

# Behind the big show

Logistics play huge role in live radio, concerts



A Prairie Home Companion's Radio Romance Tour starring host and writer Garrison Keillor arrives at 7 p.m. Sunday, bringing news from Lake Wobegon to MSU's Wharton Center. COURTESY PHOTO

By Ken Glickman  
For the Lansing State Journal

Having listened to Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" on radio for many years (decades, maybe), I always wanted to know how the show moved along with such a nice flow like it has a mind of its own but always clocking in on all the radio timing cues just right. So when I finally saw a live broadcast, I finally saw the magic ingredient. There he was — Rich Dworsky, the music director — sitting at the piano center stage, short, balding with long hair and seemingly attached to his headset.

He was in charge of the whole shebang, cuing Keillor, the band, the soloists, everybody. He was the man in charge.

Dworsky says, "I think of myself as part orchestra conductor and part traffic cop."

The show Sunday at the Wharton Center, however, will not be the radio show — it is called the "Radio Romance Tour."

Dworsky says, "Because we're not on a



Music director Rich Dworsky helps keep the "Prairie Home Companion" production on track. He writes and plays music, conducts the Guy's All Star Shoe Band, and accompanies every musical artist who appears on the show.

strict broadcast schedule the entire cast feels liberated. Garrison gets to improvise with Fred Newman, the sound man. It's more laid back. We've got a fantastic production staff, so it moves like clockwork."

Concerts are one thing, radio shows are another. They must be

run on split-second timing, and Dworsky keeps it all together. He writes all of the arrangements, original music, plays the backup music for the radio plays, conducts the Guy's All Star Shoe Band, and accompanies every musical artist who appears on the show, from country star Willie Nel-

son to opera diva Renee Fleming.

"Sometimes, Garrison will want me to write a piece for the show, on the actual day of a show."

"We're all having fun. I love theater music and with Prairie Home, I feel like I'm writing a Broad-

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## IF YOU GO

Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion's Radio Romance Tour

» 7 p.m. Sunday  
» Wharton Center, Michigan State University  
» Tickets: \$35, \$50, \$60, plus applicable fees  
» info: whartontcenter.com, 432-2000 or (800) WHARTON

## Wharton

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way show every week.

"Garrison pretty much writes the show, but he leaves the music to me. It's a dream gig."

By all accounts, Dworsky is a unique talent, playing like a virtuoso with every style of music that is on the show, which is every style of music.

"I think of myself as a theatrical musician and a studio musician, and with 'Prairie Home,' I can do it all. It's a great challenge."

Dworsky is a classically trained pianist and composer which has enabled him to not only do the "Prairie Home"

weekly radio show, but also appear on TV specials on Disney, PBS and BBC and travels with Keillor in concerts as a duo and with orchestra.

Dworsky even found himself in the movie "A Prairie Home Companion" with Meryl Streep as, what else, the bandleader. He also provided all the musical arranging, conducting and composing for the movie.

He's been attached at the hip with Keillor for about 20 years, thanks to his mother.

Dworsky's father was a real estate lawyer in St. Paul and when he died, his mother found herself owner of the World Theater (now Fitzgerald Theater) where Keillor performs. A Rus-

sian soprano was about to appear on the show and Keillor wondered where he was going to find a pianist to accompany her. Dworsky's mother piped up and said, "My son could do it."

Dworsky was hired for the night, and a few years later was given the post as music director.

Although Dworsky has been working with Keillor for so long, he is still amazed by his talent. "He has endless energy. We do have writers for the show, but Garrison has his hand in it all. For his weekly monologue, News from Lake Wobegon, he writes it all out the day before, but pretty much recites it from memory. Sometimes, depending on the show, he'll stretch it

out, or cut it a bit short."

"He's not a composer, but Garrison has very sophisticated musical tastes. You can't fool him."

Has the show changed much over the years?

"The acting part of the show has gotten much more professional. The band used to have scripts and stand there and read the parts with Garrison. Now we have real actors on the staff and Garrison's radio plays are much better."

Keillor, 71, has announced that he'll retire in two years — how will that be?

"For the past 10 years Garrison has been saying that he'll retire in two years. I'll believe it when I see it."