

# Keillor and Symphony have fun

By Martin Sivitz

For The Pittsburgh Press

Just what was humorist/writer Garrison Keillor doing at Heinz Hall in front of the world-conquering Pittsburgh Symphony?

Keillor offered a lighthearted explanation when he cracked that "it's easy to collaborate with dead composers — the work goes so much faster." But kidding aside, the combination was an odd one, all right.

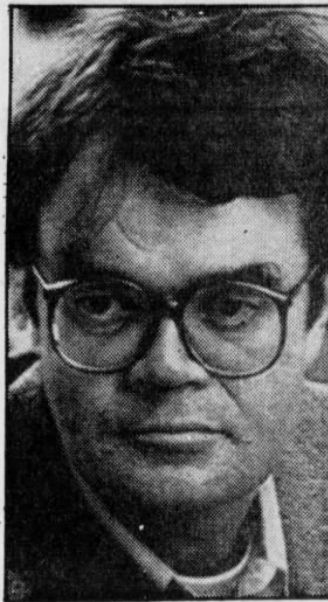
Keillor's usual medium is radio, where he has hosted "A Prairie Home Companion," odds and ends of Americana in folk music and tales from make-believe Lake Wobegon.

The link between Keillor's past and Saturday's Heinz Hall concert is Philip Brunelle, who conducted this first pops concert of the season and has served as keyboard player and conductor on the radio broadcasts. He managed to elicit strong and precise playing from the orchestra.

The first offering encapsulated the disparity of the whole concept. Randall Davidson's "Piano and Orchestra Bench Overture" began with hymn-like piano chords from Brunelle and ended as a patchwork, stopping along the way to glance at Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" and the theme from the old "Andy Griffith Show."

The orchestra sounded a bit threadbare at first, but gradually warmed to Brunelle's clear beat.

Keillor sang "Hello Love," a blues tune that he uses to open his radio show. His gentle singing is very much an extension of his storytelling, a voice out of the Midwest, the



**Garrison Keillor**  
A supreme storyteller

kind of voice broadcasters consider perfect for TV and radio.

I prefer the intimacy of his radio show, which leaves much to the imagination and features small band accompaniments, but the humorist bent the Symphony to his style. Thus, on "Whoopi-Ti-Yi-O," cowbells rattled and the theatrics included standing shouts from the players in this cowboy song where Keillor pokes fun at himself ("a man in a suit who speaks of manure/who sits at his desk and writes litera-ture").

Keillor has such a gentle way with the language that none of this is

## REVIEW

### Symphony Pops with Garrison Keillor

Conductor: Philip Brunelle.

Where: Heinz Hall.

When: 7:30 tonight.

Tickets: \$15-\$30; 392-4900.

offensive or corny. He really is a supreme storyteller, sort of a Mark Twain from Minnesota. His soft jabbing of Lake Wobegon, its stolid Lutherans and timeless values, strikes a chord in a place most of us never knew existed.

Allusions to standard repertoire were in full force. Grieg, Bizet and Dvorak were appropriated outright, often with hilarious effect, as in Keillor's "Ode to Powdermilk Biscuits" sung to "Carmen." Composer Davidson, who figured strongly in the program, borrowed a concept from Benjamin Britten to create "The Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra." Keillor's narration wrestled with a weighty issue: What instrument embodies Lutheran sobriety? Piccolo player Ethan M. Stang spun some bluesy inflections and assistant concertmaster Huei-Sheng Kao excelled in some double stop violin passages on this one.

Although it was an unlikely pairing, the collaboration of Keillor and the Symphony was good honest fun, and poignant, too. The attendance was 2,838.