

'Loyalty Days' is classic Keillor

Show wryly notes 'Midwest' region's composing greats

By Dimitri Drobatschewsky
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Garrison Keillor thinks he has a problem.

"When you are this good-looking," he says with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, "people don't take you seriously as an artist."

Keillor, the creator of *A Prairie Home Companion*, a funny, now-retired American Public Radio series, ought to know that people take him quite seriously.

The famed Minnesotan's sense of humor, a curious mix of homespun prairie philosophy and sophisticated sociopolitical sarcasm, has made him a sort of cult figure among public radio's intelligentsia.

In a new, 90-minute television special called *Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days*, Keillor now aims at Classical music in addition to his usual targets. The Disney Channel will air the show at 10 p.m. Sunday with repeats scheduled for Nov. 9, 26 and Dec. 11.

Appropriately, the show, subtitled *A Recital for Mixed Baritone and Orchestra*, originates from Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, "the city that people like who don't like cities." The Minnesota Orchestra, conducted by Philip Brunelle, provides the musical accompaniment.

With a voice that "critics have showered with adjectives such as 'familiar' and 'husky,'" Keillor sings a hymn to the "Sons of Knute" to the strains of the *Sigurd Josallar March*, composed by the well-known "Minnesotan" Edvard Grieg, as well as several other Classical pieces, all with "updated" lyrics by Keillor.

Some of that music was composed by another "urbane and brilliant Midwesterner . . . a Lutheran composer from Omaha who moved to Paris, where he changed his name to Georges Bizet," according to Keillor. There also are excerpts of a symphony by Antonin Dvorak, another "Midwesterner, born — or was it reborn? — in Spillville, Iowa."

Keillor says that Bizet's *Habanera*, from the opera *Carmen*, initially was named "Bob and Carol," after Bizet's parents, Bob and Carol Carlsen ("or was it Larsson?"). Keillor, with deadpan serious-



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Garrison Keillor offers a *Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra* as part of *Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days* at 10 p.m. Sunday on The Disney Channel.

ness, explains Bizet's Omaha origins and tells about the time he moved to France with a fleeting acquaintance, Carmen Lajoie.

The *Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra*, the show's centerpiece, is a good-natured ribbing of devout Christians in general, and God-fearing Lutherans in particular. With music specially composed for the occasion by Randall Davidson, this is a parody based on Benjamin Britten's piece *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. But instead of focusing only on the instruments, as Britten's work does, the *Lutheran's Guide* also deals with the people playing them.

"If our Lord had played an instrument," Keillor asks, "which one do you think he would have chosen?"

Certainly not the French horn, Keillor suggests, because playing the French horn takes too much time. "So much time, in fact," he says, "that you don't have time to marry and have children. Some horn

players are required to be celibates — often by their wives — because all they can do is think of their horns."

Not the oboe, either, Keillor continues. It's the sensualist's instrument, and it's mainly used in movie soundtracks. "You hear the oboe when the woman takes her clothes off," Keillor says. "If you play the oboe," he adds as an afterthought, "you can bet that you're going to have babies."

The English horn is played by people with deep, complicated problems; the bassoon, by people who never are taken seriously; the flute, by showoffs and big shots who often are millionaires, like James Galway and Jean-Pierre Rampal ("but have you ever heard of a bassoonist-millionaire?"); and the piccolo, well, it's so flaky that it's never in tune.

Keillor also excludes the strings from the Lord's choices. The cello, he says, is friendly. "You play it with your arms wrapped around it, like at a farewell from your kids at summer camp; or the viola, which you can never hear in an orchestra — you think you hear it, but it's really the second violins — or the double bass — whose players are methodical and not spontaneous, therefore a good instrument for Germans to consider."

The only good Christian instruments, Keillor concludes, are the percussion group ("you have to wait so long between the notes you play that you have to have the patience of a saint") and the harp, because "it takes 14 hours a day to tune, which gives you no time to run around and visit bars."

Finally, Keillor gives an update on the news from his hometown of Lake Wobegon, "not at the end of the world, mind you, but you can see it from there."

He pokes fun at everyone: Norwegians, Californians, our children at graduation exercises ("there they walk, in a long line and in a cloud of cologne") and many more ethnic and age groups.

His story of the Minnesota family whose 17-year-old daughter is about to leave home, or the father's great invention (to raise wild rice on his farm) which he implements with his daughter's help when they have to replace a water pump on a stormy night, will keep you in gleeful suspense.

It's so hilarious, in fact, that even if you belong to one or another of the targeted groups, you still will love Keillor simply for the way he pokes fun at you.