

GARRISON KEILLOR

Out of the Dales

**G**arrison Keillor, bestselling author and radio host of *Prairie Home Companion*, didn't hear much orchestral music when he was growing up in Anoka, Minn. Nowadays, however, he's standing in front of symphony orchestras, and relishing the job. On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, he'll bring the same subtle wit that he lavishes on *Prairie Home Companion* audiences to

**Humorist Garrison Keillor will appear with the Fort Worth Symphony Pops at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday, at the Fort Worth/Tarrant County Convention Center JFK Theatre. Tickets: \$17-\$34. Call 335-9000.**

appearances with the Fort Worth Symphony as the season opener for the orchestra's pops series.

And, yes, he'll sing, just as he does every week on the radio, between visits from the National Duct Tape Council lady and ads for the Cafe Boeuf and, of course, the weekly report from Lake Wobegon, Minn., where, as every Keillor buff knows, "All the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above-average."

"We didn't go out to see orchestras," Keillor says, recalling his childhood in a recent phone interview. "But we belonged to a church that valued hymn-singing."

With either his mother or father at the piano, the whole family sang hymns at home, with young Garrison learning early on to harmonize the alto part. Except for a stint in high school choir, however, he didn't sing before an audience until he was on the radio with *Prairie Home Companion* in 1974.

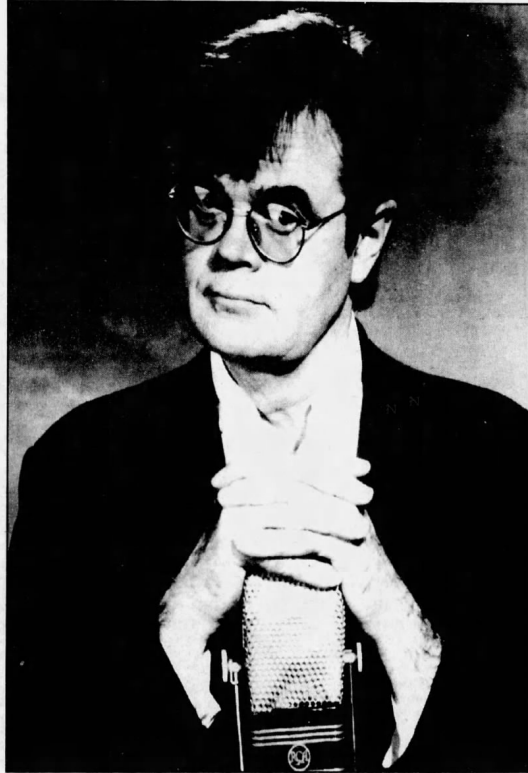
Philip Brunelle, then director of the Minnesota Opera and now director of the renowned Plymouth Music Series, was on the first program with him. And Brunelle has been the only conductor Keillor will work with on the pops concerts he has been doing since 1989.

"I could never do it without being friends with the conductor," Keillor says. "I walk out onstage with an orchestra and I feel like I'm walking into someone else's church, and don't know when to stand or kneel."

But he loves singing with an orchestra. "You're surrounded with all this sonority, all this sweetness," he says.

Keillor's pops concerts began with Brunelle's encouragement during the hiatus of *Prairie Home Companion* in 1987-89.

"I think that the time away [from *Prairie Home Companion*] was valuable," Keillor says. "It taught me to appreciate it."



Ralph Nelson

But when he returned to radio in 1989 with a revived *Prairie Home Companion*, he turned the production responsibilities over to others.

"Going to meetings is what kills me," he says. "I'm a writer. A writer goes into a room and closes the door and writes."

Keillor, who, after growing up in Minnesota and building his fame there as the host of *Prairie Home Companion*, lived briefly in New York and Copenhagen, Denmark, but has now returned to the Midwest, and lives in a restored 19th-century cabin in Wisconsin just across the Minnesota state line. He has written eight books; he and his wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, recently co-authored a novel for youngsters, *The Sandy Bottom Orchestra*, that will be published in the fall. Meanwhile, he is completing a coming-home novel set in Lake Wobegon, the fictional Minnesota township that has long served as the keystone of *Prairie Home Companion*.

Along with the singing, one of the things that Keillor enjoys most about orchestral pops concerts is rehearsing his *Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra*, a humorous commentary on the instruments of the orchestra from a prim Midwestern viewpoint.

"I enjoy doing it in rehearsal as much as for an audience," he says. "The orchestra always goes to pieces when they hear the jokes — that I got from musicians."

— Wayne Lee Gay