Though many may still not know exactly where the town of Victoriaville, Quebec is located, few fans of improvised music have not heard of the Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville. Through its yearly festival and Victo record label, the Victoriaville Festival has become one of the preeminent presenters and supporters of a broad international expanse of improvised music. This past May, the festival celebrated its 12th incarnation with 25 concerts over 5 days. Yet again, artistic director Michel Levasseur showed his knack for putting together a program that celebrates a personal, informed, idiosyncratic sampling of creative improvised music in all its guises.

As always, this festival was far-reaching in its scope, highlighting both high-profile musicians like John Zorn or Bill Frisell and unheralded masters like Italian trombonist Giancarlo Schiaffini. A single day ranged from a challenging set for solo trombone and electronics by Schiaffini, a concert of brilliantly skewed duets by Phil Minton and Veryan Weston, Zorn’s klezmer-meets-Ornette quartet Masada, and crunching Japanese rockers Altered States. And highlights were not always where expected, as with John Oswald, known for his high-tech studio collages, who delivered a set of stunning, quiet acoustic spontaneity improvisations. Those who made the pilgrimage found that, once again, the trek to this small Canadian town halfway between Quebec City and Montreal proved a perfect retreat from the everyday world for an immersion into five days of music and camaraderie that refreshed and recharged.

THURSDAY:

The festival began on a relaxed note with the world premiere of the International Bartone Tone Conspiracy, a global all-star baritone sax sextet assembled by Montreal native Charles Papasoff. The image of 6 bari players on one stage conjures thoughts of a bottom-heavy muddy mess, but this ensemble featuring Hamiet Bluiett, David Mott, Jean Derome, Christian Gavillet, and Bo Van der Wolf exceeded expectations with their tightly arranged ensemble writing and lively improvisation. The set featured pieces by all 6 players, drawing on both the mastery and unique approach of each, and the sonic breadth of the instrument, from dark growing lower registers to squealing upper overtones. Of particular note were the leader with his crying, angular attack, and Swiss player Gavillet, for both his writing and his wry, twisted, swing. Only Bluiett seemed a bit subdued, his hard bluesy tone somewhat underutilized. Pieces encompassed melodic blues, hovering sheets of atonality, deep chocolate harmonies, knotty voicings, ricocheting counterpoint, and searing solos. While many of the arrangements showed an obvious debt to the WSOQ, the writing and playing was full of energy and inspiration. Only a plodding encore of Mingus

Fithcanthropus Erectus marred the otherwise well-played set.

Next up was the North American premiere by Italian trumpeter Pino Minnola’s “Sud Ensemble” featuring Carlo Acis Dato (ts, bari), Giorgio Occhipinti (p), Vincenzo Mazzone (d, perc), Lauro Rossi (tb) and Daniele Patumi (b). Minnola’s set celebrated a Southern Italian sensibility combining a strong sense of melody and romanticism with an optimistic, skewed irony. Maniacally jumping from poignant ballads to slapstick antics to bluesy jazz riffs to slyly tango to collective free blowing, the sextet played with inspired abandon. Reminiscent at times of a cross between Fellini and the Breuker Kollektif, all of the musicians played with a raw freshness, rarely falling into the formulaic. Minnola is a master of both trumpet and flugelhorn, his phrasing a charge of slippery, careering runs and cutting blue notes extended at times by playing through a bull horn, eliciting images of a squalling electric guitar. His occasional wild scat vocals interjected the music with rhythms of skewed free-bop hip-hop. Daio’s playing impressed as well, both his brash, gruffly waiting tenor and a searing bari solo, his circular breathing driving sheets of blustering cascades and overtones. The rhythm section, especially bassist Patumi with his rich, tuneful drive, guided the ensemble through the dizzying maze with swinging glee. The set was well played and entertaining, though overamplification at times muddied the mix.

The midnight set was a program entitled “Cellule D’Intervention” by the French collective Mélamine. This multimedia display mixed live manipulation of 8 and 16mm films along with electro-acoustic music featuring tapes, electronics, sampler, and synthesizer. Two people manned movie projectors, manipulating the speed, framing, and filtering of the films as they intercut mostly indecipherable darkly abstract images. This visual barrage was accompanied by turbulent, enveloping electronic soundscapes, responding to or cutting against the rhythms of the film. Though intriguing at moments, the overall effect, combined with the late hour, proved a bit numbing and sent me to an early retreat.

FRIDAY:

The second day began with a 1 p.m. concert by Montreal native Diane Labrosse and her new quintet Le Maitres Brasseurs. The leader, on sampler, keyboard, and accordion, was joined by Michel F. Côté (d), Martin Tétreault (turnables), Bernard Poitier (b, c't, clt), and Vladimir Ulman (vn) for a set of jump-cut sound collage in which kernels of ideas were contrasted in the context of tightly arranged songs that occasionally veered off into anarchic, jerking rock. Labrosse conducted the music with her keyboard playing, queuing each of the musicians through non-linear transitions between episodic segments. Snippets of swing records might crash up against sampled Arabic calls and peeling church bells; discordant wheezing accordion, spare electronic percussion, and free clarinet runs were juxtaposed. Though the music had intriguing colors, overall, the constant shifting sounded disjointed and unfocused.
The late afternoon show by John Oswald in quartet, solo, and quintet settings was one of the highlights of the festival. Though best known for his "plunderphonics," Oswald eschewed his pop-sonic manipulations for a set of intensely subtle, completely unamplified personal collective free improvisations featuring the leader on alto sax along with Marvin Green (b), Tiina Kiik (accordion), Ann Bourne (cello), and David Prentice (vln). The concert hall was totally blackened except for a dim light centered over the musicians who were seated facing each other in a circle in the middle of the hall. The audience was seated around the circle of musicians on three sides, totally focusing attention on the conversational improvisations. The concert moved from a long quartet piece to a solo, unaccompanied tai chi-like dance by Oswald, followed by solo sax improvisation, and finishing with an improvisation for quintet. The group improvisations were imbued with a quiet intensity, the voices intertwined in intimate communion as the lines seamlessly melded into each other. Oswald later commented on wanting to capture the "human scale" of improvisation with this group. The hushed focus and keenly synched interplay between the musicians proved hypnotic and memorable.

The second evening began with a performance by Bob Ostertag featuring Mark Dresser (b), Gerry Hemingway (d), and Phil Minton (vcl). For this project, Ostertag asked each of the musicians to go into the studio and record a solo improvisation. He then took the taped improvisations and fragmented, reshaped, and combined them into an ensemble piece. This tape was then sent back to the musicians for them to learn. The evening concert featured the trio performing one of the taped pieces with Ostertag conducting, a collective improvisation for all four, and finally, the trio joined by Ostertag weaving his manipulated samples of the original tapes into their playing. The results blended collective improvisation with composition and conduction as the musicians wove their playing around the structures created by Ostertag. Each of these players brought a personal, extended approach to both their instrument and to improvising. It was both odd and engaging to hear them as they interpreted Ostertag's interpretations of their own improvisations while simultaneously interacting with each other. There was never a sense of contrivance and often, the score merely provided preordained shape and signposts for improvisation. The playing and interaction coalesced into a collective whole that proved electrifying.

The 10 p.m. show on Friday featured Bill Frisell's trio accompanying two films by Buster Keaton: the short One Week and the longer Go West. Frisell, Kermit Driscoll (b), and Joey Baron (d) provided what amounted to improvised incidental music for Keaton's subtly timed comic masterpieces. Using hints of American vernacular, blues, and traditional film music, the results were simple and laid-back, often fading into the background. Most of the time, the music developed a flowing groove, following the pace of what was happening on screen. Baron provided much of the musical focus as he synthesized the trio to the rhythms of the films, commenting on what was happening on screen or punctuating and nailing Keaton's graceful foibles and pratfalls with pinpoint precision. The performance, while entertaining, seemed a bit shallow and did little more than provide pleasant film accompaniment.

The night ended with a midnight show by Montreal cellist Claude LaMothe in a highly amplified rock power trio. With his cello jacked into a pile of Marshall amps, his playing too often devolved into clichéd histrionic rock bombast.

SATURDAY:

The third afternoon began with a solo concert by Italian trombonist Giancarlo Schiaffini, combining a resourceful command of his instrument and extended technique with electronic filtering, looping, and manipulations. Schiaffini is captivated by exploring and manipulating sonic timbres, phrasing, and silence in an almost sculptural manner. His solo pieces built from long pure tones contrasting with fragmented short phrases which he then processed, echoed, and overlaid. This then became the backdrop for further improvisations which built and looped back in mounting layers. His round, rich tone on trombone was often totally manipulated and transformed into pure electronic sound which he then mirrored and shadowed. There was a tension developed as the technical process of his manipulations threatened to overwhelm his remarkable trombone playing. Yet his thoughtful control and keen ability to shape the music resulted in a spellbinding performance.

The afternoon performance by guitarist Marc Ribot's group Shrek proved to be little more than a paid practice session. Showing up with a new version of the band, including Christine Bard (d), Reuben Radding (b), and David Siegel (tp), Ribot lamely apologized, mentioning that this was one of the group's first gigs and that they were still working out the kinks. Their performance was filled with disjointed noodling over ponderous lumbering rhythms as Ribot slashed and dashed off noise riffs while Siegel played endless amateurish trumpet trills through a wah-wah pedal.

From the very start, the late afternoon duet with vocalist Phil Minton and pianist Veryan Weston proved the perfect tonic to what had preceded. As Weston read from Joyce's Finnegan's Wake, Minton improvised with skittering free-sc2at, echoing the rhythms and textures of the labyrinthine prose. Weston