Scott Speck led the Chicago Philharmonic in its final season concert Sunday in Evanston.

The Chicago Philharmonic is on the move.

At Sunday night’s season-closing concert, executive director Donna Milanovich announced that the Evanston ensemble would extend its footprint by performing concerts in downtown Chicago in the 2015-16 season. The Philharmonic will still perform three events at its Pick-Staiger Hall base, yet also present one concert downtown and a fifth at an “unusual” venue, both to be named at a future date.

Based on the largely superb results at Sunday’s concert in Evanston, that’s good news for city audiences. Since taking the reins of the orchestra in 2013, Scott Speck has programmed with thoughtful intelligence, offering a well-calibrated blend of rarities and cornerstone repertory.
The concert that closed the Philharmonic’s 25th season was emblematic of Speck’s sympathies, featuring two works by American composers. The orchestra’s season-long theme of each concert being based on a different physical sense has been strained in its application at times. Yet Sunday’s program, “Vision in Sound,” worked quite well offering two works inspired by visual art.

This is a good month for Kenji Bunch in Chicago. The Grant Park Orchestra will give the world premiere of his Symphony No. 3 June 19-20, and Sunday the Philharmonic performed the American composer’s Symphony No. 1 “Lichtenstein Triptych.”

As the title suggests, the work was inspired by drawings of the artist Roy Lichtenstein, cast in three connected movements. At times the shade of Leonard Bernstein hovers perilously close, but for the most part Bunch displays striking confidence and sophistication in his first work for orchestra, vividly reflecting Lichtenstein’s antic cartoon imagery.

“Varoom!” opens with apt explosive energy, throwing out piston-like strings, witty rhythmic flips and brass and percussion accents, later segueing into a Latin dance theme with some sassy trumpet solos. Likewise, the finale, “In the Car,” offers motoric dynamism and audacity, with the jazzy riffs batted around by members of the orchestra.

Yet in the central section (We rose up slowly”), Bunch transcends Lichtenstein’s sardonic style. The music moves beyond its Mahler and Wagner quotations to plumb a surprisingly sincere depth of expression. Even with split notes in a crucial horn solo, the result was utterly beguiling, Speck drawing a rich vein of warm-hearted lyricism from the Philharmonic strings.

Jennifer Higdon’s *blue cathedral* opened the concert. Composed for a brother who died at a young age, Higdon’s homage manages to avoid sentiment, though Sunday’s performance sounded like it could have used more rehearsal time. Too much of the playing was loud and not very well blended, with a lack of expressive feeling in the prominent flute and clarinet solos.

The most celebrated visually inspired music for orchestra is, of course, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Modest Mussorgsky’s tribute to the work of his late friend, the painter Viktor Hartmann.

The bright, very live acoustic doesn’t offer much light and shade but Sunday’s robust and exciting performance of Mussorgsky’s musical gallery walk made one wonder anew at Ravel’s endlessly inventive orchestration.

Aside from more dodgy horn work, the Philharmonic principals rose to the occasion in all departments under Speck’s direction. From the opening Promenade, Robert Sullivan’s trumpet work was sensational, gleaming with clarion tone yet characterful as well, with a baleful “Catacombs” solo and whiny Schmuyle. Jessica Maxfield floated an evocative saxophone solo in “The Old Castle,” elegantly echoed by the individual woodwinds.

Apart from pausing a bit too long between the early pictures, Speck’s conducting was exemplary, vividly characterizing each portrait and building momentum to a fiery “Baba-Yaga” and weighty
and majestic “Great Gate of Kiev” finale, closing the evening in a triumphant pealing of brass and chimes.

After two seasons, the partnership of Scott Speck and the Chicago Philharmonic appears to be hitting its artistic stride, with performances showing greater interpretive depth and ensemble cohesion. One looks forward to Speck and the Philharmonic bringing their thoughtful programming and committed music-making to downtown Chicago next season.

The Chicago Philharmonic opens its 26th season November 16 at Pick-Staiger Hall. The program will include Wojciech Kilar’s *Little Overture*, Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony* and Brahms’ *Piano Concerto No. 1* with soloist Robert McDonald.