The Musical Playground: Global Tradition and Change in Children’s Songs and Games
Kathryn Marsh

In The Musical Playground, ethnomusicologist Kathryn Marsh issues a challenge to educators, music teachers, and all adults invested in the creative development of children, to question long-held, entrenched assumptions and beliefs about children’s musical development, metacognitive abilities, and creativity and the importance of play. Marsh believes that the pervasive distinction between the playground and the classroom has had a negative effect on the full development of the creative potential of children and has resulted from adult-centered perceptions of child development that have created theoretical blinders. She presents a compelling case in general for taking the play of children seriously and in particular for recognizing the creative, cognitive, linguistic, and kinesthetic complexities of children’s spontaneous musical play from all over the world. As evidence for her argument, Marsh presents carefully observed, documented, and analyzed data from her fifteen-year, cross-cultural study of children’s musical play in schools both urban and rural from remote locations in Australia to sites in the United Kingdom, Norway, the United States, and South Korea.

Marsh explores the musical play of children at school by focusing on playground singing games and chants that involve the interrelated elements of melody, rhythm, text, and movement. These games are learned and taught by children themselves, and through Marsh’s meticulous field work in oral transmission, she traces both the conservation of particular patterns and the constant transformation and innovation of text, music, and movement. The book is directed toward music educators and ethnomusicologists, and Marsh begins by discussing the dominant theories regarding children’s musical play and musical creativity, casting a cold eye toward such theories and adult perceptions about the musical play of children in general.

In music education, two major theorists provided the philosophical and pedagogical framework for much of the twentieth-century. Western musical education (including most state music standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade in the United States) fell under the purview of either Carl Orff or Zoltan Kodaly. Marsh details major tenets of both systems and emphasizes that both rely on the simplicity of rhythm, melody, and movement in children’s music making. She provides an overview of literature critiquing these theories that draws attention to both the complexity of children’s musical play and the disconnect between music as taught in the classroom and music made spontaneously by children, as well as music to which they are exposed through the media outside of the classroom.

Ethnomusicological research and studies of children’s playlore, Marsh says, also have limitations. For example, the lack of cross-cultural research and the fact that most studies are geographically specific
means that so-called “universals” are often
generalized from those specific contexts.

Finally, with regard to children’s musical
creativity, Marsh states that although
there has been strong and growing interest
in children’s innate musical creativity, few studies have focused specifically
on children’s spontaneous play. In addition, most theories posit a developmental
“stage theory” that puts the more complex,
metacognitive creative processes at much
older ages than many current researchers,
including Marsh. Marsh argues for going
directly to the playground to observe and
record games and the variations and trans-
formations of those games over a period
of years.

In the over three hundred pages that
make up the substance of the book, Marsh
discusses the methodology she used in
her fieldwork, as well as the philosophi-
cal, ethical, and practical issues of being
a researcher, observer, and participant in
various cultural settings. She then meticu-
lously documents the influence of social
groups, the media, and the classroom
on playground singing games and the
impact of ethnicity, gender, and age on
the teaching and learning of the games.
Throughout, she offers examples of music,
handclapping, movements, and text from
each school, ultimately producing a body
of evidence that shows the complexity of
the creative process in children as young
as six.

To supplement the description of the
data, she provides a thorough index of
the singing-game genres in each site over
fourteen years and a detailed index of mu-
sical and movement notation as well as se-
lected musical transcriptions of the games
described in the text. In addition, she in-
dicates where video clips of the games she
describes can be found on the companion
Web site.

Ultimately, Marsh’s analysis of play-
ground singing games provides incont-
rovertible evidence that, contrary to
notions of the assumed simplicity of
young children, children’s musical cre-
ative play consists of complex, subjective,
and collaborative improvisations, ones
that involves a combination of tacitly un-
derstood rules or constraints, memorized
words rhythms, and movements—and
variations on them—in performances
composed dynamically in the moment,
then changed over time.

This clearly written, detailed, and so-
phapsicated work is a major contribution
to the field of ethnomusicology; however,
Marsh’s findings also have extremely
important practical implications for
music-education pedagogy, curriculum,
standards, and assessment, as well as to
the field of play research.

Marsh challenges educators to ques-
tion inherited preconceptions and as-
sumptions that are outdated and limiting
and to pay attention to and learn from
children’s play, thereby enabling them to
incorporate aspects of what occurs sponta-
neously on the playground or while wait-
ing in line into ways of learning, playing,
and thinking in the classroom.

—Victoria Stevens, California Institute of
the Arts, Valencia, CA