

Keillor helps make for a pretty good concert

By Michael Anthony
Star Tribune Staff Writer

The news this week of Lake Wobegon came from the stage of Orchestra Hall. Garrison Keillor was the guest of VocalEssence in a concert Tuesday night that served as a benefit for the organization's education and community-partnership activities.

The concert, played to an enthusiastic, near-capacity crowd, followed the pattern of Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show in being a mix of music and Keillor's trademark humor, which itself is a mix of nostalgia and a kind of satire on that nostalgia. VocalEssence director Philip Brunelle, a longtime colleague of Keillor's, conducted the orchestra and chorus in a wide-ranging program of hymns,

Music review

carols, Christmas-related pop tunes and singalongs. Keillor presided as host, singer, tale spinner and leader of the congregation.

If there was a theme to the evening, it was a familiar one: The Christmas season is problematic. We want it to be a happy, meaningful time, but we go overboard, buying presents that no one really wants and trying to engineer the perfect Christmas, what Keillor described as "a creeping Martha Stewartization" of the holiday. In what was set up as a Christmas program at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church, Keillor strove to uncover "what is true and simple and real about Christmas."

Keillor set new words to "The 12 Days of Christmas" (among the gifts: "... five onion rings, three French fries and a Partridge Family CD"). He delivered an old Swedish-American vaudeville number, "Johnny Johnson's Christmas." In a clever piece using Bach chorales as interludes, he updated the story of Jesus' birth. Finding no room at the inn (the Econo-Lodge), Mary and Joseph, coming from Davenport, Iowa, to register for the census, end up sleeping in their Honda Civic, where Jesus is born.

Among the musical selections, Twin Cities composer Cary John Franklin's delicate setting of Donald Hall's "A Carol" drew a resonant performance from the Ensemble Singers. Joining Keillor as soloists were Lori Lewis, Jaime Nelson, Ruth Spiegel and Steve



Garrison Keillor, host of radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," was the guest of VocalEssence at a Christmas concert.

Burger. Keillor's monologue, which, presumably, is what people were waiting for, was full of unexpected detours and divagations. Suffice it to say that Cousin Bob lost his swimming trunks while hang-gliding over the Mississippi River.

Michael Anthony is at manthony@startribune.com.