

**review:**

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**Kathryn Marsh (2008). *The Musical Playground. Global Traditions and Change in Children's Songs and Games*. New York: Oxford University Press; ISBN 978-0-19-530897-6; \$29.95**

At present the research in German speaking countries studies on the acquisition of and the dealing with music in informal context are rare to find. Only a few studies mainly in the field of popular music have been conducted (Rosenbrock 2006 for instance) and they demonstrate the complexity of acquisition processes – and the difficulties of related research.

Already in 2008 the documentation of a comprehensive research project was published that can be assigned as well to comparative or general music education as to ethnomusicology. Australian Kathryn Marsh, professor at the Sydney Conservatory of Music collected children's songs and games in Australia, the USA, South Korea, Great Britain and Norway, visiting the "informal contexts" of playgrounds. Documented are more than 2000 Songs stemming from 333 Places – a gigantic collection. The author is moving in this field with astonishing easiness.

Marsh follows the goal "to investigate the processes of continuity and change" (p. 18). Another focus lays upon the structure of creative processes. Here Marsh finds a starting point for reflections regarding music education. Considering the importance of composition as part of general music education in Great Britain and Australia this may be obvious. In other countries, especially in Germany, this is a stimulating and potentially fruitful thought.

In a research project of so many years one cannot count on a continuing, a priori theoretically grounded approach. Indeed, Marsh points out that the method has (in spite of her reflexivity and her dealing with research literature) developed only over the years (p. 43). The nature of the study object had guided her: the children's folklore would not fit the consequent, seamless und smooth. Creative instants that grow out of the situation and may partly be due to the joy of breaking rules, are therefore correctly documented. This mirrors the sincerity that the author brings forward to the children as partners in the research process

– an attitude also to be found with Peter Ruehmkorf (1967) who in contrast to Marsh did not want to do document meeting scientific standards.

Two extensive chapters present the results. One is dedicated to the processes of "transmission" on the playground. By presenting many vivid examples Marsh shows how flexible (and most of the time: sensitive) children pass on singing games. Younger ones learn from older ones, novices from skilled singers, children with migration background from native ones – and vice versa. A special quality stems from the fact that Marsh does not file the material according to formal categories as this was the case in earlier times by ethnomusicologists. Instead, Marsh asks for the context: To what degree are boys included? Are patterns of exclusion to be found? Especially where staff in schools includes these games and encourages children to play these there seems to be a potential of integration and enrichment. And even if the musical playground is more of a girl's domain it is not exclusively theirs. Rather Marsh numerous examples where boys, too take part as equal partners, joyfully and creative. And again and again she demonstrates how flexible and socially adequate children act in the games and in their transmission.

Another 100 pages are dedicated to creative processes. Especially interesting is that not only traditional games are handed on but that also new ones are adapted or generated. On a Korean school yard a case is documented where new movements are found accompanying a song from a TV series. Other examples show adaptations of video-clips and repeatedly acculturated songs and games of children from other ethnic communities or countries. If one follows Marsh's idea the borders between traditional and mass media related games blurr: here and there creative elements of interaction get visible. "Children's dialectical relationship with the media results in cycles of appropriation and reappropriation whereby material derived from the media is appropriated for play purposes" (p. 181).

Marsh finds examples of purposeful, aesthetically motivated inventions she rightfully titles "compositions". Different from Swanwick and Tillman (1986) who saw children's compositions as mirrors of processes of development she describes situations where children try out in a "childlike" manner and follow typically "youthlike" strategies of shaping embedded in communication of evaluating and valuing: apparently improvisation and composition go hand in hand. Taking the worldwide existing song of *Sar Macka Dora* that was already documented by Segler in 1990. Marsh analyzes in detail the dealing with the musical, textual and rhythmical material as well as with patterns of movements.

The volume focuses in different ways. Horizontally she compares between setting in different countries, vertically she is interested in processes of change stemming from migration and changing mass media reception, but also the creative elements in oral transmission as mentioned above.

From the point of view of a music educator the closing chapter is of specific interest when Marsh asks for implications. From a German perspective the potential is fascinating that rests in the verses and games. Marsh stresses their complexity that exceed by far the

requirements that are supposedly adept to children. A pedagogic reduction drastically labeled "systematic impoverishment" (p. 309) and advocated sometimes following Gordon's and Gruhn's ideas does apparently not mirror the children's practice who are in addition able to reflect the "material" and the "practice". From an educational point of view it is interesting that the schoolyard's practice mirrors progressive ideas such as learning in different cohorts, strengthening group identity, integration of ethnic minorities etc.

What makes this easy to read – in spite of its size and the precision of the ethnographer for instance in the description of rhythms – is of course the style that is in comparison to Germany in anglosaxon countries still more fluid, its broad scope that changes from describing melodic scales to voice characterization to media (p. 283); and, of course, the magnificent 100 page appendix documenting places and transcriptions, a fine register and a large biography. Furthermore, many examples many videos are accessible on the publishing company's homepage. Downloading some examples one understands what attractiveness comes from the games and songs, how much creativity is sedimented in them and what virtuosity comes with some of them.

## Literature

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