

The Biscuits, orchestra did what had to be done



Star Photo by Sharee Marcus
"A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION'S" GARRISON KEILLOR
His Powdermilk Biscuit band met the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra

Reviewed by ROY M. CLOSE
Minneapolis Star Staff Writer

The faithful turned out in force Saturday evening for the second annual installment of "A Prairie Home Companion Meets the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra." There were enough of them to fill Northrop Auditorium, and they were rewarded for their loyalty with nearly three hours of highly entertaining music, talk and advertisements for a non-existent biscuit company.

"A Prairie Home Companion," for the uninitiated, is Minnesota Public Radio's Saturday evening variety show. Its host is Garrison Keillor, the upper midwest's last surviving humorist, and its regular performers include the Powdermilk Biscuit Band, a quartet that specializes in any music that can be performed by fiddle, mandolin, guitar and bass.

THE ST. PAUL Chamber Orchestra, by contrast, specializes in any music that can be performed by chamber orchestras—which is to say, almost nothing composed during the 19th century but almost everything else.

Both groups did what they do best Saturday. So did Keillor, although he also sang.

He soliloquized at length about his favorite town, Lake Wobegon, and its residents—among them, Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church. He sparred verbally with Bill Parker, the voice of Minnesota Public Radio's Sunday afternoon opera broadcasts, who had been brought on the show to lend a little high-brow class to the proceedings.

(Parker did just that when he referred to a Keillor song as an "aria for mezzo-baritone.")

THE BISCUITS, occasionally assisted by local jazz pianist-clarinetist Butch Thompson (who also played a solo or two), offered lively renditions of fiddle tunes and other American classics, including "Tennessee Choo-Choo," "War with Mexico" and the Powdermilk Biscuit Theme.

The orchestra, for its part, played excerpts from Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," the finale of a particularly playful harpsichord

sonata by Haydn (Layton James was the soloist), and works by Bartok, Bach, Handel and Cowell. Assistant conductor William McLaughlin conducted and introduced the selections.

In the main, the musical groups performed separately—when the Biscuits were onstage the orchestra was off, and vice versa—but they finally joined forces for the premiere of Minneapolis composer Libby Larsen's "Weaver's Song and Jig," a piece described as a "concerto grosso"—for orchestra and string band. It was, of course, com-

missioned for the occasion; outside of Lake Wobegon, string bands and chamber orchestras seldom fraternize.

Indeed, in Ms. Larsen's delightful little piece, they don't fraternize much. Taking her cue from the Welsh jig on which part of the composition is based, she has created a spirited duel between orchestra and band in which the two groups exchange rifts until, presumably, both are exhausted. It received a vigorous, amiable first performance.

Former Soviet repays good fortunes doubly

Reviewed by ROY M. CLOSE
Minneapolis Star Staff Writer

It was the Minnesota Orchestra's good fortune to be looking for a new principal double bassist last season when the distinguished Soviet bassist Eugene Levinson arrived in this country looking for a job.

Levinson, a member of the Leningrad Philharmonic from 1961 to 1976, also was active as a soloist and recording artist before emigrating, and in the 13 months since his arrival he has picked up where he left off.

The double bass seems an unlikely solo instrument, but yesterday Levinson gave a persuasive demonstration of its—and his—virtuosity in an Orchestra Hall recital sponsored by his new employer, the Minnesota Orchestral Association,

as part of its "Great Performers" series.

Expertly accompanied by his wife, pianist Gina Levinson, the soloist offered an ambitious, engaging program consisting of works by Henry Eccles, Beethoven, Hindemith, Bottesini, Faure, Grieg and Paganini.

Of particular interest was Hindemith's 1949 Sonata for Double Bass, another in that admirable composer's series of solo works for neglected instruments. Levinson deftly dispatched the thorniest of its technical challenges and displayed a luxuriously large, warm tone in the long middle movement, a powerful *adagio*.

Levinson and James Clute, another orchestra bassist, gave a lively, agreeable reading of Bottesini's

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