

Garrison Keillor casts a powerful spell with CSO

By Rick Kogan

One of the most wonderful things in the world would have been to be in Orchestra Hall Tuesday night with a very close friend—it was Valentine's Day—and watch this odd and ordinary looking fellow named Garrison Keillor do the extraordinary things he does.

Keillor has been gone from the airwaves, from his popular "The Prairie Home Companion," for what will be two years in June. But the hearts of his fans have grown fonder during his forays to Denmark and New York, and even he displayed a certain homesickness, as if his has been a reluctant interlude, for performing.

Though the evening, "Lake Wobegon Revisited" (there will be another performance Wednesday night), was spiced with allusions to the writer's solitary life and to the almost otherworldly climes in which he has been living, it was also

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abundantly good-humored and entertaining. Keillor's wickedly erudite and determinedly gentle world view combined to cast a special spell.

One must never, however, forget the fact that Keillor is a born and quite crafty performer. Accompanied by members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of guest conductor and longtime Keillor pal Philip Brunelle (they are collaborating on "Bertha's Kitty Boutique Songbook"), he was a knowing charmer and shrewd showman.

Keillor calls himself a "shy orator," but peaking from the corners of his self-effacing manner was a palpable and coltish delight in being on stage.

It didn't matter what he did: discourse on coughing in audiences ("There is an

epidemic of throat clearing. Why? Because we are a permissive culture?"); hilariously try to determine what orchestra instrument "the Lord would play" and why; read poems about male bathroom habits or dogs; sing in his rich baritone a tearfully evocative song about life in the country; or lead a sing-a-long.

Though his monologue, taking us back to his hometown, was certainly the evening's No. 1 hit for many, there were plenty of contenders for that honor.

The orchestra, though their skill would better be assessed by my colleagues, John von Rhein and Howard Reich, sounded fine. I would imagine few had ever witnessed the music of Dvorak or Schubert employed in such carefully carefree fashion. I don't know how the orchestra members feel about Daniel Barenboim, who takes over the CSO in 1991, but their smiles and laughter told me that for a couple of nights at least, Garrison Keillor will suit them just fine.