

Songs and silliness make Keillor's opera premiere a strong one

By Gwendolyn Freed
Star Tribune Staff Writer

In a recent interview with Minnesota Public Radio's Euan Kerr, Garrison Keillor likened the experience of creating his first opera libretto to having kidney stones and being run over by a truck. He said he was filled with dread about the work's world premiere, and was considering moving to Spokane, Wash., where he would change his name and hide out under a "librettist protection program."

In fact, nothing dreadful took place at the delightful first performance of "Mr. and Mrs. Olson" at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts Friday morning. Save for a few opening-day glitches, the concert opera — written by Keillor and set to music (mostly familiar opera tunes) by Andy Stein, longtime lead musician for "A Prairie Home Companion" — was a triumph of silliness and terrific singing.

Before the show began, Keillor's voice rumbled over loudspeakers, announcing among other bogus things that the performance was "sponsored by the Jesse M. Ventura Fund for the Performing Arts." So the audience was in stitches before a note was sung.

The opera's plot is a variation on classic Keillor themes. A middle-aged Lutheran couple, Mr. and Mrs. Olson of St. Paul, are struggling with a marriage running low on fizz. Bored, Mrs. Olson goes online, where she enjoys a chat-room dalliance with a sensitive but sinister baritone. Thanks to maneuverings by her best friend, Mrs. Olson finds herself at a party where her husband and her e-lover stand a good chance of colliding. Whereupon she nearly dies from eating a bad shrimp.

Very strong performances were turned in by the small cast of first-rate singers: soprano Maria Jette and tenor Mark Thomsen as the inhibited yet passionate Mr. and Mrs. O.; mezzo-soprano Alexandra Hughes as Mrs. Olson's passive-aggressive best friend; baritone Robert Orth as the online come-on guy, and bass Brian Jauhianen as the Olsons' wise plumber, ready with answers to life's big questions. The singers shared the stage with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra under music director Andreas Delfs.

The worst of the glitches on this maiden voyage was a longish silence right after the overture, when Jette and Delfs seemed to have their signals confused about which number to do next. This may be attributable to Keillor's well-known seat-of-the-pants

Opera review

Mr. & Mrs. Olson

What: World premiere performances of a comedy opera with libretto by Garrison Keillor and musical score arranged by Andy Stein.

Who: Starring Maria Jette and Mark Thomsen in the title roles. Andreas Delfs conducts the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

When: 8 p.m. today, 2 p.m. Sunday.

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

Tickets: Sold out. 651-291-1144.

On radio: Minnesota Public Radio will broadcast the Saturday performance live, at 8 p.m. on KSN (99.5 FM) in the Twin Cities. The opera also will be simulcast on 120 public-radio stations nationwide. Check local listings.

working style. According to SPCO spokeswoman Catherine Peloquin, major changes were being made to the opera up to the last minute.

Jette, who has long experience working with Keillor, was unflappable. As she sang to her friend about her marital problems, she was in shadow while the friend was spotlighted. And in Jette's fabulous and hysterically funny near-death experience with the shrimp, her light didn't come up until she was halfway through her cadenza and nearly a goner. Jette remained perfectly poised.

Other than a song about ennui set to Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" near the opening, Keillor and Stein succeeded brilliantly in stealing famous opera tunes and setting them to funny lyrics.

A high point is when Thomsen, lawn-mowing, newspaper-reading, out-of-touch husband, sings of the passion that, indeed, beats within his heart. To the tune of "Habañera" from Bizet's "Carmen," he confides that he has "something French in here that needs to be expressed. . . . Mon Amour, Très Chic, Au Lait. . . . L'Amour, for sure!"

In such ridiculous contexts, it was almost too much fun to hear tunes from "Turandot," "Carmen," "Lucia di Lammermoor," "La Bohème" and so many other classics. Add some lavish sets, impractical costumes and a couple of live animals, and "Mr. and Mrs. Olson" will be ready to take on the road.

— Gwendolyn Freed is at gfreed@startribune.com.