



Staff Photo by Tom Sweeney

Garrison Keillor rehearsed with Philip Brunelle before their concert performance.

Keillor's old radio companions turn out for debut of his new act

By Michael Anthony
Staff Writer

Not everybody made it to Orchestra Hall on Thursday night for Garrison Keillor's "Lake Wobegon Revisited" concert, not even some of the more prominent citizens of Lake Wobegon.

Jack of Jack's Auto Repair, for instance, didn't show, and in a program note took a rather curmudgeonly attitude. "It seems cruel of you to haul this old veteran out of his chimney corner and force him to fight a losing battle one more time," said Jack. "What moves me almost to dry sobs is the bravery of the man in returning to the scene of the crime so soon, long before the statute of limitations comes into effect."

Fortunately, not everyone took Jack's attitude toward Keillor, who was making his first public appearance in the Twin Cities since June 1987, when he dropped the curtain on "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show. A near-capacity audience paid as much as \$100 per ticket for a benefit performance for the Plymouth Music Series. It also was the debut of Keillor's "new act," a performance-with-orchestra — or as Keillor subtitled it, "a recital for mixed baritone and orchestra."

Keillor and Philip Brunelle, who con-

A review

ducted last night's concert and helped put together the material, will repeat the show in two concerts with the National Symphony in Washington, D.C., at the end of the month. More orchestra dates are expected to follow, though none has been announced.

Looked at as an out-of-town tryout, last night's concert had a few rough spots. For one thing, it was too long, running nearly three hours, even with some last-minute cuts. Having to pay musicians overtime, orchestra managements around the country frown on concerts that run much longer than two hours.

For the rest, the evening was prime Keillor, a deft mix of his unique blend of irony and sentiment, sophistication and corn. Unlike many performers who work in this medium — what are known as "symphony dates" — Keillor managed to involve himself with the orchestra and orchestral music rather than simply coming on and doing his thing between orchestral interludes.

"Chorales for an Old Farmyard," for instance, interspersed Bach chorales in the old Stokowski transcriptions with Keillor's oddly touching tale of

a decrepit farmyard. "The Cough: a Tone Poem for Voice and Orchestra" was a hilarious remembrance of Keillor's attempt to stifle a cough during a concert — "not one of those dry, aesthetic coughs but a major outburst with loads of phlegm."

A medley of songs associated with "A Prairie Home Companion" arranged skillfully by Daniel Kallman also worked well. Keillor's singing voice suits his material. It is the sort of voice that usually is called serviceable. Most important, he gets the words out. A clever curtain-raiser composed by Randall Davidson titled "Piano & Orchestra Bench Overture" opened the concert.

As always, the heart of Keillor's show was his monologue, which is why the timing of the show will be so important should he and Brunelle take it around the country. Keillor needs to have time to ramble a bit. Last night's monologue concerned a number of seemingly unrelated things: a Memorial Day speech at Lake Wobegon, a Lutheran flamenco group and the nature of the month of March — "the month designed to show people who don't drink what a hangover is like." Wally Nordquist, the world's smallest evangelist, also played a part in the tale.

Ruminated upon afterward, it all seemed to hang together.