

# Keillor, symphony bring Lake Wobegon to Newark

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Home News music critic

NEWARK — Although the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, even when contract negotiations have dragged on a while, does not generally play selections with such titles as "Whoopi-Ti-Yi-O" and "Some Words from Powdermilk Biscuits." But then, Sunday afternoon's performance was no ordinary concert. And there was certainly no trace of traditional concert repertoire, unless one is willing to count Garrison Keillor's performances of bizarre arrangements of Bizet and Dvorak among the traditional.

The program, the second of a pair of concerts comprising the opening of the orchestra's Winter Pops Series, drew what seemed like the "Lake Wobegon Days" fan club. It was an audience well-versed in Keillor, and ready to laugh at almost every one of his lines or stories, from the corniest of songs to the wittiest of monologues.

Keillor covered a good deal of territory Sunday afternoon, as part of the program entitled "Lake Wobegon Loyalty Days."

Keillor sang, joked, chatted, told stories

and even presented the complete "Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra," a rather irreverent tour of all sections of the orchestra. It was composed by Randall Davidson, whose musical settings comprised a large section of the program, alongside settings by Philip Brunelle, who conducted the NJSO, often from the keyboard.

"I come from that flat place out in the middle of the country, the part of the country you people fly over ... and have a little cheese omelet as you fly over," Keillor began. Dressed in black pants, white shirt, red suspenders and bow-tie, and red socks, he unplugged and turned over a monitor in the search for a spot to sing cowboy songs.

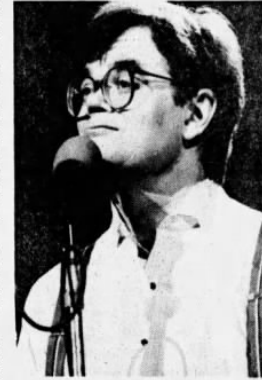
"A cowboy can't sing without one leg raised, he said, propping his left leg on the monitor. "What serves a dog for other purposes helps a cowboy to sing."

Searching further for the best position for addressing his audience, he stepped up on the podium. "Boy, this is good — no wonder they're like that. This is papal, being up here." And he stepped down and went on to sing, "I'm just an old cowboy with twigs in my hair," ("Whoopi-Ti-Yi-O").

The program included specialties of the Midwest, the complete story of Keillor's start in radio, through Davidson's "The Radio Announcer," and the short history of musical styles, as told through "The Music Program at the Second Methodist Church, Ottumwa, Iowa" (music by Brunelle). Ministers of Music at that extraordinary church, according to Keillor, included Wagner, Debussy, Stravinsky ("who refused to play for the junior choir"), "The Rev. John Philip Sousa, who played everything in four-four," and John Cage, "who was very quiet, silent in fact. He spoke of chance elements and indeterminacy in music, but we had that with the old sopranos for years."

The members of the orchestra certainly had a good time, playing and listening to Keillor. They were thoroughly involved in the Lake Wobegon Medley, "Sons of Knute: Homage March," which paid musical tribute to the music of Grieg.

The audience Sunday afternoon, in fact, took the Knute pledge, which ends in two familiar snorts. Unfortunately, "the Knutes left Newark when parking meters were put in," Keillor explained.



GARRISON KEILLOR