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## Keillor Makes a Too-Brief Visit From Lake Wobegon

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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

It's not often that people will pay a lot of good money to hear a writer sing.

Though he obviously loves music, Garrison Keillor's strength will always lie in his humor and folksy wisdom. Still, Thursday night's performance with the Utah Symphony was a musical evening, and while Keillor was a powerful stage presence, the orchestra and Utah Symphony Chorus were able to keep up with him.

Dressed in a tuxedo with a red bow tie and red socks, Keillor described Christmas (a mix of pagan and Roman that he compared to "one chain store setting up right next to another chain store") through history, including America's contribution of Santa as a jolly old elf who will give presents to pretty much anybody.

"I come from darker people than that," he said, launching an evening of storytelling centered around his boyhood in the company of stern, religious family members and one spinster aunt who insisted on celebrating Christmas in the small ways she could. Sometimes the stories were funny, sometimes they were sad and dark, but they all had their share of lyrical nuggets.

Keillor sang throughout the evening, never brilliantly but always with fervor. "You could almost dance to this — if you were brought up in a looser family than I was," he said.

It took a while for all the entities — orchestra, singers and Keillor, plus conductor and pianist Philip Brunelle — to get in sync. With Keillor's brief stop in town, the orchestra and singers hardly had a chance to rehearse, but they did a credible job of watching cues and staying on top of the pace. After intermission, the rough spots seemed to be worked out and the orchestra sailed through the accompaniment to Keillor's most touching story.

Highlights of the show's first half included a run-through of past guest conductors of the "Zion Lutheran Tabernacle," in which Brunelle ably played Christmas music as if he were everyone from Debussy to Souza; and the condensed "Nutcracker" complete with lyrics for the choir. "What a public service this is, to compress the Nutcracker . . . with no dancing children whatsoever," Keillor said, to an appreciative audience.

At times, Keillor seemed on autopilot, and he didn't come out for an encore despite a long-standing ovation from the crowd. Like jolly old Santa, Keillor dropped quickly and briefly into town — and disappeared just as suddenly.

**REVIEW**

Garrison Keillor was decked out in a tux, with a red bow tie and red socks at Abravanel Hall.