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To Create: Imagining the Good Life Through Music A Review Essay

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Abstract

Clint Randles' *To create: Imagining the good life through music* (2020) explores notions of creativity and eudaimonia from the perspective of music and music education. Drawing from several sources, including personal accounts, ancient Chinese philosophy, and the life stories of several musicians, the author argues that we are truly happiest when we create. The book comprises nine chapters, which are organized into three parts: "Life, Music, and the Pursuit of Happiness," "Making Sense of Creativity," and "Positioning Ourselves for a Better Tomorrow." The topic is timely among the burgeoning area of research exploring creativity and eudaimonia in education, and is wholly pertinent to general readers, academics, musicians, and music educators.

Music educators, and indeed educators in any artistic discipline, teach students to create and facilitate their engagement in creative activities. However, while an educator may effectively teach a student to interpret J. S. Bach's "Prelude in C Major" or to improvise over George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," the necessity and value of these creative experiences is unclear. This raises several pertinent questions for arts educators. Is it important that students create and are creative? Is it important that educators create and are creative? Is it important that anyone create and be creative? If so, how might we create and experience creativity more frequently? How might we get the most out of creating and creative experiences?

These questions appear to be emerging at the forefront of current education research, and perhaps most prominently in music education research. Work by Burnard (2012), for instance, has explored creativity in musical performance and emphasizes music education's central role in facilitating and developing the performing musician's creative ability. More recently, Rink et al. (2017) investigated whether performing musicians consider creativity an essential element of their artistry, and how different educational practices and methods might encourage their creative development. An emerging theme in Rink et al.'s (2017) findings suggests that musicians' creative ability continually develops through various experiences and relationships, and that this development is typically "complex and far from linear" (p. xxvii). Similarly, research by Odena (2018) suggests that a creative approach to educational practice might best facilitate musical development. While these texts offer readers and scholars in-depth accounts and overviews of creativity in the context of music performance and music education, their narrow research focus and academic narratives arguably limit their appeal to music scholars, music educators, and performing musicians. They do not offer general readers an accessible and applicable text on musical creativity's necessity and value.

Clint Randles' (2020) *To Create: Imagining the Good Life Through Music* is, therefore, a welcome addition to the burgeoning area of research and literature exploring creativity and Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia, or "the good life," in education. The book explores creativity through the perspective of music and music education, and argues that, "people in many ways need to create and are happiest when they are doing so" (Randles, 2020, p. 122). Although the book speaks most directly to musicians and music educators, it is intended – and, in my view, wholly pertinent – for general readers interested in understanding, pursuing, and practicing creativity in their specific field of expertise and, consequently, living "the good life." The author notably draws from a range of sources and experiences, including the author's first-hand experiences, current theories and definitions of creativity, the I Ching, and several musicians' life stories. These various sources are woven together and supplemented by analogies, all of which help articulate the author's understanding of the relationship between creativity and "the good life."

Randles' book comprises three parts. The first part, "Life, Music, and the Pursuit of Happiness," consists of three chapters. Within the first chapter, the author introduces the book's core ideas and presents his particular framework for understanding creativity, eudaimonia, and the link between the two. In the second and third chapters of this section, Randles (2020) unveils the "narrative arc" (p. 83) underpinning his experiences of creativity and eudaimonia in his professional life. This is achieved through enjoyable personal stories

and accounts of creativity shared by and of the author, intended to help readers relate the book's specific content to potential avenues of creativity and, consequentially, eudaimonia, in their own lives.

The book's second part, similarly comprising three chapters, shifts focus to "Making Sense of Creativity." In chapter four, the author draws from current research literature on creativity to define and discuss creativity more generally. Randles particularly expands on Rhodes' (1961) *Four-P* framework – product, person, process, and press – adding the concept of 'position', which comprises identity, spirituality, and imagination (Randles, 2020, p. 144). The author then draws from Campbell's (2008) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Vogler's (2007) *The Writer's Journey* in chapter five, drawing parallels between the pursuit of creativity and "the hero's journey" (Randles, 2020, p. 163). Chapter six concludes part two by illustrating the book's key themes and ideas through the lives of the band members of U2, Jack White, and John Coltrane.

The book's final section, "Positioning Ourselves for a Better Tomorrow," provides an overview of creativity and eudaimonia within music and music education contexts. In chapter seven, the author considers how musical performance and music education might facilitate creativity, how being creative might be considered 'good,' and how the pursuit of creativity through music and music education might lead individuals to the good life. Chapter eight continues by expanding on the argument made in the previous chapter, suggesting that we might position ourselves to take full advantage of our creativity and live the good life through an examination of music educators whose primary objective is to facilitate and encourage students' creativity. Finally, chapter nine draws the book's various ideas together, and issues readers with a call to create.

Three concepts are particularly unique to this book, and expand on current research literature on creativity. These are Randles' notions of position, the "driving analogy" (p. 35), and the importance of spirituality. The first notion, 'position,' expands on Rhodes' (1961) *Four-P* framework as mentioned above. For Randles (2020), position "encompasses our creative identities, where our dispositions toward specific areas of creativity and our particular self-efficacies for completing specific creative tasks lie" (p. 128). While this term appears to overlap with Rhodes' notions of 'person' and 'press,' Randles introduces the term to highlight how we each have the choice to create, to be creative, and to experience eudaimonia within our individual personal and professional contexts. The term, therefore, may help readers to better understand their unique 'position' to be creative and experience eudaimonia.

Randles' second notion is his driving analogy, which parallels creativity with a figurative road trip. In this analogy, we are 'drivers,' with agency over where we are going, how we are going to get there, and how we approach the choices we face while on the journey. For Randles (2021), the driving analogy emphasizes how we "create our circumstances by carefully considering the roads we drive in our creative lives" (p. 40). This analogy's strength lies not only in its ability to assist readers' understanding of creativity, but also in its affinity to 'the hero's journey' as delineated by Campbell (2008). Randles' analogy may not only be useful for conceptualizing creativity in a new way, but also effective in facilitating readers' ability to

perceive how they might create and be creative in their personal and professional life, and, hopefully, take a step closer to living ‘the good life.’

Randles’ third notion is the role spirituality plays in our ability to create and experience eudaimonia. When describing spirituality, the author argues that, “[s]pirituality is something that is part of who we are and how we perceive ourselves in relation to the big questions in life” (Randles, 2020, p. 41). The author then grounds this notion by discussing the role of spirituality in his life and the lives of several musicians, most comprehensively so in chapter 6. Although I found considerable resonance with this notion, the author’s experience provides the book with its only primary source material. While the notion is effective and logically coherent, the argument’s credibility might have been boosted if it was supplemented by phenomenological accounts of other established creative musicians and/or music educators. Indeed, Randles suggests that readers “suspend judgement” (p. 42) on several occasions throughout the book, a caveat which might have been avoided with additional primary source material. To the author’s credit, the bold ideas presented in the book may require some readers to temporarily suspend judgement – an act of creativity noted by the author at the end of chapter one. Contemplating these ideas may allow readers to share the “elixir” (p. 170), the reward earned by overcoming a journey’s unique trials and struggles, found by Randles and presented in this book.

While the book draws on contemporary definitions and research on creativity, the topic is discussed from the author’s distinct perspective and experiences of creativity throughout his professional and personal life. The author’s definition and driving analogy of creativity were, therefore, inevitably repeated throughout the book¹, and may be experienced as superfluous or repetitive by some readers. However, this repetitive presentation may provide others (perhaps more general readers) with a more nuanced and complete understanding of creativity. The book might also have profited from a more comprehensive overview of the current literature on creativity, including, for instance, research on creativity and constraints or collaborative creativity. Nevertheless, the author succeeds in producing an accessible and original text which is perceptively rooted in present understandings of creativity. This is an enjoyable, original, fast-paced and captivating book, offering general readers, music educators, musicians, and researchers an accessible and unique guide to achieving eudaimonia through a creative engagement with music.

¹ Indeed, many texts on creativity include definitions and elaborate explanations of what it is. This is arguably a consequence of established superficial or deficient preconceptions surrounding the term (Frith, 2012; Novak-Leonard et al., 2021).

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