

International Musique

May 18 - 22, 1995

Actuelle Victoriaville

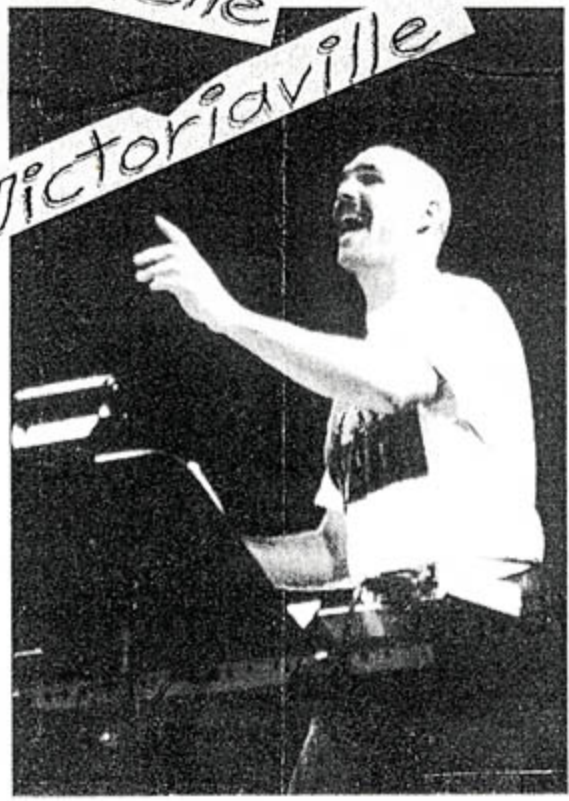
BY TOM SEKOWSKI

Defining the boundaries of "musique actuelle" is as impossible as defining the borders of jazz. Without any exaggeration, Victoriaville's International Musique Actuelle Festival is the most adventurous, the most daring,

the most captivating and the most uncompromising music festival on this continent, if not the world. Where else could you find yourself enraptured by the electro-acoustic madness of Frenchmen Métamkine, the baritone overkill of Canadian Charles Papasoff, and Pino Minafra's warm Italian jazz sextet, all within the opening night? Put more simply, the festival relies on international talent just as much as it does on Canadian artists. The music is varied - anything from jazz, hardcore insanity and (semi)composed aural matter to experiments in sound. No matter who is on stage at any given moment, you're always guaranteed uncompromised, uncommercialized music of the highest order.

Several themes arose at this year's Victoriaville festival. The most clearly defined ones were those of the human voice and of the composer/arranger status.

Out of the voice category, the duo concert of the Tuvan-born vocal diva, Sainkho Namchylak, and New Yorker woodwind player Ned Rothenberg, was the one I personally anticipated the most. Her throat is an other-worldly instrument - one which no performer I had seen in my life (with the exception of the Tuva Ensemble) can hope to match, one which no amount of words can begin to describe. Her throat-singing - multi-layered



BOB OSTERTAG

ered overtones bathed in a stew of unutterable, colourful phrases - has garnered her high praise from every corner of the world. Rightly so. As Sainkho created worlds shaped by her voice, full of wonder, awe and fear, where one minute you could hear a pin drop, while the next you wouldn't be able to hear a drill pounding next to you, Ned Rothenberg provided rich textures on his bass clarinet, shakuhachi (a Japanese instrument), and the alto sax. I hope this collaborative duo goes on for a long time, for, as mature as it already is stylistically, it needs and deserves the opportunity to develop and ripen.

their appearances. Canadian baritone sax player Charles Papasoff drew up a large scale score for his sextet of international baritone players - David Mott, Hamiet Bluiett, Jean Derome, Christian Gavillet and Bo Van Der Werf. International Baritone Conspiracy (playing on the premise that baritone players are purposefully kept out of bands) were a joy to listen to, as well as watch - the perfect blows at every turn, the nearly ideal choreography of the players - but what made it so flawless also turned out to be its biggest flaw. Sometimes, if a group of musicians adheres to every note and nuance of the score, the piece is in danger of becoming too predictable, too tedious, and ultimately a bit too safe, which was the end result in this case.

Sticking with the voice, the Phil Minton and Vervan Weston voice-piano duo kicked my funny bone's butt. Not only did Weston conduct himself like a real gentleman - reciting excerpts of James Joyce one minute, shrieking socialist manifestos the next - the duo was so well-moulded, it appeared more like one creature with two heads. What I loved the most were how smooth the transitions were between tenth century British peasant songs and Minton howling a Tina Turner song ("You're better than all the vests!").

The French (based in the Basque region) voice-hurdy-gurdy duo of Beñat Achiary and Dominique Regef quite literally struck an ancient chord in many of the present hearts. Regef brought the rarely used hurdy-gurdy to life, and the results consisted of a series of deep drones and darkly textured effects, while Achiary led the way with forgotten Basque melodies. As he improvised on old songs, the pieces took on a spellbinding facade.

Italian born trombonist Giancarlo Schiaffini was a real treat. As he manipulated his instrument with delays, pitch control devices, samplers and wood sticks, and as the sounds reverberated all over the room, I found someone new to admire. This is one man who's found his (own) VOICE on the trombone.

Composers were a dime a dozen this year, and I can't say that any of them were any less than ideally prepared for

Blending electro-acoustic music with film, the French trio, Métamkine, was all noise to some, while to others (myself included), they were explorers of new and rarely charted territories. As two members of the collective used 8 and 16mm film projectors, bounced the images off mirrors, and manipulated the images on the wall, Jérôme Noetinger contorted tapes and analog synths to produce an eerie, sometimes violently savage result. A stomach-churning experience I'd love to go through again and again...

Bob Ostertag: a complex human being, an expert of the sampler, a brilliant composer, but, most importantly, a personal highlight of last month's festival. His *Say No More* project is an intricate affair about which pages of ink could be spilled over, but, in brief, it involves the following chemistry. Ostertag asks three musicians - drummer Joey Baron (later replaced by Gerry Hemingway), bassist Mark Dresser and vocalist Phil Minton - to record solo improvisations of one another. Ostertag then takes those tapes, processes them through a digital editing system and comes up with *Say No More*, an album which, though sounding like a real band, is actually nothing more than a virtual quartet. In the second stage of the project, Ostertag asks each of the players to learn their individual parts from the album, so that they can be then performed live on stage. What I witnessed was the third (and probably the most exciting) phase of the project. Here was Minton - like Sylvester the Cat on helium: miraculous vocal chords at their prime - gurgling sounds, mimicking obscure sources. Here was Mark Dresser - all resonant bass, kicking it anywhere he could. Here was my favourite drummer, Gerry Hemingway, who, despite having arrived minutes prior to the performance, thus having some momentary problems with the cues that Ostertag threw out to each of the players, was all hard-hitting guts through and through, interspersed with the subtlety and the respect for restraint that he's so loved for. Along with the two pieces from *Say No More*, the band also performed a thoroughly demanding improvisation, which left Minton literally gasping for air, as he scrambled to respond to the sound of his own voice that Ostertag sampled seconds ago and now was throwing back in his face. If I had to cast a vote for the most energetic, the most quirky, and the most unrepentantly original ensemble of recent history, this would be it!

There were other concerts at Victoriaville that warmed Victoria Day weekend: N.O.W. Orchestra's joyous rendition of the music of Canadians Paul Plimley and René Lussier, John Oswald's ensemble's low-key, organic showcase, David S. Ware's full-force gale, Pierre Bastien's one-man, quirky man-machine showcase (Bastien playing a trumpet to his musical "machines") and many others. Twenty-five concerts in five short days means only two things - I had a ball...and I now need some time to recuperate.