

# Radio's Keillor Brings 'Prairie' To Lenox

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## STAGE REVIEW

LENOX, Mass. — Seeing a live performance of Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" for the first time is a little like finally having a date with a girl you've known only from a long correspondence.

The reality is not quite as you had pictured it, but after a momentary adjustment, it feels superior to your self-conjured version.

Keillor and his protean little troupe of musicians, actors, and sound-effects people brought the long-running public radio show to the stage of the Tanglewood shed Saturday night. The show drew about 8,000 people, a number that out here is usually reserved for the most bankable of big-name soloists or conductors.

In person, Keillor is slightly taller than imagined, and gives off a more intense vibe of personal angst.

Dressed in a dark suit and tieless, unbuttoned formal shirt, Keillor was a dutiful and polished host. But he radiates an interesting unease at being on display, like a cash-poor aristocrat who has been obliged to open the family mansion to visitors.

Keillor's reticence best expresses itself as unflappability. When, in the 15-minute warmup to the two-hour broadcast, he twice lost his place in Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire," he and the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band just cheerfully faked and vamped until they got back together.

Saturday's musical guests reflected the stylistic range that APHC has shown over the years: Norumbega Har-

mony, a Boston-area chorus specializing in music of the Shakers; the Berkshire Highlanders, a local pipe band; and the classical pianist Emanuel Ax.

Ax had a good time. First, he came on and played Debussy's three short "Estampes," whose gauzy arpeggios were a nice complement to this breezeless summer evening. Later, in what was plausibly billed as his dramatic radio debut, Ax joined the company for an episode of "Guy Noir," playing the part of a Mr. Sanders, a New York pianist who is crippled by stage fright. Ax showed some flair for this work, although he should not, as they say, cancel any of his major concerto dates just yet.

Perhaps the central revelation Saturday was to see that Keillor's celebrated Lake Wobegon monologue is a non-scripted, largely improvisatory event. I had always pictured these as somehow being read from a prepared text, possibly at a lectern. Instead, loping from one side of the stage to the other, frequently closing his eyes and entering some private realm, Keillor spun a lengthy and complex parable concerning one of the town's storied bachelor Norwegian farmers.

It wasn't so much a stand-up comedy act as a species of preaching, and indeed it included a good deal of scripture, mostly Isaiah.

But Keillor did something not many preachers can do: For nearly a half-hour, often speaking in a whisper, he held 8,000 people rapt.