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Chris Thile will take over hosting duties from Garrison Keillor permanently in the fall.

Musician Thile tunes up 'Prairie Home Companion' in first stint as new host

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Guests included Ben Folds, Ed Helms and the Punch Brothers

Garrison Keillor will be back as host Feb. 13 and remain center stage until next fall

BY CHRIS RIEMENSCHNEIDER
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

ST. PAUL, MINN.

Even the cast members who rehearsed with him earlier in the week had to address the elephant — or rather the skinny mandolin player — in the room Saturday at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, when Chris Thile helmed his first show as Garrison

Keillor's named replacement on *A Prairie Home Companion*.

"You don't look like the host," actor Tim Russell said in a skit about Thile visiting the backstage area. "The host is a long-faced galoot. You're kind of young and fair."

Though not as sharp as the physical contrast between Thile and Keillor, the differences heard over the airwaves in Saturday's

Thile-led episode of *Prairie Home* were easily discernible as Minnesota's famed public radio show enters a new era.

Keillor will be back as host Feb. 13 and remain center stage until Thile permanently takes over next fall. Even then, the *Prairie Home* patriarch will still be involved as a producer and probably a

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co-writer.

There were still echoes of Keillor when Thile addressed the week's two most unavoidable subjects.

On the St. Paul Winter Carnival: "A beautiful tradition of thumbing your nose at brutal weather that is very seriously trying to kill you."

On Donald Trump: "It seems like the only way to slow him down is increase the education budget."

Thile's "young and fair" demeanor added a fun levity and certain naivete to the proceedings. Where Keillor sounds like he's talking sternly over watery coffee at a corner table in a small-town diner, Thile could be conversing politely over the

gluten-free granola bins at a big-city co-op.

For public radio listeners nationwide, this should be a great asset.

For *Prairie Home*'s core Midwestern audience, Thile's newbie status wasn't necessarily a drawback. He frequently and charmingly made light of being a California native learning to navigate the prairie.

In one obvious but effective bit, the cast — including *The Office* actor Ed Helms as a guest member — instructed Thile on unintelligible snow-emergency rules and the golden rule of winter tongue usage.

"Why would I want to put my tongue on an iron railing anyway?" Thile asked.



Mississippi Star Tribune/Aaron Levinsky via THS

Singer Brandi Carlile, center, performs with twins Phil and Tim Hanseroth during Saturday's *A Prairie Home Companion* show.

Flummoxed, Russell feebly retorted, "Just don't do it!"

The biggest difference wasn't in the punch lines, but rather in the added musicality of the show. If Saturday's episode was any indicator, music — not Thile — will be the real star once Keillor

is gone.

Thile's own neo-bluegrass group the Punch Brothers played several tunes during the broadcast on top of an already stacked lineup of players, including locally beloved folk-rock singer Brandi Carlile and piano plunking alt-rock vet Ben Folds.

Instead of Keillor's "News From Lake Wobegon," we got extra songs Saturday, which was hard to argue against.

If the theater audience had been listening in the car, it would've had to pull over as Carlile delivered acoustic versions of *The Eye* and *Way to You*. Folds paired up nicely with the Punch Brothers on *Yes Man*, and Thile unveiled *The Mississippi Is Frozen*, the first in a series of new songs he said he plans to deliver every week on air.

That's really just the start.

The episode coming up this Saturday has none other than Paul Simon on the schedule with indie fave Andrew Bird (tickets are long sold out).

Whether this added musical punch is a permanent game plan for the new *Prairie Home* or just a diversion until Thile gets better footing trying to fill Keillor's sneakers, either scenario is a good reason to stay tuned.