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Music Teacher as Music Producer: How to Turn Your Classroom into a Center for Musical Creativities: A Review Essay

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Abstract

Music education in the United States has expanded greatly in the 21st century. Modern band is one initiative in popular music education gaining momentum in PK–12 schools. In this essay, I review *Music Teacher as Music Producer: How to Turn Your Classroom into a Center for Musical Creativities* by Clint Randles, a book focused on creating, performing, and recording students' music in modern band settings.

Course offerings in music education have expanded greatly in the 21st century. Many teachers today are finding ways to include popular music in the curriculum and move beyond traditional general music and large ensemble classes that often focus on Western art music (Kratus, 2007). Modern band is one initiative in popular music education gaining momentum in PK–12 schools (Clauhs & Powell, 2021). This movement began in 1994 when David Wish, a first grade English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at Hawes Elementary School in East Palo Alto, California, began teaching guitar to his class to compensate for the lack of full-time music instruction in the building. Students throughout the school took an interest in Wish’s guitar instruction. In addition to learning the instrument, Wish’s students were writing their own songs and recording them onto CDs. He sold these CDs to raise money to buy additional guitars for the growing number of students in the program. By 1999, Wish was teaching guitar classes before and after school and during lunch. Recognizing the potential to expand guitar instruction to other schools, Wish left PK–12 teaching in 2001 and established Little Kids Rock (LKR) the following year.

LKR began as a non-profit organization focused on providing professional development opportunities for teachers to facilitate guitar classes with their students (Powell, 2022). Wish coined the term *modern band* to describe school-based ensembles that use popular music instruments (e.g., guitar, electric bass, drums, keyboards, ukulele) and incorporate technology to perform contemporary genres and promote student songwriting. Through the work of LKR and other initiatives (e.g., Holley, 2019), modern band and popular music education have continued to evolve and gain popularity in PK–12 schools and higher education institutions.

A growing body of research (Powell, 2021), practitioner literature (e.g., Burstein & Powell, 2019), pedagogical materials (e.g., Burstein et al., 2021), and presentations at national music education conferences, provide support to teachers working to implement popular music instruction in their curricula (Powell, 2022). Nonetheless, few if any books exist that describe or elaborate on the philosophical and technical aspects of this field. *Music Teacher as Music Producer: How to Turn Your Classroom into a Center for Musical Creativities* by Clint Randles (2022) fills this gap.

The book contains an introduction followed by three parts, each containing multiple chapters. In addition to discussing technical details surrounding every aspect of modern band instruction, the author provides vignettes and historical and philosophical perspectives, as well as resources for further study. A companion web site offers well-produced and engaging videos and animations that amplify the book’s content and help readers understand concepts through visual and auditory media. *Music Teacher as Music Producer* will help readers develop their own conception of modern band instruction and see how it might fit into the unique circumstances at their school.

Introduction

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the book. Randles acknowledges the success of elementary general music methods and secondary large ensembles, but then encourages readers to make “a conceptual shift” (p. 3) about music teaching and learning, and consider what might come next. He argues that creativity should be at the heart of school music instruction, saying that “we are happiest in life when we are creating because by so doing we follow the natural progression of the universe” (p. 3).

Randles encourages teachers to think differently about modern band compared to how some educators define the term. He introduces the idea of *fusion ensembles*—small groups that combine musical genres in their compositions. These ensembles might consist of “open instrumentation” (p. 15) that include woodwinds, brass, or orchestral strings in addition to, or instead of, the usual combination of guitar, drums, keyboard, and bass found in most rock, pop, and country bands. He also recognizes that although most students will choose to create music in current popular genres, some might choose styles that used to be popular, including classical or jazz, as “all music can be used as a platform for growing the musical creativity in students” (p. 17).

Part I: Organizing Your Space

As indicated by the title, Randles encourages teachers to see their role as a music producer facilitating creativity among their students. Randles suggests that for teachers, “thinking about [their] room—how it looks and, more importantly, how it feels—is an essential piece of the puzzle of turning [their] classroom into a center for musical creativities...[and]...to move away from the ‘hospital’ feel of most school rooms” (p. 26).

Chapter 2 covers all aspects of organizing the music classroom for creative music making in a fusion band setting. The author illustrates how to arrange space to accommodate up to six bands with five or six musicians by connecting them through headphones. He also provides instructions for setting up a single space where students can play out loud. In this chapter and throughout the book, Randles describes several alternatives for making the best out of spaces and equipment that are available and affordable. Figures in this section illustrate how traditional large group rehearsal rooms and practice wings can be configured to accommodate classes involving fusion bands and music production. Additional topics in this chapter include instrument and equipment storage, lighting, and furniture to create an efficient and inviting learning environment.

Chapter 3 focuses on the selection, configuration, and use of technology for fusion band performance in the classroom, including mixers, headphone hubs, microphones, pickups,

computers for recording, various sound effects such as those produced by distortion boxes, and related cables and power supplies. In this and subsequent chapters, the narrative explains the similarities and differences in the tremendous variety of equipment available. The author explains the value and importance of technology for inspiring creativity, saying that:

When you stumble on an effect or series of effects that is inspiring, entire songs can be written that were hidden previously. Curiosity and the fun associated with playing around can lead you and your students to creating sounds that you have heard before and many that might be brand new to the world. (p. 76)

Finally, Randles reminds readers that an iPad, a guitar made from a cigar box, or any number of alternatives can facilitate music making among students who might not play a traditional acoustic or electric instrument.

Chapter 4 discusses the use of musical instruments with an emphasis on electric and acoustic guitars, basses, keyboards/synthesizers, and drum sets. Randles also examines the use of MIDI devices, amplifiers, various software on tablets, and home-made instruments. The information is discussed in a way that is thorough and practical for the music teacher as music producer (MTMP). For example, the author compares the cost, function, and use for all this equipment in the classroom. Randles provides both historical background and his own personal experiences with playing various instruments, in a way that engages the reader and demonstrates the author's deep knowledge of the subject.

Part II: Living with Live Performance

Students involved in creating music in fusion ensembles may want to perform either their own music, or covers of others' songs in a live performance. Chapter 5 is about helping the MTMP prepare for the job of live performance engineer, including what to expect in terms of tasks and troubleshooting, and the personal qualities needed to fulfill such a role. The most effective sound engineers, he argues, are those who (a) listen to and value many varieties of music, (b) display curiosity coupled with a positive outlook, (c) are hardworking and lifelong learners, (d) have good people skills and technical abilities, and (e) who are willing and able to "[work] on emptying ego" (p. 128). The author reminds the reader that: "It is not all about you. It cannot ever be all about you. And many times the less you, the better the experience for everyone" (p. 128).

The chapter continues by describing all the roles the MTMP might have at a live performance with students, including that of stage manager, sound operator, electrician, lightboard operator, wardrobe manager, business manager, album sales representative, caterer, driver, and janitor! Randles discusses the steps needed to prepare for a live performance, anticipating problems and considerations for both indoor and outdoor venues. Here and elsewhere, the

author reminds teachers of the potential loud volumes that students might produce in a live performance and the need to consider hearing safety and protection for everyone involved.

Chapter 6 further elaborates on the responsibilities of the MTMP during live performance, and discusses the gear necessary to make these experiences as engaging and authentic as possible, such as portable staging, microphones, lights, public address systems, and related accessories. The chapter concludes with considerations related to acoustics in performances spaces and how to work in a variety of environments.

Chapter 7 focuses on diversifying performance, and opens by encouraging readers to take a different perspective than they might as directors of traditional ensembles, saying:

Most of the things that happen in collegiate schools of music and across the world in music classes to some extent involve music teachers helping students refine performances to be as close as possible to perfection for the duration of a particular performance. I think of this way of doing things as just one way of making good in performance, and NOT the only way to make good. Nothing needs to be (or can be) perfect, but it's important to note that "good enough" is actually very attainable and true enough for most people and most situations. (p. 166)

Randles follows this statement with descriptions and examples of criteria for determining if a performance was good, including whether the performance was offered as a gift, if those involved had fun, how many people were included in the process, and if any of them experienced flow. A performance might also be considered good if it was unique and compelling, if it might lead to future music making, if it brought people together, and if it did not result in harm.

Part III: Making Tracks and Albums

This final section of *Music Teacher as Music Producer* focuses on techniques for recording students' compositions and performances. Randle states that

This is the most exciting time in the history of music to be a music teacher, in part because music teachers can now function in the classroom like music producers do in the studio. Your classroom can be a place where student music can be captured. (p. 187)

In Chapter 8, the author discusses how the MTMP can help students unlock their own creativity by providing musical "jumping off points" (p. 187), such as melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic fragments, drum beats, and chord progressions. He shares strategies for brainstorming with students and making deliberate and thoughtful efforts to inspire them. The MTMP works with students in the same way a producer works with professional musicians. At times the MTMP might orchestrate students' compositions, serve as an audio engineer, or help them write lyrics to their songs. Randles also acknowledges the potential for conflict

when young people come together in a creative activity, and offers strategies for addressing these situations.

Chapter 9 addresses the use of technology in a classroom functioning as a recording studio. As in previous chapters, Randles provides just the right amount of technical information to help a MTMP make choices as to what equipment to select. Topics include different types of microphones, input devices and software, and the manipulation of recorded sounds in the studio with different effects.

Chapter 10 provides a brief history of the recording arts. The author describes the evolution of the industry and recorded media from the Edison Phonograph through tape recording technology and credits learning the biographies of noted music producers as inspiration for his own work. He takes the reader through a brief journey into the lives of several famous producers including George Martin, producer for the Beatles; Linda Perry, an American singer-songwriter, musician, and record producer who is an advocate for females in the industry; and Sylvia Massy, who has worked with System of a Down, Johnny Cash, and Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Randles closes the chapter with a summary of what MTMP means to him, saying, “I would love to see this version of music teaching become much more widespread...Let’s leverage our technological tools and create an awareness for making musical products as a legitimate and ubiquitous form of music making, a way forward for music education” (p. 244).

This vision of music education might be a concern for teachers entrenched in traditional large ensemble models (Rolandson & Conn, 2022). Recent studies, however, determined that the addition of modern band to secondary music curricula did not detract from enrollment in traditional band, choir, and orchestra classes, but instead increased overall participation in the school music program (Clauhs & Cremata, 2020; Powell, 2019). Randles reminds those working in the profession that we do not have to abandon innovations of the past to initiate change:

When we think of school music education, we tend to think of those beginning band concerts, those middle school show choir holiday performances at the local nursing home, those Friday night marching band performances under the football field lights. My vision of the future is additive. Those things are not going to suffer from a widespread exodus. Rather, we’re poised to be much more diverse. We’re creating a parallel universe with this work. (p. 244)

The final chapter of *Music Teacher as Music Producer* serves as an inspiration for the aspiring music educator who wants a classroom where students create, perform, and record

their own music. The author encourages teachers to make creativity the core of the curriculum and to embrace the messiness and chaos that invariably comes with the process. He acknowledges the potential challenges of following a non-traditional path, including resistance from those uncomfortable with change (e.g., Rolandson & Conn, 2022). He also affirms that “by creating alternate pathways to experience music in school, we open the door just a little bit more for our citizenry to experience the life-affirming power of music” (p. 254), and suggests that teachers engaged in this work should “take pride in being part of making things more right for our students and communities.” (p. 255)

Final Thoughts

Music Teacher as Music Producer is an excellent resource for teachers aspiring to create classrooms and curricula that are student-centered and focused on creativity. The book will be particularly helpful for educators in developing a vision for modern band and working to build or upgrade their equipment inventory for creative music making. College professors teaching methods classes in modern band might use the work as a textbook or simply as a resource for developing instruction. Although the book does not include lesson plan examples or chapters on pedagogy, other sources do provide this material (e.g., Burstein et al., 2021) including various writings by the author (e.g., Randles, 2019, 2020).

Randles’s vision for music education is one where students experience music creation and performance in ways that are authentic to the music industry and the world at large. The text is scholarly and refers to the writings of numerous researchers and practitioners in the field. At the same time, the narrative is conversational, accessible, and personal. The experiences and reflections that Randles share create a connection with readers from the start. This book will provide valuable information to in-service and pre-service teachers with or without experience in the field of modern band, songwriting, or music production. It will serve as a useful text in any undergraduate or graduate course on these topics, and should be held by every college and university library.

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