

Classical Notes

Busy Nilsson sister has ties to Pro Arte, Pops, and Keillor

By Richard Dyer
GLOBE STAFF

Garrison Keillor was having fun warming up the sold-out Tanglewood Shed Saturday afternoon before the live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion."

He had more than 4,000 people whistling "America the Beautiful" and introduced some of the onstage personnel, including the Nilsson Sisters string quartet. "After the show," he said, "I will select one of the Nilsson sisters to be married to."

This got a nice laugh, but few people realized that the joke was on them — Keillor is in fact married to violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, and they have a 6-year-old daughter, Maya.

Another Nilsson sister, Kristina, is a prominent and busy Boston freelance violinist, concertmaster of the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, and a member of the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra (she is also a lawyer). The Nilsson sisters, like Keillor, hail from Anoka, Minn., and Kristina won the Minnesota state high school debating championship with one of Keillor's cousins — and she dated one of his younger brothers.

But she never met Keillor until many years later, when the founder of the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, Larry Hill, asked her to approach Keillor about appearing with the orchestra; Keillor did, and it led to a renewed friendship between the two families and to several public performances involving Keillor and the Nilsson sisters, his meeting with Jenny, and subsequent events. Keillor returns to perform with the Pro Arte in February.

Earlier this week, Kristina Nilsson recalled one of Keillor's monologues about a rock star who was tired of eating live chickens onstage in order to grab attention. "So when I wrote to him, I told him he wouldn't have to bite a chicken's head off if he came to perform with the Pro Arte. He was fascinated that there were fellow Anokans who had made careers in classical music, which he adores, and we had a long lunch and told all our family history — some of which came up in later monologues."

Kristina's Pops schedule is so hectic that she had to do one of the "Prairie Home Companion" rehearsals by remote, sitting in a studio at WGBH while her sisters were at Tanglewood. Once she got to the Tanglewood Shed, just before the broadcast began, Keillor handed her a page of script — she had some lines to deliver in a sketch. "I was very worried about that; I was afraid I would have to be reading my lines while playing the violin, and I'm not that smart. But he had it all planned out — a microphone appeared in front of me, I said the right thing, then went back to my music."

Keillor's devotion to music is genuine — you can run into him at the Metropolitan Opera — and he sometimes features classical artists on his program. Leo Kottke was the big name last week, but the Nilsson Sisters were kept very busy, and Hsing-Ay Hsu, a pianist from Beijing who is a Tanglewood Music Center fellow this summer, played pieces by Liszt ("L'arabesque"), Debussy, and Chopin with bravado, charm, and unerring accuracy.

Labelle in Germany: While



Garrison Keillor on "Prairie Home Companion" last month.

Karina Gauvin, one of the two leading French-Canadian sopranos, was conquering Boston in the title role of Conradi's "Ariadne" during the recent Boston Early Music Festival, the other, Dominique Labelle, was making a triumphant return to the Goettingen Handel Festival in Germany. Labelle, who has been based in Boston since her student days, sang concerts in Goettingen and took the role of Iphis in Handel's "Alcina." A reviewer for *andante.com* praised Labelle's "highly colored soprano," her "dramatic immersion in the role," and her "serene, beautiful singing."

Recordings of Goettingen Festival performances are available to friends of the festival (visit www.haendel.org for details). Recordings of Labelle from earlier Goettingen seasons include the modern premiere of Handel's rediscovered "Gloria" and the title role in the opera "Rodelinda."

classical picks

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The Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer season at Tanglewood opens tomorrow at 8:30 p.m. when guest conductor Kurt Masur leads Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky" with mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and the Tanglewood Festival Chorus. Sunday's concert at 2:30 p.m. brings guest conductor James DePreist, whose program includes Beethoven's Triple Concerto with the Kalichstein-Robinson-Laredo Trio.

Not to be overlooked in the holiday weekend is the annual Arthur Fiedler Memorial Concert by the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra at the Hatch Shell Sunday at 7:30 p.m. Keith Lockhart conducts; the program is a tribute to the late associate pops conductor laureate Harry Ellis Dickson. . . . Aston Magna's summer series of early-music concerts opens Saturday at 6 p.m. in St. James Church in Great Barrington, a program called "The Birth of the String Quartet." . . . Next week's early-music program presented by the Society for Historically Informed Performance is Jewish music from 17th and 18th-century France and Italy presented by the Spanish ensemble *Le Tendre Amour*. The concerts are Tuesday at 8 p.m. in St. Peter's Church in Weston, Wednesday at Harvard House Museum in Ipswich, and Thursday in Lindsey Chapel in Emmanuel Church in Boston. . . . Monadnock Music launches its season Sunday at 4 p.m. in the Peterborough Townhouse in New Hampshire with an all-Beethoven program by the New Zealand String Quartet.