BY TOM SEKOWSKI

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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 enrapturn by the elecro-acoustic madness of Frenchmen Métamikine, the baritone overkill of Canadian Charles Papasof, and Pino Minafra’s warm Italian jazz sextet, all within the opening night? But more simply, the festival relies on international talent as much as it does on Canadian artists. The music is varied — anything from jazz, hardcore, hip hop, and (semi) composed aural matter to experiments in sound. No other festival gives such a wide range of music without any restrictions.

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

Out of the voice category, the duet concert of Suvin and vocal diva, Sainkho Namgail and New Yorker woodwind player Ned Rothenberg, who was the one I personally anticipated the most. Her throat is an other-worldly instrument — one which no musician I had seen in my life (with the exception of the Tuva Ensemble) can hope to match, one which so much of words can begin to describe. Her throat-singing — multi-layered 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 soothing 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 (Japanese instrument), and the alto sax. I hope this collaborative duo goes on for a long time, for, as mature as it already is, it needs and deserves the opportunity to develop and ripen.

Their appearances, Canadian baritone sax player Charles Papasof, drew up a large scale score for his sextet, shakuhachi (Japanese instrument), and the alto sax. I hope this collaborative duo goes on for a long time, for, as mature as it already is, it needs and deserves the opportunity to develop and ripen.

Sticking with the voice, the Phil Minto and Veryan 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’s a minute, shrieking socialist manifestos the next — the duo was so well-moulded, it appeared more like one creature with two heads. What a loved the most were how smooth the transitions between the twentieth-century British peasant songs and Minto howling a Tina Turner song (“You’re better than all the vests!”).

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

Italian born trombonist Giancarlo Schiavini 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 sound (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 their appearances. Canadian baritone sax player Charles Papasof drew up a large scale score for his sextet, shakuhachi (Japanese instrument), and the alto sax. I hope this collaborative duo goes on for a long time, for, as mature as it already is, it needs and deserves the opportunity to develop and ripen.

Blending electro-acoustic music with film, the French trio, Métamikine, 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 consulted 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 following chemistry. Ostertag asks three musicians — drummer Joey Baron (later replaced by Gerry Hemingway),) bassist Mark Dresser, and vocalist Phil Minto — to record solo improvisations of another song, 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 performed live on stage. What I witnessed was the third (and probably the most exciting) stage of the project. Here was Minto — 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, impassioned with the subtlety and the respect for restraint that he’s so loved. Along with the two pieces from Say No More, the band also performed a thoroughly demanding improvisation, which left Minto 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 warm 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, David S. Ware’s full tone galaxy. Pierre Bastien’s one-man, quirky man–machine showcase (Bastien playing a trumpet to his musical “machine-toys”) 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.

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