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Keillor, Fox Valley Symphony work well together

By James Chaudoir
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REVIEW

The Fox Cities Performing Arts Center was filled with laughter as Garrison Keillor entertained the audience with his home-spun humor Tuesday evening.

Whether his stories were about happenings in the town of Lake Wobegon, Bizet making his way from Omaha to Paris so that he could write operas, or singing "There's No First Class to Appleton," a new song he wrote while waiting in line at the airport, his wit and delivery never wavered.

Guest conductor Philip Brunelle opened the evening's program with a rousing performance of Glinka's "Overture to Russlan and Ludmila." A familiar work to concert audiences, this exciting and flashy piece is filled with running passages in the violins and fanfares juxtaposed with lyrical lines in the cellos. The orchestra played with excellent precision and balance, setting the stage for Keillor's entrance, complete with red socks and sneakers.

His first piece was the story of Bizet leaving Omaha sung as a parody on the famous "Habanera" from "Carmen." This was followed by a lengthy "age of caution" monologue, which could at best be described as a funny discourse on contemporary lifestyles of parenting and youth.

This led into his next song, "My Life" which was accompanied by the strings of the orchestra with Brunelle at the piano.

Keillor next turned to his style that we recognize from "The Writer's Almanac" with poetic recitations given before four movements taken from Francois Poulenc's "Suite Francaise." Poulenc's clever writing in this collection of 16th-century French dances was written in 1935 as incidental music for a play by Bourdet, "La Reine Margot."

Afterward Keillor spoke of Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream" and lamented that whenever incidental music for plays is performed, something seems to be missing. So he offered to supply the missing narrative while the orchestra played five movements of the music.

The second half of the program began with Keillor singing "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose" based on poems he was "taught in junior high school." This was followed by a hilariously funny monologue, "Surveying Lake Wobegon," which concludes with the orchestra joining in as a coda to the story. The final number was his own "Song of the Exiles," which is sung by Lake Wobegon exiles whenever they gather, where ever they gather, a fitting conclusion to an evening of gaiety and delight, full of song and stories, though as Keillor surmised, half of the stories weren't even true.

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