



CASSEY COHEN / Los Angeles Times

The "animals"—members of the L.A. Music Center Opera—get into the swing of things.

A Hip Opera

■ **Education:** The L.A. Music Center Opera created 'A Muskrat Lullaby' project for area grade schools. Students and teachers are singing its praises.

By BARBARA KOH
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Opera, generally thought of as the entertainment of the evening gown and tuxedo set, is coming to the Bart Simpson and L.A. Gear set.

Under the guidance of professionals from the Los Angeles Music Center Opera, grade-school students throughout the county are learning to slither like alligators, play the drums on trash-can contraptions and sing heartily in the chorus of a children's opera.

After five weeks of training, they will unveil the opera, "A Muskrat Lullaby," on their school stage, sharing the spotlight with professional singers.

At a recent dress rehearsal at Grand View Boulevard School in Mar Vista, the children, who play alligators and muskrats, went through the score and blocking—their movements on stage—in preparation for that afternoon's performance. Location director Paul King ordered the gators to stay low to the ground and act less polite and more "snarly."



Jason Clouse, a fourth-grader, waits for his cues as he prepares to play his can drum set.

The opera involves about 120 youngsters in the fourth through sixth grades. Several of the children had seen Mozart's "The Magic Flute" or Oliver Knussen and Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are" on field trips last year.

But before the "Muskrat Lullaby" project, most had no idea what opera was. And if they did have an opinion about opera, teacher Brenda Richards said, it was that it was weird or boring.

"You hear all these notes, and you don't know what they're saying," Richards recalled her fourth-graders saying.

"Even for adults," added director King, the stereotype is that opera is "a bunch of fat ladies on stage singing." The opera company's school

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Opera singer Richard Bernstein, the villainous Boss Alligator, rehearses with the students.

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program, he said, aims to leave children with "their first memory of opera [as] something they participated in."

With the L.A. Music Center Opera team, a school production is not a casual undertaking. They conduct workshops in which the children sing musical scales, learn creative dramatics and acquire a basic music vocabulary. Such people as Llewellyn Crain, manager of the opera's education and community programs, and opera docents explain opera and teach lines and cues. Composer and librettist Edward Barnes and percussionist John Fitzgerald lead rehearsals and talk about their jobs.

"It was pretty hard to learn how to breathe in the first lesson," said muskrat Hailey Singh—that is, inhale through the nose, exhale from the mouth.

She and other students said they had been teased by some classmates about being in the opera and wearing handmade animal masks. "They think it's for wimps, they think it's dumb, because you're singing," Hailey said.

But opera has caught on, teachers said. At recess, "[students will] sing. 'Will you throw the ball to me?'" Richards said.

Eight of the children play in a percussion band on instruments they built themselves under Fitzgerald's guidance. Among the instruments are a drum made of three aluminum cans hanging inside a box, a "zipper guitar" made of a dowel and a metal spring strung between a garbage can and a coffee can, and glass canning jars filled with water and played with pencils with new erasers.

They are "junk instruments—easily made, easily repaired," Fitzgerald said. They were all built in less than an hour.

Playing them, however, took some practice, the youngsters said. "You have to keep track, look at the teacher, [and know] your instrument," said aluminum can drummer Jason Clouse, 9.

In addition to the unusual instruments, "Muskrat Lullaby" has elements of Charleston, salsa, rock 'n' roll and rap. "The style is . . . accessible and entertaining," said Crain. "more like Sondheim than like Puccini."

"We wanted kids to feel it was real hip, real cool," she said.

No matter that the children don't exactly achieve *bel canto*. "We don't care how good they sound," Crain said. "Most important to us is that they understand this process" of creating an opera and they are coaxed "out of their shells or their everyday world."



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"Muskrat Lullaby" composer Edward Barnes coaxes the students to sing with more enthusiasm.

So it helps that "Muskrat Lullaby," which is based on the book "Mama Don't Allow" by Thacher Hurd, is set in a swamp. The plot is simple: A singing group consisting of Miles the Muskrat and three other animals (played by members of L.A. Opera's resident company) goes to the swamp to practice. They are nearly eaten by a gang of alligators, but they sing themselves to safety by crooning a lullaby and putting the 'gators to sleep.

There's a moral, of course: "The singing group uses music and cooperation to get themselves out of this predicament," Crain said.

The student performers say

they've been learning that along the way. Fourth-grader and alligator Claudia Marroquin said she liked working with her classmates, but she added that it's difficult at times because "some people don't listen, and they screw it up."

The "Muskrat Lullaby" program, started in March, is the brainchild of general director Peter Hemmings, who ran a similar project when he led Scottish Opera. The program is financed by government agencies and private foundations and costs about \$2,300 per school, with the school chipping in \$600. By the end of this month, "Muskrat Lullaby" will

have traveled to 29 schools in the county.

The opera company is so pleased with the way the program has gone that it is developing a similar program for junior high and high schools, Crain said.

On performance day at Grand View, 11 people from the opera company took part, including the singers and technical crew. They brought costumes, a few props, conga drums, slide whistles and other instruments. The big star, from the children's standpoint, was bass-baritone Richard Bernstein, who played the role of the alligator boss, dressed in top hat, black

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coattails with green jewels and metallic green pants.

The student alligators and muskrats seemed dazzled by the show even as they were in it. Accompanying composer Barnes on keyboards and Fitzgerald on drums, the sounds of the children's percussion band—the *boing* of the spring, *think* of the garbage can, *ticktock* of the aluminum cans and *plock* of the canning jar tops—were amazingly melodic.

Barnes said he was delighted at the way the youngsters shed their shyness as the 20-minute performance progressed. "They learn the value of being a ham on stage," he said.

The audience of about 200 students first whooped and giggled but were soon entranced. The alligators popped up out of character occasionally and the band missed a few beats, but they were given a chorus of bravos.

"It was fun," said a breathless Laura Farahat, 9, who dressed for her part in apple-green turtleneck and stretch pants.

The performance is over now, but it's not the finale of "Lullaby" yet. Waiting back in the classroom, said Richards and other teachers, are science experiments on the sounds of liquid-filled jars, assignments to write reports on muskrats and other animals—and tapes of Puccini.