive sound sculpture, the mutated sound of a child’s crying causing the listener to get a choking sensation in the throat. It is also an irony that in an era where the technology of terrorism and death, smart bombs and their ilk, have allowed some in North America to look away from the obvious and terrible conclusions of the war, the artist like Ostertag is able to use simple technology to create such a devastating portrait of human suffering. Frames of sound flew by, hypnotic.

Denis Schingh Ensemble drew upon the considerable influence of the contemporary orchestral writing, most notably American Composer Steve Reich, in his program of pieces for sextet. The show’s opener, a new solo setting for marimba player Mark Duggan, got the show off to a good start, but intonation problems in the ensemble marred the next two pieces. The ensemble presented good musicianship throughout the program but this was compromised by a lack of intensity on some of the pieces. The program was rescued midway through with the premiere of Schingh’s Son of Patchwork, and the performance of an older work, Emergent Design.

Friday evening’s concerts were both premieres, a tradition at FIMAV where a new work can find an audience at its most receptive. The duo of Mikhail Alperin (piano, melodica, voice) and Arkady Shilkloper (trombone, bugle, voice) performed in the large cathedral Eglise Ste-Victoire, giving an exceptional concert of first moody melodic tone settings reminiscent of early ECM recordings (not surprising since they are also signed to this company), then through the course of the evening, swinging in a hot rhythmically exciting fashion. A wonderful mixture of folk themes, jazz and theatre.

The highlight of this year’s FIMAV was the world premiere of René Lussier’s Le Tresor de la Langue, performed on stage for the first time. A potent example of the succinct brilliance of the contemporary French scene, it was awarded in 1989 the prestigious Paul Gilson prize, an award granted by the Community of French Language Broadcasters for excellence in the field of contemporary tape composition. Live on stage, the ensemble created a joyous event for the festival. The composition explores themes of politics and culture en français, linking the music to the rhythmic nuances of taped voices, taken from interviews where the composer asked people on the streets in Quebec, “How important is it to speak French in Quebec?” Mixed in the composition were tapes of key historical events in contemporary Quebec culture, notably DeGaulle’s 1967 speech that proved a catalyst of political action, and the reading of the FLQ manifesto (from t.v.) a scant three years later. Le Tresor de la Langue reflected Lussier’s intense commitment to the beauty of French language/culture, and gave him a forum to also demonstrate the high level of creative work that characterizes the current musique actuelle direction.

A feature of the FIMAV that was good for audiences and performers alike was the series of solo concerts staged first thing every day at the CEGEP stage, a small auditorium in the local high school. Joan Labarbara’s set for solo voice and tapes was a good illustration of the American vocalist’s wide-ranging conception and exceptional technique. The feature of her performance was a new work, In the Dreamtime where her use of tapes and voice together created a ritual-like soundscape, the poetic of language/sound transformed into chant, an unravelling of the mystery. In a remark before the performance, Labarbara related the dreamtime piece to an Australian aboriginal ceremony, where the elders would gather to chant and have visionary experiences, to gain insight into the tribe’s future. This meditative quality of the dream was fundamental to the context of listening, though unsettling for some audience members not sufficiently awake/relaxed at that hour. It was an engaging moment when a child in the audience began to respond to the sound.