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FEATURES

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IN REVIEW

SMALL GROUPS • MUSIQUE ACTUELLE
CANADIAN FESTIVALS & NEWS



1995 CANADIAN FESTIVALS VICTORIAVILLE AND WINNIPEG

FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL MUSIQUE ACTUELLE VICTORIAVILLE • MAY 18th-22nd • 1995

Twenty-five sets + 1800-word ceiling = no room for lofty theories about whatever musique actuelle's supposed to be. Let's get to it.



The opener looked dubious on paper — Montrealer Charles Papisov's all-bari sax sextet, with Hamiet Bluiett, Jean Derome, Toronto's David Mott, Belgium's Bo van der Werf, and Switzerland's Christian Gavillet, a trickster worth keeping an ear out for. It worked, everyone rising to the challenge, starting with a top-this solo sequence in which the big horn's false high notes were heavily exploited. Most players brought charts. Chief compositional influences: Urban Sax's Gilbert Artman — dense long note chords, walls of sound, overtones complex enough to sound like a shimmering gong — and that great influence on most every reed choir, Julius Hemphill, who'd died after this set had been booked, but to whom it served as unannounced tribute. (Something surely not lost on Bluiett, who's been less than gracious about Hemphill's contributions to the World Saxophone Quartet.)

The next set, trumpeter Pino Minafra's, featured Carlo Actis Dato on bari as well as tenor — so make that seven notable baritonists in one night. Italian jazz has been a well-kept secret from North Americans; Victo (and Vancouver) now aim to change that. Minafra's six-piece Sud Ensemble has much to recommend it. Such as, they nail tricky rhythmic passages, and they play in tune; bassist Daniele Patumi combines dead-on intonation with raunchy bowing. Mediterranean lyricism sings through a lot in Minafra's tunes, and his brass chops are serious and jazz-idiomatic. That said, he's as desperate for laughs as an aging comedian whose career is skidding. He bounds around stage like Jerry Lewis on speed, babbles like an auctioneer through a bullhorn, plays eight notes where three will do. Pino, you needn't strain so. Try decaf.

Compatriot Giancarlo Schiaffini's lyrical solo trombone-plus-electronics relied on familiar strategies — layered digital-delay drones, microtonal weaving around same, multiphonic or black-box timbral distortion. But since every manipulated sound was generated by mouth or lung (or striking the horn's surface), the music never came off as mechanical. Its humanness was underscored by the sounds of the many orifices he echoed, snort to song to fart.

There was a similar lip + machine mix with France's Pierre Bastien, playing simple pocket-trumpet melodies over a host of homemade mechanical instruments. He knew just what his many automated mbiras, machine-bowed strings and music boxes were worth. He didn't wear any one gizmo out, and kept the pieces short and varied: it was a set of miniatures in every best sense.

The quartet Masada seesaws between belaboring and animating John Zorn's unspoken conceit: what would Ornette sound like if he were Jewish? Of the dozen-plus Masada sets I've heard, this was one of the best. Drummer Joey Baron put weird accents in all the wrong places, merci; Greg Cohen kept the bass lines moving, avoiding the endless vamping that can tie Masada down; trumpeter Dave Douglas developed various lyrical motifs; Zorn was of a mind to mimic Ornette, not a problem when you do it this well. For the benefit of punsters, they played past midnight: Zornette at 12.

Baron also sounded fine accompanying the greatest genius on view at Victo XII: Buster Keaton, on screen. Bill Frisell's nifty C&W-laced guitar style lends itself perfectly to Keaton's "Go West" and suburban-frontier short "One Week." Bill's motivic scores didn't get in the way of Buster's fluid moving camera, except the one time he needed a boost. At an uncharacteristic moment late in "Go West," when the pacing flags, the trio — Kermit Driscoll played mostly upright not electric bass — stepped in to raise the energy level. Most enjoyable and satisfying. Another silent film set, by the co-op Metamkine — with Jerome Noetinger's atmospheric electronics — built on the work of photo-kineticists from Muybridge to Brakhage: live manipulation of film from dual projectors: very dark images that gradually gave up their identity; stop-motion studies; contrapuntal or doubled split-screen scenes; hand-colouring; even the melting of film over a projector bulb. Very nice, so why did many folks who cherish weird music balk when confronted with the visual avant-garde?

REVIEWED BY KEVIN WHITEHEAD & RANDAL McILROY

Vancouver's N.O.W. orchestra gets enough ink in these pages, so we'll be brief: the antic Paul Plimley's send-up of the conductor's role was funnier than it was compositional. At the helm, in the mad-doctor role, was a walking rebus: Coate Cooke, in a lab coat, cooking. N.O.W.'s guest composer, guitarist Rene Lussier, kicked off his half of the show with the wonderful "Premier Course," that rarity of rarities, excellent orchestral fusion. The fast first part had a terrific, irresistible beat; later there was an episode of absurdly spare stoptime — two staccato hits in two minutes, the audience majestically quiet — in apparent (but unintended, said Rene) homage to Canadian composer Alison Cameron's infamous "Blank Sheet of Metal."

"Premier Course" was in the running for this Victo's best piece; best set, no contest, was Phil Minton and Vervan Weston. Their stylistic rage (I'd meant to type range) is as extraordinary as Minton's half-man half-goat vocals. They performed a ruthlessly funny sendup of lounge-act sincerity, a portrait of a highway milepost (from a Ho Chi Minh poem), an ode to anarchy (their setting of 19th century propaganda), Kurt Weill's "Mandalay," a Tina Turner cover,... each getting just what it deserved. The pianist is Phil's perfect match, sliding sideways, micro-plausible, macro-surreal. Weston drops beats, changes chords early or late, his sustain pedal and hands contradict each other. We listeners didn't even know where to tap our feet, but they never got lost. Here's hoping Les Disques Victo doesn't realize what bunco this fake-jazz rubbish was, and issues it first thing. (Minton also sang on Bob Ostertag's Say No More project, pretty much as discussed in the May/June '95 Coda.)

Siberia's Sainkho Namtchylak and altoist/bass clarinetist Ned Rothenberg had the unenviable job of following that other duo. This pair is well-matched, too; the setting's linearity tilts Ned away from his usual echoes of E — P

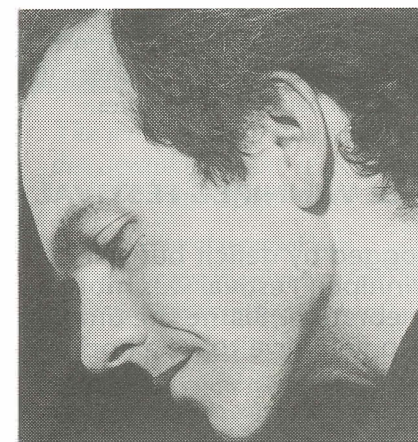
— —'s corkscrew style (which critics mightn't talk about so much if Ned was more candid about Evan's pervasive influence). Namtchylak and Rothenberg both have overtone-rich timbres — she's got Tuvan throat-singing down — and a keen ear for microtonal variation, and like to improvise in familiar channels. (I couldn't spot the two free improvisations among the more pre-plotted selections.) Each piece had a distinctive character. Ned has also become a fine and original shakuhachi player, neither strictly traditional nor trivializing. That's no easy feat.

As usual these days, tenor David S. Ware's quartet was longer on bluster than substance — can hardly blame them, the critical praise they've gotten for it — but there were five or ten golden minutes in the middle: an unaccompanied Matthew Shipp solo in his best scrabbling-in-place busy-stasis piano style, and Ware's subsequent a capella display of rich overtones, moving from depth-charge low notes to tea-kettle falsetto in seconds. He'll blend circular squeals with staccato tones moving around a lower register, without sounding like he cops Evan Parker.

Best rock show was the closer, by Japan's Tenko, a clear-voiced yodeler whose band struck a killer groove (kudos to New York bassist Kato Hideki), and boasted fine screech-guitar and turntable scratching from Otomo Yoshihide. Otomo's sextet set earlier that day was marred by dumbo profundity (sampled pitchman voice: "Panasonic... Panasonic... Panasonic...") and volume deafening even by the usual standards of the only Victo venue that's a drag, half the floor of the town hockey arena. Are the guys who do sound there actually deaf, or just aspire to it?

Otomo notwithstanding, best turntable solo was Martin Tetreault's — slow and low-rumbling as a glacier, his hand barely moving — during Montreal singer and keyboardist Diane Labrosse's

set, which slid between poppy tunes (one with very nice changes) and open-field improvising. A duet section for turntable and her far-flung samples confirmed musique concrete is back, bless it. Worst rock show — and as always at Victo, there was fierce competition for the crown — was by guitarist Marc Ribot's quartet Shrek. They were so boorishly banal, the guitar solos and improvising strategies so limp, you had to wonder if it was supposed to suck, some misguided conceptual thing. (Sadly, the answer seemed to be No.)



Small groups with strings was the year's most obvious motif; there were four sets where more than one player wielded horsehairs. Torontonian John Oswald's diverse show — including his silent solo dance improvisation and a so-so alto solo — ended with a sublime impromptu by his once-a-week, improvise-for-pleasure quintet. Saxophone, David Prentice's heavy-vibrato violin and Tiina Kiik's single-note accordion lines somehow blended so you couldn't tell who played what, a reminder the improviser's most useful skill is the ability to listen. On another, even quieter improvisation, unamplified bassist Marvin Green imposed unity by (throat?) singing in unison with his bowed double stops, a one-man ensemble within Oswald's ensemble. Nice mood at the gig too — a single, dim overhead bulb suspended over the band, who sat in a circle at floor-level.