

Start with a seemingly happy Lutheran couple from St. Paul. Add poisoned breakfast cereal and music. Call it a world premiere.



Photographs by Stormi Greener/Star Tribune.
Angel on his shoulders: Garrison Keillor takes time out for Maia, 4, his daughter with wife Jenny Lind Nilsson.

MR. KEILLOR WRITES AN OPERA

IF YOU GO

Mr. and Mrs. Olson

Who: A new opera written by Garrison Keillor. Music composed and arranged by Andy Stein, performed by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with conductor Andreas Delfs.

When: 10-30 a.m. Fri.; 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat.; 2 p.m. next Sun.

Where: Orchestral Center for the Performing Arts, 5th and Washington Sts., St. Paul.

Tickets: \$15-\$65, 651-291-1144. Concerts are sold out, but some standing-room seats might be available.

On the radio: Broadcast live at 8 p.m. Sat. on Minnesota Public Radio (KSN, 99.5 FM).

By Michael Anthony
Star Tribune Staff Writer

The news from Lake Wobegon this week is that Garrison Keillor has written an honest-to-goodness opera. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra will premiere the work in four performances next weekend.

The opera's title, "Mr. and Mrs. Olson," suggests its character. It is comic rather than tragic, which means no one dies, and there is no chorus of gypsies singing around a campfire. But, as in much of Keillor's work, there is a thread of sadness, perhaps even of desperation, running through this tale of Norman and Karen Olson, a middle-aged Lutheran couple from St. Paul. Although outwardly content, Karen occasionally thinks "about slipping my husband a dose of poison in his Cheerios" and ends up looking for romance on the Internet. Clearly, this is a marriage in trouble.

Keillor wrote the text, and Andy Stein, the veteran violinist and saxophonist of the house band on Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion," composed the music, which interpolates a number of well-known operatic arias into the score. Vern Sutton is staging the production.



Saxophonist Andy Stein composed the music for "Mr. and Mrs. Olson."

which will be broadcast live at 8 p.m. Saturday on KSN Radio (99.5 FM). Andreas Delfs will conduct.

It was Delfs, in his first season as music director of the Chamber Orchestra, who suggested that Keillor write something.

"I've always been a big fan of Garrison's," Delfs said. "I thought we should collaborate, maybe every season. I think he is our Mark Twain today. No one else walks that line between humor and touching description of what American life is like. Like Twain, he makes you laugh and cry at the same time."

OPERA continues on F5:
— Keillor had planned to narrate the work, but abandoned the idea.

OPERA from F1

Keillor cast aside other plots before coming upon the Olsons

Seated in the living room of his Georgian-style mansion in the Crocus Hill area of St. Paul, Keillor, 59, said he went down a few blind alleys before hatching the idea of the unhappy Olsons. One of those alleys concerned a small touring opera company in which the tenor, for mysterious reasons, loses his voice.

"The point of the opera was for other members of the company to find a way to cure his problem," Keillor said. "I had written myself a good way into this, nothing very good, mind you, before it occurred to me, as it would have occurred to anyone else months earlier, if you have a tenor who has lost his voice, you don't have much of an opera. *Duh!*"

At the suggestion that this might therefore be a good part for a mime, Keillor's perpetual scowl, which gives him the look of a tall, rather myopic bird, dissolved into laughter.

"But people don't pay to see mimes," he said. Abandoning that idea, he thought of writing about a marriage.

"I know something about marriage, having been married so often," he said.

Keillor's wife (his third) is Jenny Lind Nilsson, a violinist and co-author with her husband of a book for young adults, "The Sandy Bottom Orchestra." They have a 4-year-old daughter, Maia, who, as a photo session later in the day demonstrated, can turn her father's face into pure sunshine.

The 'opera police'

As a student at the University of Minnesota, Keillor avoided opera.

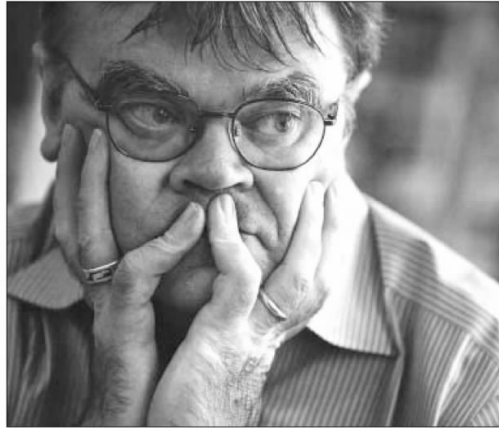
"I thought if you walked in there, you would be so obviously out of place," he said. "The opera police would come and ask you questions: Do you know what this opera is about? Who's the composer? What key is this in? And they would throw you out because you weren't smart enough. No, I guess I just grew up with this plain, ordinary Midwestern inferiority complex."

But during his years in New York, after he brought the first phase of "A Prairie Home Companion" to a close, he subscribed to the Metropolitan Opera and came to love it.

Keillor, who has spent decades mapping the Lutheran psyche in Wobegon, hopes his flock can appreciate what Samuel Johnson called this "exotic and irrational entertainment" called opera.

Would a Lutheran pay to see the wild gypsy Carmen onstage, with a rose between her teeth and clicking her heels?

"You wouldn't go to see it in your hometown, no," he said,



Stormi Greener/Star Tribune

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— Garrison Keillor

sage. "You'd go elsewhere and see it. The Lutherans from St. Paul probably won't attend this new opera, for example, but the ones from Granite Falls might. In the theater in your hometown, you want G-rated movies, even though there aren't any anymore. You want the R-rated movies to be 25 to 30 miles away. You can get there if you need to, but it's not in your face."

At the time he spoke, about 2½ weeks before opening night, "Mr. and Mrs. Olson" was more or less finished, sort of. With a two-hour radio show to prepare every week, Keillor is used to deadline pressure.

"It's coming together more and more quickly as the date of performance approaches. And in the final 24 hours, it's going to come together really, really quick," he said.

"It's kind of a potpourri of opera," Stein said of the new work, which he also is orchestrating.

Keillor gave him a first-draft libretto in late March, and they've been communicating by phone and e-mail ever since.

"It's really fun to work with Garrison's words," he said, "and sometimes I get to work in the style of the great composers: Mozart and Puccini."

Philip Brunelle, who con-

ducts for Keillor in his orchestra appearances around the country, said he's not surprised that Keillor would tackle an opera libretto. For Brunelle's VocalEssence, formerly the Plymouth Music Series, Keillor has written texts for large-scale concert works, "The History of Evil" and "The Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra," both to music by Randall Davidson.

"Garrison knows how to set words to music," Brunelle said. "A lot of people don't know how to do that. He's a natural poet."

Originally, Keillor was going to narrate the work, but that idea has been abandoned.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I'll come on as a beggar or a mystic or maybe a chiropractor. No, seriously, we don't want a narrator. A narrator would slow everything down, especially me. I talk slower and slower every year. This would become a four-hour opera."

A writing industry

While it might be true that Keillor's speech is slowing down, his writing continues at a pace that most practitioners would envy. He has, in fact, become an industry. An online listing of his works runs to 15 pages of books, CDs and audiotapes, some drawn from "A Prairie Home Companion." Last year, he put out two books: a novel, "Lake Wobegon: Summer 1956," and a collection of essays with photographs by Richard Olsenius, "In Search of Lake Wobegon."

His two professional lives — radio entertainer and book writer — do provide an echo of Twain's pursuit of comic lecture and writing. And in the case of both Twain and Keillor, the novels and stories tend to be darker in tone than what one could call the public comedy.

Keillor responded to a quote from Twain scholar Kenneth S. Lynn: "Consigned to the role of America's court jester, Mark Twain found grinning more and

more unbearable, and he wove his savage frustrations into the fabric of many of his works."

Has Keillor picked up this savage thread?

"Twain became bitter toward the end of his life, as anyone might who had undergone the sort of tragedies and reverses that he had. He was a man of sorrows," Keillor said. "In my case, I think that I simply had a chance when the radio show started and then again with this opera to escape the rigors of writing fiction, which is a solitary occupation, and into something that's sociable and collaborative. . . ."

"You're in this congenial group of people who have the hope that the total will be greater than the sum of its parts, and that's a wonderful thing because a novel is simply the sum of its parts, I'm afraid. You slave over it, and you move the pieces around, and you toy with it and you beat on it, and it simply is what it is."

Looking to the future, one goal Keillor still aims at is writing a full-length play. He has written one-acts that are staged from time to time. And he knows that a libretto is a play, and therefore with "Mr. and Mrs. Olson" he has written a play, although one that is intended to be sung.

"I'd love to write something for the theater that would go drifting around," he said. "To think that a work of yours is taking place somewhere onstage while you're sitting here doing a crossword puzzle is a pleasant thought."

But for the next few weeks, his thoughts would be on "Mr. and Mrs. Olson." And how would he like people to respond to his and Stein's opera? At the least, he would like them to laugh, presumably.

"If they don't," he said, "I'm going to move to St. Cloud and see what the real-estate business is like up there."

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