

Music

Give 'Prairie Home Companion' credit for its music

By STEVE METCALF
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In its 25 years on the air, Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" has been credited with many things.

Helping to rekindle our appreciation of a story well told, for one. Helping to reconnect people to their radios, for another.

But "A Prairie Home Companion" has perhaps not always been adequately recognized for its contributions to music.

From the beginning, the show has been a national campfire of the air, around which has been heard folk music, hymns, Tin Pan Alley, classical, country and jazz.

Just in the past few seasons alone, its musical guest list has found room for Chet Atkins, Rosemary Clooney, the Turtle Island String Quartet, the Squirrel Nut Zippers, Diana Krall, the Bob Brenny Polka Band, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Fontella Bass.

Keillor and a guest recently came together for a surprisingly convincing rendition of Dean Martin's "Memories Are Made of This." That once-square mid-1950s pop bauble took on the feel of something valuable and even timeless.

The classical selections, meanwhile, are offered cheerfully and without pretension.

Keillor talked the other day about music. Here are highlights from that conversation.

● **On the place of music in his childhood:**

"I grew up in a family of fundamentalists, and we had a piano and were wont to sing hymns for entertainment. I didn't buy records of my own until I got to college.

"Popular music was disapproved of. Still, I managed to soak in a lot of it. This was in the late '40s and early '50s.



Tribune file photo

Garrison Keillor, backed by the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, sings "Springtime in the Rockies" in the Mother Lode Theatre in Butte.

"When rock 'n' roll came in, it brought with it a good deal of alarm. Among fundamentalists, it was referred to as fornicating music ... Looking back, I wouldn't say that I'm nostalgic about the music of my childhood so much as something simpler: I know the words. Drifting through my head right now is a thing we used to do at Bible camp, which was to sing the words of 'Amazing Grace' to the tune of 'The Mickey Mouse Club' theme song. ... It was considered blasphemy, so we had to do it under our breaths."

● **On the show's tendency to include music that in some circles would be considered old-fashioned or corny, such as the time he sang the old hymn "I Come to the Garden Alone" as a duet with opera star Marilyn Horne:**

" 'I Come to the Garden' is a

sweet song, although it doesn't seem overly treacly to me. But yes, I know what you mean — it is sentimental. But then I think one has to be brave and go ahead and be sentimental sometimes in our day and age.

"Many of our older songs were unashamedly sweet, and I think we need to celebrate them."

● **On the musical moment from the radio show that he remembers most fondly:**

"We did a show in Hawaii once. I remember there was a large children's choir from a school for native children. They came on and sang 'Aloha Oe,' which we've all heard for years in bad arrangements and in elevators. But these young voices sang it in a way that was just so unexpectedly sweet. I was really moved by it, as I was by Hawaiian music generally. I find

that it's usually choral music, or at least sung music, that moves me the most deeply."

● **On his decision to have classical music be a regular presence on the show:**

"To me, classical music is part of the musical folklore of this country, if for no other reasons than so many millions of children have been set to learning how to play the piano, and when they do, it usually includes a little Bach or Chopin or something. Choirs in churches still sing Handel and Mendelssohn anthems, especially in small towns. So it would have seemed odd to me to do a show that celebrated the Midwest and its grass-roots traditions and its folk sensibility and to not include classical music."

● **On his own music listening habits:**

"When I'm writing, I usually have something classical on. And in the car I used to listen to a rock station that played sort of alternative music and odd things, and I would keep up that way. But I live in the city now, and I don't drive that much, so my musical horizons have really shrunk."



Garrison Keillor