

Pianist highlights orchestral color

D.S. Crafts / For the Journal

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This summer the young Chinese pianist Haochen Zhang played a concert at Simms Auditorium that took everyone by surprise. This 13th winner of the Van Cliburn Piano Competition appeared Saturday with the New Mexico Philharmonic and once again astounded his audience, this time with the Piano Concerto of Maurice Ravel.



If there was a theme to this concert at Popejoy Auditorium it was orchestral color with four works that showcase the rich, even exotic timbres of the symphony orchestra. The music was replete with excellent solos too many (alas) to mention individually. Suffice it to say each section, and virtually each first chair player had at least an impressive moment in the spotlight.

It was also a program of foreigners using other people's music. An American playing with Mexican melodies (Aaron Copland), a Frenchman taking a jazzy turn (Ravel), and a Russian and Frenchman reveling in Spanish folk tunes (Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel).

Apocryphally, Copland's *El Salón México* was said to have been written after a night at a cathouse in Nogales. The Philharmonic under the direction of guest conductor Oriol Sans projected an unmistakable sense of locale (notably a dance hall called *Salón México*) in what the composer called a "musical souvenir."

Zhang's performance in Simms this summer demonstrated his full-out, light-up-the-piano style in Igor Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*. Here we saw his more subdued playing despite the bravura nature of the Ravel Concerto, the final movement especially. The long solo section that begins the middle Adagio assai movement seemed much in the mood of that composer's elegant yet disconsolate *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. Overall the work was less bombastic than it often is in performance.

Even at his young age, Zhang has the confidence of a seasoned professional to the point of choosing as encore, not a piece of piano flash, but rather Claude Debussy's "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair," a work that I daresay hundreds in the audience have themselves played. This was virtuosity of the introspective nature reflecting an emotive sophistication.

For the second half, Sans led a highly animated *Capriccio espagnol* by Rimsky-Korsakov, beginning almost before he had leaped to the podium with unbridled enthusiasm. Even the generally darker harmonies of the Russian style couldn't diminish the excitement of the five continuous movements fashioned out of Spanish and Gypsy tunes.

Ravel modestly described his own *Bolero* as "orchestral tissue without music." But with the accustomed repetition inherent in rock music (and its ever newly arriving offspring), not to mention the utter brain-numbing inanity of what is called "minimalism," *Bolero* seems in perspective almost abundant in musical material – certainly in its ingenious use of color. With percussionist Jeff Cornelius (snare drum) placed up front in between the sections of the strings, Sans took the work from the barest pianissimo to a blazing climax of sound that rocked the entire auditorium.