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Monday/July 10/1989/Star Tribune

'Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days' lets Keillor, orchestra shine

By Michael Anthony

Staff Writer

Danny Thomas once said he never met a funny Lutheran. Thomas should have been at Orchestra Hall Saturday night listening to Garrison Keillor talk about Lutherans and hearing 2,500 people, many of them Lutherans, bursting with laughter.

Thomas, of course, means that there haven't been many Lutheran comedians. (Have there been any?) Keillor might make the same point. It's the *behavior* of Lutherans, not their ability to tell a joke, that makes Keillor laugh and that in turn has allowed him to create an entire world of small-town Lutheranism called Lake Wobegon on radio, television, books and now in concert halls.

It's a world he's ambivalent about. He sees it as narrow-minded, stifling and, worse, anti-fun. "If you grew up Lutheran, it's always Lent," he told the audience Saturday night. "Norwegians," he said (Norwegian being synonymous with Lutheran), "are a sea-faring people, which is why they're never really happy unless they're cold, wet and miserable."

At the same time, Lake Wobegon represents roots, stability, cozy familiarity and timelessness. It's the tension between those two attitudes that keeps him afloat creatively and keeps him immensely productive. If he ever resolved that tension, he'd probably go dry as a writer.

A review

'Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days'

Review: What might be called "the Symphonic Keillor," humorist Garrison Keillor's appearance with the Minnesota Orchestra, proved to be a program deftly tailored to Keillor's skills, skillfully conducted by Philip Brunelle, with clever compositions by Randall Davidson.

Saturday's show, "Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days," the first of two nights at Orchestra Hall, was the continuation of a venture that Keillor started here in March 1988, a format in which he is accompanied by a symphony orchestra — in this case, the Minnesota Orchestra. It's essentially what orchestras call a pops concert, but the content has been tailored skillfully to Keillor's abilities, which are not really musical. He does sing, but in a voice that, as he told the audience, critics have showered with adjectives such as familiar and husky.

Mostly, he speaks, and it's a better show than it was last year. Since then, Keillor and his conductor, Philip Brunelle, have worked with a number of orchestras around the county, and collaborating with local composer Randall Davidson, they've concocted a batch of new material that lets both Keillor and the orchestra shine.

The two major pieces of the evening were "The Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra" and "The Radio Announcer." The former makes allusion to Benjamin Britten's "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra" but asks the question: should a young Lutheran want to become a musician, which instrument should he take up? The clarinet sounds too snooty, the oboe much too sensual. The problem with the cello is the way cellists put their arms around the instrument. They look like parents at a day-care center zipping up snowsuits. Keillor ultimately recommends the percussion instruments — like Lutherans, percussionists must be ever so patient — and the harp. Playing the harp keeps you humble and, most important, it keeps you home at night because it takes so long to tune.

"The Radio Announcer" is a sweet, wry tale about Keillor's early days working as a classical-music DJ at a college radio station, which allows for ample quotations from the music that he put on the air. Both pieces are clever. The text of "The Young Lutheran's Guide," which Keillor and Brunelle premiered recently at the Aspen Festival, needs to be trimmed a bit, but Davidson's music is both skillful and funny. A highlight of "The Young Lutheran's Guide" was a duet for Keillor and piccolo player Adele Lorraine: a blues version of "Jesus Loves Me."

For the star of the show, this was a demanding evening. Keillor was on stage for nearly the entire two



Garrison Keillor

hours. He made one quick exit at one point, only to return dressed as a member of the Sons of Knute lodge, a kind of Lake Wobegon version of the Mystic Knights of the Sea. The cape, Keillor explained, was made from the skins of over 1,000 walleyes.

"Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days" was recorded for future broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio and will also be seen on the Disney channel.