

## Commentary

# The growing voice of America's other public radio network

**By Leonard Inskip**  
Associate editor

The opening of the Ordway Theatre got national attention — and more. A nationwide public radio network broadcast the performance live to stations across the country. The network was not well-known National Public Radio, but little-known but growing American Public Radio.

Like the Ordway, American Public Radio is a Minnesota-based endeavor. It serves 287 public radio stations. Though its budget is only a tiny fraction of National Public Radio's, three-year-old American Public Radio tops National Public Radio in hours of weekly programming. Most APR affiliates are also NPR members.

American Public Radio is a consequence of satellite technology. It's also, in good measure, a product of the creative mind and energy of William Kling, longtime head of Minnesota Public Radio. He built the nation's leading local public radio system; now he's expanding alternative programming nationwide.

In the process, arts organizations in Minnesota, other states and foreign countries have gained broader exposure and recognition. More than 100 stations carry the Minnesota Orchestra's full season, nearly as many carry the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's concerts. Through APR, "A Prairie Home Companion" reaches 2 million listeners weekly.

The network's offerings are a not-so-subliminal message: There's more to classical music than what emanates from the Kennedy and Lincoln centers in Washington and New York. About 70 percent of American Public



A rehearsal for "A Prairie Home Companion": The program, distributed by American Public Radio, reaches 2 million listeners weekly.

Radio's programming is classical music (10 percent is nonclassical).

And there's more to news than what emanates from other networks focused on Washington and New York. That's why American Public Radio distributes to about 45 stations a daily news program by Canadian Broadcasting Corp. and will distribute British Broadcasting Corp. news if it can find financial support. About 20 percent of APR programming is public affairs and documentaries.

Kling has a strong ally in Kenneth Dayton, whose radio begins playing classical music when the morning alarm sounds. Dayton, the retired head of Dayton Hudson Corp. and former board member of the National Council on the Arts, once worried that "the country was dividing itself into (arts) producing and consuming communities, and we could end up getting all our culture from the Kennedy and Lincoln centers. . . . I have a strong conviction that this country is too big, diverse and exciting to rely on just a few sources of production."

Dayton began talking with people about how the Twin Cities, with its wealth of artistic resources, could be "a major producer in the arts world and develop programs for the whole nation. All of a sudden Kling walks into my office and tells me about American Public Radio. I knew nothing about it. It was the vehicle by which we could distribute the exciting programs in the Twin Cities."

In 1983 Dayton became the first non-radio member of American Public Radio's board, and later its chairman. The post he has today. His enthusiasm is undiminished. "Now there's an opportunity for every community in the nation to be a producing community — a poet, a festival, a small chamber ensemble. We can tap that and more with APR."

National Public Radio produces most of its own shows. American Public Radio is a middleman between the producer (say, Minnesota Public Radio recording a performance of the Minnesota Orchestra) and the network of public stations. Although two-thirds of programing originates with a handful of stations, nearly 50 stations and independent producers contribute. American Public Radio arranges contracts with receiving stations, promotes offerings and then distributes the programs via satellite.

According to manager Rhoda Marx, American Public Radio has only 10 employees but distributes 90 hours of programming weekly. Its budget this year is \$775,000, compared to more than \$20 million for National Public Radio. The affiliated stations pay \$1,500 a year in top markets and \$1,100 in the rest. Most programs are covered by that basic charge; a few, like "A Prairie Home Companion," must be purchased separately. APR gets about half its revenue from affiliates. The rest comes from corporations and foundations.

American Public Radio was created in 1982 by Minnesota Public Radio and several other program-producing stations. A federally funded agency had sponsored a satellite and "uplink" transmission facilities at 17 locations, including Minnesota. That made satellite transmission economical. Minnesota became American Public Radio's home because of Kling's prominent role in organizing the satellite operation and because Minnesota Public Radio, unlike the other founding stations, had no potentially restrictive governmental affiliation. The first transmissions began in July 1982.

Initially a subsidiary of Minnesota Public Radio, the new nonprofit company became independent in 1983 — although Kling is president of both companies. Eric Friesen, a top Canadian Broadcasting Corp. executive, was hired last summer to direct day-to-day APR operations, and the company moved from the MPR building in October. APR is governed by a 15-person board that includes the president of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the chairman of the Lincoln Center and the treasurer of Harvard.

Marx says Minnesota Public Radio, a major producer of programs that APR distributes, is treated the same as other affiliated stations. Kling argues that public radio is best served by his market-oriented approach, in which stations vote for network service and programs with their dollars. That approach has spurred APR's growth while NPR was experiencing mismanagement and federal cutbacks. American Public Radio does not seek federal money.

American Public Radio got \$900,000 from the Ford and Mellon foundations to give to producers as seed money for new programs. Kling says the company distributes about a dozen solid programs carried by most affiliates, he'd like to see that number rise to two or three dozen. But, he notes, half a dozen major series are held up for lack of funds.

Another Kling goal is to raise the network's visibility. When most people think of public radio, they think of National Public Radio. That affects American Public Radio's ability to raise funds.

National distribution of Minnesota-produced programs not only allows events here with listeners elsewhere, but heightens the stature of the programs themselves, making it easier for organizations like the Ordway in St. Paul and the Westminster Town Hall in Minneapolis to attract leading performers or public figures.

Further, such distribution helps win underwriting support from corporations and foundations and can produce receiving-station fees that, in effect, spread production costs. Such support makes it more feasible for Minnesota Public Radio to produce ambitious programs in the first place — and thereby serve Minnesota listeners better.

Dayton points out one other contribution to Minnesota. American Public Radio — though no IM or Hillearywell — is an addition to Minnesota's vital fraternity of headquarters-companies.