

## BOOK REVIEW

*To Create: Imagining the Good Life through Music* by Clint Randles. GIA Publications, 2020. 328pp., pbk, £20.99, ISBN: 978-1622774548.  
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From the outset of *To Create: Imagining the Good Life through Music*, Clint Randles makes clear that this book is ‘not for music or music education, but for *everyone* from the perspective of music and music education’ (p. 17, my emphasis). His aim is that, through conceptualising creativity in relation to his own life in music and music education, the reader ‘will be better able to create in [their own] domain’ (p. 45). Over nine chapters, he conceptualises the Person, Process, Press, Product, Position model of creativity using his original driving analogy (Chapter 1), in relation to spirituality, imagination and individual and socio-cultural creativity (Chapter 4), and alongside heroic narratives from comparative mythology (Chapter 5). Interspersed within this conceptualisation are a description of Randles’ personal creative identity (Chapter 2), examples of creative performance in the music classroom (Chapters 3 and 7) and stories of creativity in the lives of professional musicians and music teachers (Chapters 6 and 8).

Reading this book from the perspective of music education was, to some extent, rather disorienting. On the one hand, I was curious to read about Randles’ research into musical creativity and its potential applications in the music classroom. On the other hand, I wanted to consider the question he poses: ‘can this book be practical, not just for scholars and researchers?’ (p. 25). How might (or might not) his ideas be relevant when I next embark on a knitting project, or tend to my garden, or rehearse with an ad hoc chamber ensemble? I therefore want to address these two perspectives in turn. First, what is the place of *To Create* in music and music education scholarship? And second, to what extent does it successfully speak into other creative domains?

Despite Randles’ background in music education scholarship, *To Create* is not intended as an academic publication. Though it has a comprehensive bibliography, there are no in-text references and few footnotes. Nonetheless, to the discerning reader, there are clear links between Randles’ descriptions of the creative music classroom and the principles of autonomy, experimentation, dialogue and ownership that are well-established in complementary literature on the child-centred progressive tradition (e.g., Finney, 2011). There are also important associations with seminal music education research in creativity (e.g., Burnard, 2012) and eudaimonia—the good or flourishing life (e.g., Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Randles’ overarching premise is that understanding and appreciating creativity in the (small-scale) context of music making can help foster the experience of eudaimonia through living ‘in tune’ with our (large-scale) social and environmental surroundings (p. 45).

However, in his attempt to marry existing conceptualisations of creativity and eudaimonia with the aforementioned driving analogy and heroic narratives, Randles overlooks some important aspects of contemporary music education research. For example, in Chapter 3, he compares creative chamber ensemble learning to driving a car and sets it in opposition to the ‘bus tour’ of large ensemble, classroom-based learning (pp. 94–95). Though he does acknowledge some nuance in both driving and touring scenarios (the probable chaos of everyone driving all the time, and the enjoyment of being taken on a tour), this stark dichotomy potentially diminishes readers’ understandings of creativity by not accounting for creative processes in large-ensemble or teacher-directed classrooms. Similar issues are evident in Chapter 7. In depicting the ‘hero collective’ of music education as those who embrace the challenge to recognise more diverse modes of music making than the traditional, notation-based modes that typically dominate classroom teaching (p. 165), Randles claims that ‘extreme promoters of read-from-notation-only music making

act as the *villains* of the story. These people stand in opposition to the hero in his or her quest' (p. 256, my emphasis). Not only does this imply that some kinds of music making should be valued more highly than others, but it risks vilifying scholars who are beginning to raise awareness of the potential pitfalls of critical, emancipatory and progressive approaches to music education (e.g., Hess, 2017; Niknafs, 2021). Albeit grounded in Joseph Campbell's significant work in comparative mythology, this hero–villain, progressive–traditional dualism perhaps attributes too much importance to the transformative potential of creative music education, sustaining a harmful 'hero syndrome' rather than a helpful heroic narrative.

Randles' framework of heroism could also come across as problematic in other domains of creativity. I struggled to imagine how beginning a new knitting project might involve an inherent sense of danger or adventure or how choosing new perennials to plant in the garden would mean facing enemies in battle (bar slugs); or how playing with an ad hoc chamber ensemble could present anything resembling 'the elixir of life' (p. 163) to those who happen to overhear the rehearsal. Likewise, I felt that drawing on the life stories of professional musicians (U2, Jack White and John Coltrane) in Chapter 6 potentially overemphasised the importance of transformative socio-cultural creativity over the reward of humble individual creativity. Although Randles highlights these musicians' humble beginnings, there is a sense that their exceptional experiences are far-removed from those that the average reader may encounter in their own creative endeavours.

Nevertheless, these issues aside, I found that the final three chapters of *To Create* gradually began to unify the previously disparate themes of music education, comparative mythology, spirituality and creativity. Randles avoids further perpetuating a music education hero syndrome by drawing on his own testimony as a Christian to explain how 'sacrifice is the true qualifier of a hero' (p. 297). He highlights how creativity should be a pathway towards eudaimonia both for oneself and for the benefit of others (p. 239). In this regard, the creative music classroom—chaotic, caring, vulnerable, experimental and exhausting (pp. 270–291)—is an invaluable microcosm of how creativity and its associated self-sacrificial spirituality can contribute to navigating the rest of life. This, I believe, is where this book stands out. Randles' rich depiction of teachers and students encouraging each other to realise new visions is a refreshing reminder that even when music education falls short of any heroic calling, the music classroom remains a gateway to numerous challenging and enriching creative encounters.

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