

opera

REVIEWS

By BARBARA LOCKARD-ZIMMERMAN, editor

A MUSKRAT LULLABY

Book and Music: Edward Barnes

Publisher: MMB Music, Inc.
11370 Page Industrial Boulevard
St. Louis, MO 63132

Cast: 1 tenor, 1 mezzo, 1 soprano, 1 baritone,
1 bass baritone, 2 choruses of school
students, 1 narrator as piano/conductor

Synopsis: *A Muskrat Lullaby*, the story of a muskrat, spider, bird and toad who form a singing group, features a multiplicity of music forms, including jazz and rap. When they go to the swamp to practice, the creatures are almost eaten by a group of alligators but manage to escape by putting the gators to sleep with a lullaby.

If you have done Ecology last year as my students who are teaching tell me they did, then have "I got an opera for you!"

Just add an apple-green turtleneck and stretch pants to your students' required list, or better still, make it alligator green.

I mean, any grade school music teacher worth her salary will want to produce *The Muskrat Lullaby* before the school year is over.

Your students will fight over the alligator parts. "It's cool."

I gather this kind of enthusiastic, unsophisticated and honest response has been the norm for the southern California and "submitted" to the foresight of the Los Angeles Music Center Education program last year.

Edward Barnes' opera is only twenty minutes long. In that short time we meet the Muskrat quartet, in town, and the Alligator Gang, at the River.

An opera that begins with a tenor vocalizing could of course have its drawbacks.

People might just get up and leave!

But showing the novice that practice is neces-

sary to sing well (or play ball well) is just one of the many lessons in this work.

The Quartet — no place to rehearse or perform. Friends and faces are indifferent to the Arts.

These points, along with the Gators' greed for food for the body and not the soul, should nudge those who do not believe in Arts in the schools — or in life.

The set could be portable, but as envisioned for your school with your homemade props and musical instruments "could be work, but fun."

Costumes go with the casting colors: a tenor muskrat, a bass baritone toad (Hmmm!), a mezzo spider, a soprano bird, and a baritone alligator. Use your own imagination and bits of cloth.

Two choruses are needed: alligators and regular people.

Costumes created from feathers, cotton tubing for extra arms, and basic tights and turtlenecks will do fine.

You don't need Sendak monsters or Disney lookalikes.

The California students made instruments: old cans and old lids, liquid-filled jars and pencils

continued on page 22

and erasers. Some of the props for the Gator Ball were copies from home kitchens but oversized and cardboard, like salt and pepper shakers and barbecue-sauce bottles.

You see, the Muskrat Quartet, finding themselves unwelcomed in the parking lot, the playground and other places at home, accept the kind invitation to the Gator Ball to sing and eat after the guests. (They sing a lot!)

Of course, their singing has many styles in Manhattan Transfer form, swing, honkytonk, Boogie Blues, Rock salsa and Rap as the alligators join in.

All the performing leaves them very hungry, but the alligators are hungrier and they have brought their own condiments.

Well, you don't need a B.A. to guess the rest of the plot, even if the Gators do. Boss Alligator — a Mephistopheles amphibian — has concocted this evil plan so that he can feed his gang.

The plot is defeated when Muskrat suggests, "Just one more song" and then begins a lullaby. The other three join him.

The alligators fall asleep, and the musicians escape to home and sweet dreams.

These five parts are interesting as acting vehicles as well as being interesting vocally.

I would like to hear trained voices in these roles as presented on the demo.

The music, however, is so pleasing — to say

nothing of the sheer energy emanating from the rhythmic contrasts and styles.

The score lists the narrator as a character played by the piano conductor.

I assume that Barnes' voice is the speaker on the demo.

Perhaps you might use a separate person for this role — a non-singer, even — and give your pianist time to concentrate on the music.

At any rate, the story is narrated and would lend itself to television with fade-ins and -outs.

The lyrical 38-measure title song, complete with vocalize-type backup trio, is beautifully set for the tenor voice and fits the one-aria-opera category that was the popular format for introducing children to opera in recent years.

The work uses all the voices favorably, but the piano-orchestra is as interesting as the vocal lines. The work has a very positive message and is a delight to hear.

Performing groups from your college or professional groups should love to share with your children in the performance of this work.

Besides working on materials for the show, the students could perform their music with ease, and the added aspect of big folks singing well but looking like these animals should keep their interest throughout rehearsals.

(LISZT to do today: Call MMB, Order green turtlenecks, Collect jars and cardboard.)