

Toothy grins for 'Muskrat Lullaby'

TINA GERSON/DAILY NEWS

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The stage in the assembly room at the Castelar Elementary School in Chinatown was alive with hungry alligators.

They gnashed their teeth; they waved their arms. "Very tasteful, such a treat," they sang, while their intended dinner — a muskrat, a bird, a spider and a toad — quailed fearfully.

Then Miles the Muskrat sang a lullaby. The others joined in, and, before you could say "gaping jaws" the menacing alligators all had fallen asleep. A roomful of enchanted fourth- through eighth-graders breathed a little more easily.

The first opera commissioned by the Music Center Opera Company has been making the rounds this month, enthusiastically greeted at every stop since its premiere on March 5.

Its name is "A Muskrat Lullaby," with words and music by Edward Barnes. It has been composed, not for your usual operatic first-nighters, but for schoolchildren, for their pleasure, and their participation, as well.

Barnes, who also functions as narrator and, at the piano and electronic keyboard, as half the accompanying orchestra (percussionist John Fitzgerald is the other half), drew his text from Thatcher Hurd's beloved children's book "Mama Don't Allow."

A former composition student of Vincent Persichetti at Manhattan's Juilliard School and of Peter Maxwell Davies at London's Royal Academy, Barnes made his first contact with the Music Center Opera a year ago. That's when Peter Hemmings asked him to compose a fanfare for the opening-night performance of "La Bohème."

"I don't make a specialty of composing for children," Barnes said during a break in Monday's dress rehearsal. "But I actually don't see too much difference between children's music and writing for grown-ups. If anything, the very fact that children haven't yet had a dose of grown-ups' prejudice makes it easier to write for them very freely."

The music for "Muskrat Lullaby" bears him out. While nobody will confuse this score with, say, Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," there is a nice sense of variety in this 20-minute piece, including an impressive stylistic sweep from rap to Rachmaninoff, that kept Monday's full house of 10- to 12-year-olds enthralled and amused.

Part of that audience had been pressed into more active roles during the two months of preparation that preceded the actual perfor-



Alligator Gang surrounds "A Muskrat Lullaby" creator Edward Barnes at Castelar Elementary School.

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mance. In all, the piece calls for five professional singers: Greg Fedderley, recently in the Music Center Opera's "Falstaff" and now cast as the muskrat; Dale Wendel; Stephanie Vlahos and Wayne Shepherd as his pals; and Richard Bernstein as the evil boss of the alligators. But Barnes has also left some big open holes for audience participation.

At one point, the muskrat and his friends have gone off to find a rehearsal space for their singing act. Maybe the public library? "Not here, we're reading," came the massive shout from out in the darkened auditorium. The bowling alley? "Not here, we're bowling!" came another answering shout. "Take that music to the swamp," another choral group yelled, which is how our heroes came up against the hungry Alligator Gang.

And at the end, when the singers have returned from their victory over the Alligator Gang, the out-front chorus, readers and bowl-

ers both, joined in on their triumphal song.

In all, "Muskrat Lullaby" will be staged at 15 Los Angeles area elementary schools during its run. It continues through Thursday at the Cabrillo School in San Pedro and the Russell School downtown and resumes again for a week in mid-May.

(The opera's last performance at a San Fernando Valley school was Tuesday at Gledhill Street School in Sepulveda. Its next performance in the area will be May 14 at Wonderland Avenue School in Laurel Canyon. Note, however, that these performances are open only to students at the particular schools and not to the general public.)

Under the direction of Music Center Opera education coordinator Llewellyn Crain, each school was supplied with a complete brochure, describing the opera and outlining suggested related study topics. And each school, of course, had worked up its own chorus of

alligators, readers and bowlers.

"All of the schools set their kids to work making their own alligator masks and other props for their performances," Crain said. "In addition, most of the schools had teachers who could give the children a little background on opera. At least one school I know of, the science teacher put together a whole course about alligators, muskrats and other swamp animals."

In all, by conservative estimate, close to 1,800 Los Angeles schoolchildren will undergo metamorphosis this season into muskrat-eating alligators, with 1,800 green alligator masks as proof.

It was performance time at Castelar, and the well-behaved juvenile horde crammed itself into every square inch of floor space. Dozens of the children proudly sported the green alligator masks they had made in the past few weeks. Others waved make-believe tambourines, paper plates glued together with fringes that undulated colorfully but, praise be, silently.

"Good afternoon, boys and girls," called the unflappable Crain. "Today we're all going to see an opera. Can anyone tell me what an opera is?"

"It's a play," came a voice from down front.

"Yes, it's a play, but there's something different. Who can tell me what's different?"

"There's singing!" chorused the crowd.

And there certainly was.