



## Where All The Music Is Above Average

**By STEVE METCALF**  
Courant Music Critic

**I**n 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.

For another, helping to reconnect

**"LOOKING BACK,"** says Garrison Keillor, "I wouldn't say that I'm nostalgic about the music of my childhood so much as something simpler: I know the words."

JASON BELL

**WHO:** Garrison Keillor and guests  
"A Prairie Home Companion" **WHERE:** Tanglewood, Lenox, Mass.  
**WHEN:** Saturday, 5:45 p.m. **INFORMATION:** 888-266-1200

Alley, classical, country, 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 Funtella Bass.

Keillor's own singing, untrained but dogged and on pitch, has set the show's earnest and affectionate musical tone. When his boyish high

people to their radios.

For a third, giving many Americans a deeper understanding of the Minnesota Lutheran sensibility.

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 kind of national campfire of the air, around which has been heard folk music, hymns, Tin Pan

baritone intones "Hello, Love" at the top of the show, you immediately have the sense you are among people who just plain like music.

In keeping with the unpredictability of the repertoire, Keillor has from time to time essayed the odd Elvis tune or, as I dimly remember from years ago, a couple of thoughtful choruses of "Great Balls of Fire." Just the other day, Keillor and a guest came together for a surprisingly convincing rendition of Dean Martin's "Memories Are Made of This." That once-square mid-'50s pop bauble suddenly took on the feel of

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# Saturday Night Live With 'Home Companion'

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something valuable and even timeless.

For their part, the classical selections are offered cheerfully and without pretension.

In advance of the show's upcoming Saturday night live broadcast from Tanglewood in Lenox, Mass. — its first visit to that venue — 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. We didn't have many recordings around the house, and 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.

"When rock 'n' roll came in, it brought with it a good deal of alarm. Among fundamentalists, it was referred to as fornicating music. Rock 'n' roll was not initially all that exciting to me, although I did have a curiosity about it.

"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 [sings a few bars]. It was considered blasphemous, 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:**

"Well, 'I Come to the Garden' is a sweet song, al-

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

though 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.

"There's a false association in our time between intelligence and acerbity. As one gets older, one learns about the pretensions of iconoclasm. Cynicism is an intellectual pose.

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

**On the question of whether the musical culture is still producing "standards":**

"There certainly was that great period in American music, led by Kern and Berlin and Gershwin, in which composers were not writing primarily as a means of exploring their own personal identity.

"Very often they were actually creating a song for a specific slot in a specific show — you know, the ingénue song at the beginning of Act II — that nonetheless could be sung by anybody and thus could be popular in the sheet-music market, and the sheet-music market was very important in those days.

"Bob Dylan, say, does not share this motive. His songs are written for him to sing. Still, I think some Dylan songs are standards. Not necessarily his best or most popular songs. But to me, a song like 'Forever Young' can be sung by anybody, so

it's a kind of standard. Not in the old sense, though."

**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. They were 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. Or Edward MacDowell — I think his 'To a Wild Rose' is still in circulation, at least in some places.

"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 grassroots 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."

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