Osorio’s Ravel provides the highlight with Chicago Philharmonic

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By Gerald Fisher

Jorge Federico Osorio performed music of Ravel and de Falla with the Chicago Philharmonic Sunday in Evanston.

In an ambitious program Sunday night at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, the Chicago Philharmonic under artistic director Scott Speck presented a stunning performance of Ravel’s Concerto for Piano Left Hand featuring the Mexican-American Jorge Federico Osorio. Three early twentieth-century masterworks made up the rest of the evening and produced more mixed results.
The concert’s opening was refreshingly unconventional and featured actress Barbara Robertson reading sensitively from both French and English versions of Mallarme’s *Afternoon of a Faun*, the inspiration for Debussy’s music.

In this performance the resonant sound of the poetry melted smoothly into the music, enhancing the atmospheric effect of the opening flute and harp solo. The delicious flute-player was Mary Stolper.

Falla’s beautiful *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, for piano and orchestra dating from 1915, continued the atmospheric feel of the program but this performance was undermined by technical issues.

Pick-Staiger Concert Hall is not ideal for a full orchestra like the Chicago Phil: the space is too small, and the acoustic is impacted by too many performers. This was immediately apparent in the percussive thumps that begin the Falla, which sounded dead and desiccated.

In addition, the piano was too often drowned out by the orchestra — in part owing to its role as providing orchestral coloring rather than as a soloist in a concerto. What could be heard of Osorio’s piano playing was fine.

The Ravel Concerto is the greatest of the left-hand works commissioned by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein over the first half of the last century, and Osorio and Speck did it ample justice.

From the opening growls of the contrabassoon through the entry of the piano in a spectacular display of aggressive virtuosity it was clear that this was going to be no ordinary performance. Both Speck and Osorio gave their all both dynamically and in attention to detail, with Osorio flawless in his solos.

Speck showed sensitivity to style in the jazzier parts of the piece; also to the contrast between the more delicate elements of the lyrical middle section and the fierce insistence of the composer in the unfolding of the finale.

But the real star of the evening was Osorio, who effortlessly achieved the maximum of power and virtuosity with the minimum of visible effort.

The program was bookended with music by Debussy. *La Mer* received a solid reading with clean direction and some fiery dynamics. The many solos gave ample space for the Philharmonic’s fine players.