

CONCERT REVIEW

# Right at home



Times photo — THOMAS M. GOETHE

Garrison Keillor shared the stage with the Florida Orchestra on Tuesday at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center.

By JOHN FLEMING  
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TAMPA — Except for his trademark red socks, Garrison Keillor made an entrance that was almost unobtrusive, like a man taking a stroll in the park as he ambled on from stage right, for his appearance with the Florida Orchestra in its season-opening performance Tuesday night.

Keillor is extremely tall, with the slouch of someone who tried to avoid attention as a string-bean teenager in Minnesota, and some of his ardent fans in sold out Morsani Hall of Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center may not have quite known what he looks like. After all, as host of public radio's popular *Prairie Home Companion*, he is heard, not seen.

Ah, radio, said Keillor, born in 1942, it's "a life of fantasy and grandeur. On the radio, I can be as young as I like."

Keillor opened with trenchant observations for the transplanted Midwesterners in the audience, reminding "all you people who left" the winters of the north country that "warm weather is associated with immorality ... with inappropriate romance."

He went on to sound many of the themes from his weekly radio show and the news from Lake Wobegon, from the foibles of shy people to agonizingly long Sunday mornings in a fundamentalist church to the pleasure of sweet corn from the garden, and they were artfully worked into a program that showed off the orchestra to excellent effect.

On the podium was Philip Brunelle,

a longtime Keillor colleague and former music director of the Minnesota Opera, who opened the evening with *Burleska*, a buoyant little piece by Dominick Argento. Keillor, displaying a sturdy church choir baritone, gave expressive renditions of several songs, including a touching melody over lilting strings, *My Life*. He was powerful in the hymns he sang, suggesting that if he hadn't become a writer and showman, he could have been a marvelous preacher.

The centerpiece of the program was the *Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra*, inspired by Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and deftly scored by Randall Davidson. Keillor's narrative had a wealth of wit and musical insight as he pondered the question: "Which instru-

ment is the right one for a Lutheran to play?"

One of the things that makes Keillor such an original is that his humor, for all its folksiness, often comes with a barb. For example, the second violins "never have to practice because the parts are so easy." The piccolo is "an instrument that can open garage doors ... or set off the pager of every obstetrician in the audience." The brass section "includes a number of men who were in the construction trades. ... The orchestra hours are better."

Concertmaster Amy Schwartz Moretti, piccolo player Carmen Bannon and harpist Anna Kate Mackle took well-deserved bows for playing solos while Keillor made hilarious remarks about their instruments.