

CONCERT
PREVIEW

A PRAIRIE HOME COMPASSION

Garrison Keillor will lend his deep voice and humor to help fill the RPO's woebegone coffers

By JOHN REINAN
STAFF WRITER

The voice flows like warm maple syrup — mellow and sweet and husky. Sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a whoop, it tells us tales of places that never were — but that we wish could be.

For more than a quarter-century, Garrison Keillor has stood before a radio microphone and poured that voice into living rooms and diners and automobiles humming through the night.

Now he's hoping its golden tones will turn into real gold for the struggling Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra.

After a hiatus in Manhattan and Denmark, Keillor is back in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, once again hosting *A Prairie Home Companion* on public radio.

But it's September — time for him to get out on the road and support the orchestras of America.

Keillor and guest conductor Philip Brunelle will appear Friday and Saturday to kick off the orchestra's WPOP pops series with *A Prairie Home Symphony With Garrison Keillor*, an evening of stories and music.

"I have this little vacation I take

in September every year, when I travel around and do shows with orchestras," the golden voice explains over a staticky car phone.

(His assistant explains that

Keillor likes to give interviews while driving the 30 miles into St. Paul from his home on the St. Croix River, just over the Wisconsin border: "It saves time, and he says it's just like chatting with someone riding next to you." You know what? It is like that.)

"I love orchestras," the 53-year-old Keillor continues. "I've loved sitting and listening to them since I was a child and we schoolchildren were taken to see the Minneapolis Symphony.

"I'm also loyal to orchestras, because they're in trouble. They're scraping to meet their budgets and keep their season together and keep these wonderful musicians employed. So if I can go

KEILLOR, PAGE 6C

"I love orchestras. . . . It's easier to protect and preserve them than it is to re-create them if they're allowed to collapse."

GARRISON KEILLOR
Humorist

Playing and praying:
Keillor has a lesson
for Lutherans

By JOHN REINAN
STAFF WRITER

Should Lutherans play in an orchestra? Only after careful consideration of the moral and practical issues involved, says Garrison Keillor.

One of the humorist's most popular set pieces is a number called *The Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra*, which he'll perform during his appearance with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra this week.

"It's a rare piece, because the orchestra sounds good playing it and they laugh a lot, and it's a pretty rare thing to be able to combine both of those elements," says Keillor, who grew up in Minnesota, where Lutherans are about as numerous as Roman Catholics in Rome.

"We go through the orchestra instrument by instrument, and everybody has a chance to play and shine. And I talk about the instruments and whether they'd be suitable for a young Lutheran who wants to play in the orchestra."

As a former young Lutheran who played bass viol in an orchestra, I ask Keillor for his comments on that mainstay of the ensemble.

"The bass viol is a crucial instrument in the orchestra," he says. "Music has to be built from the bottom up."

"And yet the parts written for the bass do tend to be boring. Bass players' minds tend to wander. And what they think about back there is transportation."

"Playing the bass is sort of like playing a sofa, in a way. And what bass players are thinking is, 'How am I gonna get this thing home?'"

Classical companion

What: *A Prairie Home Symphony With Garrison Keillor*

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Friday's performance will be interpreted for the hearing-impaired.

Where: Eastman Theatre, 60 Gibbs St.

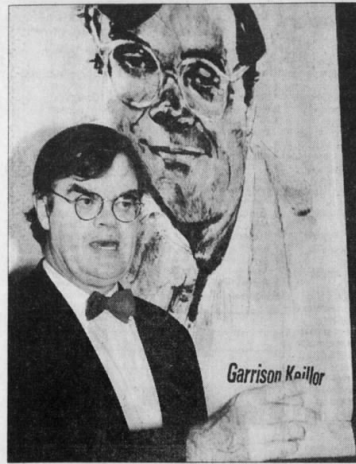
Tickets: \$10 to \$35; student and senior discounts available.

Call: Ticket Express at (716) 222-5000 or TicketMaster at (716) 232-1900

JOE IULA staff artist



6C DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE, ROCHESTER, N.Y., WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1995



Heir of the air Garrison Keillor as he was inducted last year into the Radio Hall of Fame, along with Burns and Allen.

Keillor
FROM PAGE 1C

around and do shows with orchestras and help them make money, it's a wonderful thing.

"It's a wonderful institution, and you don't want to let them fade away. It's easier to protect and preserve them than it is to recreate them if they're allowed to collapse."

Keillor is being paid an undisclosed sum for his appearance here.

Keillor's gentle humor is firmly rooted in the soil of his native Minnesota, a land of sensible Scandinavians with names like Tollefson and Swenson and Peterson. In Minnesota, you're something of an exotic if your name doesn't end in "son" or you don't like tuna-fish hot dish (and please don't call it a casserole).

He got his start in radio in 1968, a couple of years after graduating from the University of Minnesota. *A Prairie Home Companion*, which chronicles life in the mythical town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., was born in 1974 and became wildly popular, spawning a cottage industry of *PHC* paraphernalia that thrived even after Keillor killed the show in 1987.

At the time, his placid life had grown unexpectedly tumultuous. He ended a longtime relationship with a Minnesota Public Radio producer and impulsively married a high school classmate — a Danish exchange student whom he'd met again at a class reunion.

He also squabbled publicly with the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, which had angered him by printing personal information, including his home address.

So, in June 1987, *A Prairie Home Companion* said farewell after 13 years. Keillor and his new wife moved to Denmark, then later to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he continued writing best-selling books and short stories for *The New Yorker* and other magazines.

But the pull of Lake Wobegon was too strong. In 1991 he began moving back to the Twin Cities

area, and in the fall of 1993 he brought *PHC* back to life. (It can be heard locally from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturdays on WXXI-FM, 91.5.)

Now he's mended his Minnesota fences — and, in fact, he downplays the incidents that spurred him to move an ocean away.

"I feel very cheerful," he says. "I hope I have not complained about any of those things you have mentioned."

"I think they were intense but cheerful experiences. Even the quarrel with the paper was fairly cheerful. I enjoy having an argument, as long as it doesn't go too far."

At such times, he says, "You simply have to take the dark part with the cheerful. Inevitably there's loneliness and misunderstanding, but you learn to tell

yourself that it's not your fault. Just go to bed and tomorrow will be better — or, at least, different."

Keillor has been quite productive as a writer lately. His illustrated children's book, *Cut, You Better Come Home* (Penguin, \$15.99) was published this spring, and he's finishing another, *The Old Man Who Loved Cheese*.

He's also working on what he calls "a little baseball story" based on the Lake Wobegon Whippets, "who after decades as patsies and doormats have a championship season."

"It's lovely, and it's also a terrible crisis," he says. "We don't really know what to do about victory in Lake Wobegon. And there's a certain skulduggery behind it — there are gamblers who are trying to turn this to their advantage and take the good people of Lake Wobegon for a ride."

"It's sort of a Black Sox scandal imported to central Minnesota."

Mostly, though, Keillor is happy to be back behind the microphone, doing what he loves best: sending that voice out to the millions of unseen listeners who have come to depend on it as a friendly presence in a lonely world.

"We used to joke when I was younger that the show was broadcast for the shut-ins," he says. "But there really are people who are kind of cooped up — whether they're ill or they're just kind of broken people."

"People live such difficult lives — you can hardly imagine — in a world that seems utterly inhospitable. And to these people, a cheerful voice on the radio who seems to be talking to them, and

who seems to be saying something other than the weather, or the president, or O.J. Simpson — telling stories about children and about life — this is valuable to them. They don't get to hear that much."

"It all sounds very pretentious, and one shouldn't talk about this in public. But you come across people later in your life, and you're touched by the fact that you did something for them."

There's a long pause, and then the golden voice says, "Well, I have come to a stop and I'm about ready to go and pick up my dry cleaning."

Something in a sensible wool blend, no doubt. □

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GARRISON KEILLOR
Humorist

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