

Music Theory Remixed: A Blended Approach for the Practicing Musician

Kevin Holm-Hudson

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reviewed by BRAD OSBORN



I received a review copy of Kevin Holm-Hudson's much-anticipated *Music Theory Remixed: A Blended Approach for the Practicing Musician* (hereafter *MTR*) just in time to include it in the textbook-review project for my graduate students in music theory pedagogy. Some of the questions I posed to the students included: Amid the ever-expanding sea of undergraduate theory texts, why might an instructor choose this text over another (or no textbook at all)? How do its ancillary materials compare to the growing number seemingly required of such products? Which students would this book reach that others might not? Will students find the text and its materials accessible, inviting, and fun? Throughout this review, I will shed some light on these questions, with a keen eye toward why an instructor may or may not adopt *MTR* over a few of its competitors.¹

I. Focus on Popular and World Music

MTR includes all of the topics customarily found in an undergraduate theory textbook such as voice leading, form at various levels, and harmonic function, as well as novel topics such as timbre and narrativity. Instructors looking to adapt a preexisting curriculum and general teaching method would have no problem doing either with this text. It doesn't fire a cannon at any canons: both Western classical music and the pedagogical tradition of music theory are present, intact.

Where *MTR* is truly revolutionary is in its inclusion of popular music and, to a lesser extent, world music. While *The Musician's Guide* has steadily increased the number and timeliness of such examples in each of its three editions, it is eclipsed by *MTR* in both regards. *MTR* presents "music theory through a dual lens of works from the Western canon and examples from popular music, including rock, jazz, techno, film

¹ For the purposes of this review, I assume *MTR*'s primary competitors to be the near contemporaneous first edition of Burstein and Straus (2016), as well as the most recent editions from Laitz (2016), Clendinning and Marvin (2016), and Kostka, Payne, and Almén (2017).

soundtracks, and world music” (front matter). In Chapter 3, for example, hemiola and polymeter are explained, on the same page, with examples from Beethoven and King Crimson (83). Harmonically open structures, in which phrases end on the dominant, are exemplified by a Maroon 5 song (129), after which students must immediately correctly identify a half-cadence in Handel (129). Rather than exemplify a topic with a common-practice example and present a popular one as supporting evidence, Holm-Hudson just as frequently makes popular music the rule, rather than the exception.

This balance of classical and popular music reaches a *tour-de-force* in the coverage of form, Chapters 20-23. Beginning with an introduction on the “two-part principle” (457), Holm-Hudson uses bubble graphs evoking the now-popular *Audio Timeliner* software (the first textbook I know of to do so) to demonstrate binary-esque forms in a country song by Dwight Yoakam and an EDM track by The Orb. Holm-Hudson stresses that “pop-music examples may not correspond to classically understood ‘binary form,’ but they are contemporary manifestations of the two-part principle...” (458). Going to great lengths to explain, for example, that Brubeck’s “Blue Rondo à la Turk” is not truly a rondo in the classical sense (581), and resisting the urge to include any popular examples in the sonata form chapter are both wise steps to be applauded. Instead of treating the popular examples as distortions of classical form, Holm-Hudson instead recasts the differences as opportunities for classroom discussion and critical assessment.

Each chapter in *MTR* is prefaced with a chapter overview and an “audio list.” The audio list from Chapter 23 (Variation Forms) is so demonstrative of Holm-Hudson’s commitment to music by people of color and music from the non-Western world that it deserves reprinting.

Artist/Composer	Piece/Song/Track
George Frederic Handel	Chaconne in G Major, HWV 435
Philip Glass	“The Kuru Field of Justice,” from <i>Satyagraha</i>
U2	“With or Without You”
Miles Davis	“Well You Needn’t”
Beethoven	Seven Variations on “God Save the King,” WoO 78
Charles Ives	“Variations on ‘America’”
King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band (with Louis Armstrong)	“Dippermouth Blues”
John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers (with Eric Clapton)	“Hideaway”
Fatboy Slim	“Right Here, Right Now”
Hariprasad Chaurasia	“Raga Darbari Kanada”

Table 1
Audio List from Chapter 23: Variation Forms (608).

II. Common-Practice Music and Overall Organization

Despite *MTR*'s groundbreaking inclusion of popular music, those looking for the bread-and-butter topics and repertoire of common-practice theory texts will not be disappointed. Because its organization, pacing, repertoire, and depth for a three-to-four semester tonal curriculum is on par with Laitz, Clendinning/Marvin, or Kostka/Payne/Almén, I will focus instead on some elements that set *MTR*'s approach to common-practice music apart from these other texts.

Holm-Hudson opens with a 132-page fundamentals section.² Foregrounding this extensive section helps move us away from a model in which we *expect* incoming students to know these fundamentals (assessed through a pre-test, and often remediated through an extra course) toward one in which we actually *teach* fundamentals.³ Furthermore, *MTR*'s opening "Prelude" to this unit makes fundamentals interesting from page one. Beginning with three "listening studies" from Scott Johnson, Iannis Xenakis, and Robert Schumann helps to put music first. In these three studies, Holm-Hudson focuses on the aural experience by forgoing any musical notation. Instead, attention is on timbre, texture, and topics even more universal in scope, including music's evolutionary basis (6) and its relationship to world religions and cultures (9). This dazzling opening chapter is further illustrated with examples from Appalachian folk song, Bach, Chopin, and The Master Musicians of Jajouka (Morocco).⁴ Students will leave this opening chapter with two valuable takeaways that will fuel their future study: that music analysis can apply to almost any music they are interested in, and that everybody can "do" music theory because it requires no specialized skills (e.g., score reading) coming in.

Holm-Hudson's approach to teaching rhythm mirrors this innovative "listening first" model. Rather than beginning with the familiar metrical types (e.g., simple quadruple), he begins with an example from Hoobastank's hit song "The Reason" (67). Using dot-diagrams to represent "pulse streams," Holm-Hudson demonstrates the gradual interlocking of parts between the piano, drum kit, and guitar that forms a groove. He then differentiates between the "primary pulse stream" and those which

2 This first unit is called "Fundamentals and Diatonic Harmony," which stretches over the first ten chapters and 233 pages. What I am calling the fundamentals section ends with Chapter Five ("Diatonic Chord Labels") before Chapter Six dives into counterpoint and voice leading.

3 For more on this change in expectations, see Hoag (2013).

4 Such incorporation of world musics recalls *Sonic Design: The Nature of Sound and Music* by Robert Cogan and Pozzi Escot (1976) and the heyday of comprehensive musicianship.

are either twice as fast or twice as slow.⁵ This has the familiar effect, from the first chapter, of presenting the analysis and notation of rhythm and meter as a practice that any student can jump right into.

Holm-Hudson's treatment of Neo-Riemannian theory (Chapter 26) demonstrates the synthesis of his theoretical and pedagogical research. Theories by David Lewin and Brian Hyer are as foregrounded as the musical examples from Liszt, Glass, and Britten. One must applaud Holm-Hudson for bringing students into the world of professional music theory this way. Neo-Riemannian operations are presented as something you *do*, rather than footnoted as an obscure theory. Students are invited to map chords onto a *Tonnetz* and compose chords that follow from Neo-Riemannian operations—all of which looks *fun* on the page. Reading Holm-Hudson's straightforward illustration of movement by chromatically related third across the *Tonnetz* (727), I can already see those expressions of fascination and wonder on the students' faces that we all hope for.

Perhaps the most innovative addition to the canon of undergraduate theory topics comes in Holm-Hudson's final chapter "The Stories We Could Tell: Musical Narrativity and Intertextuality" (Chapter 31). Again, the repertoire list, including Satie, Janet Jackson, and Emmylou Harris, is impressive on its own. Unlike most chapters in *MTR*, this one is not broken up by intervening "level mastery" exercises. Holm-Hudson instead leads students through a précis of concepts one might encounter in a graduate seminar, including stylistic/strategic intertextuality, genre synecdoches, sonic/tactile/kinetic/composite anaphones, and episodic markers. Each of these is conspicuously presented in bold print, defined concisely, and demonstrated through musical examples. Holm-Hudson's analysis of anaphones in Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb" (845) is both compelling and completely accessible for a college sophomore. The highpoints of this chapter come any time students are asked to *do* narrative and intertextual analysis or activities, including deciphering specific types of anaphones from Mozart score excerpts, writing a narrative analysis of Chopin's Ballade No. 2 (Op. 38), composing program music based on one of Grimm's fairy tales, and improvising to convey a well-known story.

There are, of course, elements in *MTR* that are presented somewhat differently

⁵ Holm-Hudson's pulse streams are not a metrical hierarchy (à la Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983), but rather an alternate notation for rhythm which nevertheless has generative implications for meter. The term "pulse stream" is taken from Roeder (1994), but Holm-Hudson's non-mathematical use is closer to that in Osborn (2016), in that it is presented for the musician who does not necessarily read traditional notation.

than in textbooks to which instructors may be accustomed. For example, harmonic sequences (Chapter 14) are given lengthy text-based labels such as “the ascending second 5-6 harmonic sequence” (338) relative to concise numerical labels; c.f. “A2 (-3, +4)” (Laitz 2016, p. 417). Since this chapter precedes those on chromatic harmony, instructors wishing to teach the barbershop-esque interlocking of applied dominant seventh chords in sequence at this point will need to supplement.

MTR’s overall organization will look familiar to most instructors, with chapters subdivided by topic and combined into larger units. One organizational gaffe stood out to me. The second major unit of the book, entitled “Form and Chromatic Harmony 1” (Chapters 11–16) is the first place in which several diatonic chords appear (ii, iii, IV, and vi). Indeed, the first chromatic harmony does not appear until Chapter 15, so the unit title conceals a significant topic in its span.

Unlike Clendinning/Marvin or Burstein/Straus, this volume is set entirely in a duo-tone color palette (blue and black), which hinders the organization by insufficiently breaking up the flow of text. Most pages have at least one musical example to assist in this subdivision. But on pages where no musical notation appears, the reader sees only text. For example, on page 640, a 16-point blue text header is all that partitions an otherwise undifferentiated sea of 12-point, black, single-spaced prose (in this case, with no bolded terms). In future editions, the publisher should adopt a third color, and should create more callout boxes and other such shapes to help direct student attention to organizational features of the individual chapters.

III. Inclusion of Twentieth-Century Music

Undergraduate theory texts are increasingly expected to provide some coverage of twentieth-century music.⁶ Just what a tonally focused book will include in a short number of chapters is always interesting. Do you stick to an in-depth exploration of the first three or four decades (as have so many textbooks), or do you aim for comparable attention to all ten?

To point out that *MTR* only devotes three chapters to twentieth-century music (Chapters 28–30) is somewhat misleading, due to its inclusion of popular and world music from this period throughout. Nevertheless, and perhaps unsurprisingly, *MTR*’s approach at this point runs toward art music. Chapter 28 begins by connecting early 20th-century music with late 19th-century practices in Richards Wagner and Strauss, then tackles Impressionism, planing, integer notation, polytonality, and non-tertian

⁶ See, for example, the recent expansion of Laitz in its fourth edition.

chords with examples from Debussy, Milhaud, Ives, and Stravinsky.

Chapter 29 is the customary Second-Viennese focused chapter, including the usual cast of topics and composers. Uniquely, it adopts an ahistorical approach by beginning with 12-tone technique, and even presents total serialism *before* moving to free atonality and set theory (Boulez's *Structures 1a* is the first notated musical example). Despite this occlusion of historical context (a skilled instructor will mitigate this, of course), I applaud Holm-Hudson for beginning with what I've always found to be, somewhat ironically, the most pedagogically straightforward aspect of 20th-century composition. Total serialism is convoluted, but totally *logical*. Chapter 29 closes with set-class topics such as Z-relations and interval vectors, and briefly touches on combinatoriality.

Chapter 30, "Contemporary Techniques," covers everything from a 1914 Stravinsky string quartet to Glass's *Music in Contrary Motion* (1969) in ten pages. Which is to say, of course, that it is not contemporary by any stretch of the imagination. *MTR* thus falls into the old-school model of 20th-century pedagogy, focusing on the first half of the century, with white male composers, especially those from the Second Viennese School, represented disproportionately. This is surprising given Holm-Hudson's scholarly immersion in music from the 1970s onward. Future revisions of this text might perhaps keep Chapters 28 and 29 as is, and then expand coverage of post-1950s concert music into at least two chapters.

As it stands, the 20th-century material in *MTR* could actually fit the bill for the one-semester coverage required at most institutions. Chapters 28 and 29 are thorough, engaging, and thoughtfully explained, and would be excellent fodder for the first half of the semester. Chapter 30 presents a useful historical overview of some key developments, and would make for a fine one-or-two week introduction to the second half of the semester, at which point an instructor could bring in scores, writings, and multimedia from Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, Björk, and other composers active from 1970 to the present.

IV. Price Comparison

MTR is inexpensive relative to other "bundled" products on the market. Its closest price-point competitor is Burstein/Straus. Both have only two products available for purchase (a textbook and workbook), and both shave costs through their paperback format.⁷ The total for all products in either franchise is under \$150 for three to four

⁷ Burstein and Straus do offer a bound workbook, while *MTR*'s is virtual, available for download once

semesters of instruction, which is a significant savings relative to the full suite of products from either Laitz, Clendinning and Marvin, or Kostka, Payne, and Almén (should an instructor require the full ensemble from these products).⁸

While there are obvious advantages to concision, *MTR* ups the ante relative to Burstein and Straus by including a short 20th-century unit that would serve the needs of some instructors' curricular requirements. *MTR* also includes free access—though it is not automatic for students, and must be requested by the instructor—to Leigh Van Handel's innovative *Music Theory Skill Builder* program. However, Burstein and Straus do include a more robust wealth of online pedagogical materials than *MTR*, a deficit to which I now turn.

V. Ancillary Materials

a. Online Pedagogical Resources

Textbooks increasingly seem to live or die not by their paper and ink, but by their online ecosystem. *MTR*'s bare-bones web presence mostly closely resembles Laitz's, which is unsurprising given their shared publisher. For an instructor who does require a more interactive and robust online component, Burstein/Straus and Clendinning/Marvin, both of which feature similarly designed packages developed by Norton, are far and away the better choice.⁹ Table 2 offers a side-by-side comparison of what student-facing resources are included with the purchase price of *MTR* and its competitors.

The instructors most affected by *MTR*'s spartan online ecosystem are those who teach in a “flipped” (aka “hybrid” or “blended”) classroom—wherein students watch instructional videos and/or take automated, online quizzes before class meetings—and who rely on a commercial source for such products. I would go so far as to say that the instructional videos included with Burstein/Straus and Clendinning/Marvin are robust enough to *replace* said textbooks.

paid for. If instructors demand that students complete and submit work on paper, the former has an added value since the printing costs of *MTR*'s workbook would probably be deferred to the student.

⁸ The latter of which charges nearly \$90 for a set of CD recordings to accompany the textbook—which should hardly be considered optional—bringing the cost of the textbook and its recordings to over \$280. Worse, given the increasing number of students whose laptop computers no longer contain CD drives, it would be utterly pointless for an instructor to require students to purchase these recordings, and therefore unreasonable to assume that they are listening to the examples they analyze for homework.

⁹ I note an obvious conflict of interest here: Anna Gawboy and I designed and voiced the “Know It” videos attached to *The Musician's Guide*, 3rd edition.

Textbook	Publisher	Ancillary Resource						
		Interactive e-book	Answers to text exercises	Recordings for in-text examples	Extra text	Extra exercises	Automated quizzes	Instructional videos
KHH (1 st)	OUP		✓	b	✓		d	c
Laitz (4 th)	OUP		a	✓		✓		
S/B (1 st)	Norton	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
C/M (3 rd)	Norton	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
K/P/A (7 th)	McGraw-Hill		a		✓	e		

a = these answers are to the extra exercises on the web, not those in the text

b = these recordings are only available as a Spotify playlist, rather than web-hosted audio files

c = at the time of my writing, there were only two such videos

d = only accessible through optional (yet free with purchase) *Music Theory Skill Builder*

e = at the time of my writing, the web-based “self-tests” were unresponsive

Table 2

Student-Facing Ancillary Resources Included with Textbook Purchase.

There is simply nothing comparable in *MTR*. Instructors wishing to either replace or supplement *MTR*’s textbook with videos and online quizzes will need to create them.

MTR’s online ecosystem is really limited to two products: 1) answers to exercises in the text, and 2) “web” features, which dive deeper into issues addressed in the text (e.g., Javanese Gamelan practice, *diabolus in musica*).¹⁰ Both of these products are accessed via downloadable PDF files through an open-access website. Which is to say they aren’t interactive, merely available. Unlike Norton’s “Show It” quizzes or OUP’s *Music Theory Skill Builder*, there is no built-in way to incentivize or track student engagement with *MTR*’s materials.

This reliance on downloadable PDFs creates another problem: security. While students are not given access to the answer key for the workbook, instructor access provided me with the entire set of workbook answers as unencrypted PDFs in a single click. It is so likely that these files will reach students’ hands sometime in the

¹⁰ This currently includes two instructional videos. The textbook front matter promises a “computerized test bank” and “PowerPoint lecture outlines” as well, though these were not yet available during the writing of this review.

near future as to endanger the possibility of an instructor relying on the workbook as a source of student homework. What students are given immediate access to is the complete (again, downloadable as PDF) answer set for the textbook exercises. This effectively eliminates the possibility of requiring only the textbook, since all homework opportunities contained therein have been solved. In future editions, OUP should not only password-protect both of these resources—giving the instructors the option of using the textbook as a sole source of homework—but should also host them as non-downloadable, interactive web resources rather than PDF files.

b. The Workbook

Here is where I must return to a point I made in passing earlier: the significant overlap between *MTR*'s textbook and its (optional, \$50) workbook. Ideally, a textbook provides content and some quick opportunities for practice, while a workbook provides not only expanded opportunities for practice, but also *deeper* opportunities for active, creation-based learning. If reading and interacting with a textbook represents the lowest rungs of a learning taxonomy,¹¹ workbooks should help students climb higher ones.

The textbook opportunities for student engagement include “level mastery” (included mid-chapter for short practice) and “self-test” (end-of-chapter) exercises. These textbook activities range from passive drills such as circling and labeling non-chord tones (247) to complex creation tasks such as composing a chaconne (346) or improvising over a jazz standard (266).

The workbook contains the same types of activities as the textbook, with the unfortunate exception that it actually *omits* those that engage the highest rungs of active learning. I randomly chose four chapters from the middle of the book and cataloged the types of activities found in both the textbook and workbook. Table 3 ranks these activities by level of active engagement (reading left to right), evidenced partly by verbs given in the directions. In each of these four chapters, the workbook only duplicates activities found in the textbook, rather than adding novel ones, and omits that textbook chapter's active learning opportunities.

Despite this problem, Holm-Hudson's workbook is entirely worth its cost for the repertoire it includes for analysis (one wonders how they secured copyright for some of these!). Students get to analyze modern popular music by Norah Jones and Sufjan Stevens, an excerpt from *Les Misérables*, and Classic-era chamber music by

¹¹ Such as that created specifically for music learning by Rifkin and Stoecker (2011).

	Passive Learning Opportunities		Active Learning Opportunities	
MTR Resource	IDENTIFICATION ("locate," "circle," "find," "mark," or "label")	COMPLETION ("add," "spell," "complete," or "resolve")	ANALYSIS ("provide," "prepare")	CREATION ("embellish," "compose")
Textbook Ch 11	non-chord tones	non-chord tones	roman numerals, non-chord tones	improvise over jazz standard
Workbook Ch 11	same	same		
Textbook Ch 12	cadences, phrases, form type		arch map (form), formal analysis	compose waltz
Workbook Ch 12	same			
Textbook Ch 13	harmonic function, prolongation		roman numerals, layer analysis (cf. 2 nd level analysis)	compose 16-measure double period
Workbook Ch 13	same		same	
Textbook Ch 14	voice-leading/spelling/ doubling errors, sequence type/intervallic pattern		roman numerals, layer analysis (cf. 2 nd level analysis)	write a chaconne for vocalist and continuo
Workbook Ch 14		same	same	

Table 3
Comparison of Exercises Provided in *MTR* Textbook and Workbook.

women such as Maria Theresa von Paradis (1759–1824) and Marianna von Martines (1744–1812). Those of us who have been incorporating popular music and music by women composers into our pedagogy have typically transcribed such music ourselves, scoured the web for printable versions of it, and/or traded materials with colleagues—all incredibly time-intensive endeavors alleviated by *MTR*'s workbook.

The workbook presents another shocking security issue: it is also downloadable as a single PDF, which should be a serious concern for the publisher.

Parting Thoughts

A textbook is not a fine wine. It does not age favorably left alone in a dark place. Instead, like a roux, a textbook grows only through incremental changes and additions made relative to the feedback one receives from users of previous editions. I have no doubt that *MTR* will be greatly improved in its subsequent editions. As it stands, the first edition is to be lauded for its parallel presentation of popular and common practice music, but simply cannot compete with the visual layout and ancillary

resources of veteran, multi-edition textbooks that, at one time, suffered from these same shortcomings.

My music theory pedagogy students found much to recommend in this book. Several reviewers were charmed by the breadth of examples included (“the variety of examples in the book is impressive”). One reviewer decided to use *MTR* as a personal reference text (“I would pick many of these examples to use in my class lessons”), while ultimately choosing a different one for their students to purchase. The reviewers’ highest praise for *MTR* came in their assessment of its final chapter on narrativity and intertextuality (“I believe it is always important to think of theory and analysis not as existing in a bubble, but realize that it is just one part of understanding how and why a piece of music was created”).

In deciding whether to adopt *MTR*, an instructor must weigh the merits of the book’s visionary approach to repertoire with these aesthetic and accessibility concerns. Ultimately, I think the former outweighs the latter. If one’s primary goal is to broaden the repertoire in the undergraduate core, there is simply no better textbook on the market. Anyone wishing to adopt this book in its first edition will likely find their patience rewarded with a better looking, more online-friendly second edition, while meanwhile providing music by women and people of color not currently available in competing texts.

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