

Bending the Rules of Music Theory: Lessons from Great Composers

By Timothy Cutler

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Reviewed by MICHAEL BAKER



Timothy Cutler begins the preface to *Bending the Rules of Music Theory: Lessons from Great Composers* with a reference to a common joke among music students: that Bach kills a kitten every time someone writes parallel fifths. While this saying may be a darkly humorous way for music students to collectively acknowledge the strictures of voice-leading practices typically taught in music theory classes, it also acknowledges the unquestionable wrongness of writing parallel fifths, at least on voice-leading assignments that explicitly require one to avoid doing so. This time-honored rule is taught for a reason, usually explained as a way of maintaining independence of contrapuntal voices; however, there are occasional moments when apparent parallel fifths do occur in classical art music, and not only in Mozart's *Ein musikalischer Spaß*. Cutler's *Bending the Rules of Music Theory* studies the wide range of rules as commonly taught in music theory classes, showing that for every cut-and-dried rule espoused by a textbook or instructor, there is frequently a good illustration of its violation in actual music, and by some fairly well-known and well-respected composers.

The Author

Cutler was head of the music theory department at the Cleveland Institute of Music from 2017 until 2022. In addition to his articles and his recently published *Anthology of Music for Analysis* (Norton, 2018), Cutler is also the creator of the Internet Music Theory Database ([Cutler, n.d.](#)), the first large-scale anthology of music theory examples maintained on the internet. Cutler's experience with building anthologies of musical excerpts for various harmonic and tonal techniques informs his knowledge of the repertoire for *Bending the Rules of Music Theory*. The excerpts housed at the Internet Music Theory Database are intended as textbook examples of harmonic usage; however, Cutler's search for examples must have also occasionally unearthed examples of rule-bending. While Cutler may not have wished to include these examples in his Internet Music Theory Database or *Anthology of Music for Analysis*, they are thought-provoking for teacher and student alike, and worthy of a

more considered discussion.

An expanded version of *Octaven und Quinten*

In the preface, Cutler makes an indirect reference to Brahms's *Octaven und Quinten*, a collection of examples Brahms had maintained in which he identified many cases of apparent consecutive fifths and octaves in music from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.¹ (Cutler returns to *Octaven und Quinten* later in Chapters 4–5, drawing more direct parallels between his project and Brahms's essay.) Cutler recalls a story from his student days at Oberlin College-Conservatory of Music in which he noticed a set of parallel fifths in a keyboard composition by Edvard Grieg. As he was under the impression that all parallel fifths were “bad,” Cutler was perplexed to find them in a published score; he was even more surprised that, far from being offensive, these fifths sounded idiomatic to the music at hand. Cutler mentions that he began keeping a notebook of instances where composers disobeyed what he understood to be the “laws” of music theory (vii). One may regard *Bending the Rules of Music Theory* as an updated and greatly expanded version of Brahms's *Octaven und Quinten*, with examples of many other violations of common rules taught in modern music theory courses.

“Rules”

Chapter 1, entitled “Rules,” surveys several quotations from composers and musicians on the purpose of rules, and their attitudes toward them. The attitudes displayed in these quotations run the gamut from “rules are for fools,” to “all rules are rules of thumb” to “rules for thee, not for me,” to “it sounds good, even if it is wrong,” and many other attitudes. For instance, John Coltrane's “damn the rules, it's the feeling that counts” (Cutler 3, citing Marsalis 2005, 32) views music theory and its rules as irrelevant—perhaps helpful to getting started, but not much more than that. The same sentiment comes through in an oft-cited quote from Debussy: “There is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law” (Cutler 3, citing Austin 1970, 131). When questioned about a set of parallel fifths in his music, Beethoven is reported to have asked “well, who has forbidden them?” Upon citations from Fux, Marpurg, Kirnberger, and others, he then replied, “well, I allow them!” (Cutler 4, citing Wegler and Ries 1987, 76). The entire chapter illustrates a range of attitudes about rules from a number of composers, musicians, artists, authors, and others. To these quotes, I would add one more, commonly attributed to Pablo Picasso: “Learn the rules like a

1 For an English translation of this notebook, see Mast (1980).

pro, so you can break them like an artist.” I believe this quote captures the tensions between music theory’s focus on rules as ways of learning common practices, and on the artist’s inexorable drive toward originality and innovation.

In the preface Cutler mentions that, while he frequently refers to “the textbooks,” this is intended as a generalization; he is not interested in censuring any particular theory primer (viii). That being said, nearly all of the deviations from commonly-held rules he studies are *generally* understood to be deviations from the norms of typical common-practice tonal music theory, and, for anyone who has taught a typical music theory course from one of the commonly available manuals, this perspective rings true.

Chapter Summaries and Highlights

Following this survey of rules, the book proceeds with chapters on a variety of concepts. Chapter 2, concerning “Consonance and Dissonance,” surveys several instances where intervals we may automatically and instinctively consider consonant can occasionally sound dissonant in a given musical context. In particular, Cutler’s study of dissonant perfect fifths surveys many cases where this interval may occasionally occur in a dissonant context, as in a pedal point. For example, in Schubert’s “Der Leiermann,” the tonic pitch (i.e., the bottom pitch of the pedal’s perfect fifth interval) clashes with the dominant triad in the piano’s right hand. In other cases, a perfect fifth interval may occur between the third and seventh of a minor seventh chord, with one of the pitches being a chordal seventh, thus in need of resolution. Cutler illustrates other seemingly paradoxical cases of dissonant perfect octaves and dissonant perfect unisons as well as stable and unstable root-position triads, with illustrations from canonic composers. Rather than illustrations of true rule-bending (compositional decisions that students—or composers—can make), the topics in this chapter promote a more nuanced consideration of the nature of intervals, which, under some circumstances, may take on the characteristics of dissonances.

Chapter 3 highlights many instances of rule-bending in chordal construction. Following a brief explanation and illustration of typical chordal construction, Cutler surveys examples of doubled chordal thirds, doubled tendency tones, incomplete chords, chords with missing thirds, incomplete inverted chords, chords with missing roots, chords with wide spacing between voices, and other transgressions. Whereas Chapter 2 seems more obliquely aligned to Cutler’s thesis, the examples in Chapter 3 go right at it, with several clear examples of the concepts for discussion.

Several subsequent chapters in the text pair together into themes. Chapter 4, titled

“Voice Leading I,” focuses directly on instances of parallel fifths. Cutler begins with a brief elucidation of “good” and “bad” parallel fifths, then proceeds with examples arising from the inclusion of nonharmonic tones, parallel fifths at deeper levels of musical structure, illusory parallel fifths, parallel fifths that arise through octave transfer, enharmonic parallel fifths, parallel fifths that occur between phrase endings and beginnings, and other concepts. Two topics of interest in this chapter are his discussion of so-called “Mozart fifths” (proceeding directly from a German augmented sixth chord to the dominant) and a more thorough consideration of Brahms’s *Octaven und Quinten*.

Chapter 5, titled “Voice Leading II,” considers further instances of rule bending in the domain of voice leading, including parallel octaves, octaves by contrary motion, motion from a diminished fifth to a perfect fifth, ascending chordal sevenths, unresolved leading tones in the soprano, and other contraventions. Cutler also examines instances where two voice-leading principles collide, focusing on voicings and irregular resolutions of the cadential six-four chord.

Chapters 6–7 focus on harmonic syntax, and chord-to-chord progressions. Topics in these chapters include harmonic retrogressions, such as V–IV or V–ii, where the dominant harmony proceeds to a pre-dominant harmony; motion between two predominant harmonies, for instance, the progression ii–IV; and direct ii–I harmonic motions, among many others.² These chapters are again filled with numerous examples of harmonic progressions that, while idiomatic in their setting, might run afoul of rules in a music theory course.

Chapters 8–9 deal with “deviant” harmonies, those that music theory textbooks recommend avoiding. Chapter 8 discusses root-position and second-inversion diminished triads, half cadences involving V⁷ chords, iii⁶ and vi⁶ harmonies, and other topics. Chapter 9 deals exclusively with unusual treatment of six-four chords, including examples of consonant six-four chords, arpeggiated six-four chords, and other topics. Among the most interesting parts of this chapter is Cutler’s examination of “inverted” six-four chords. This topic is clearly a special interest for Cutler, who devotes twelve pages to the subject.

Chapters 10–11 focus on aberrant nonharmonic tones. Among the topics in these chapters are ornamented ornaments, nonharmonic tones with dual interpretations, nonharmonic tones that are the product of registral displacement, and textbook deviations of passing tones, escape tones, and other typical nonharmonic tones. Much attention is given to suspensions, including irregular resolution treatment and

2 Cutler uses all upper-case Roman numerals for triads, irrespective of quality.

irregular metric positions, as well as suspending an entire chord.

Chapters 12–13 focus on tonal transgressions, and unusual beginnings and endings in compositions. Cutler provides examples of compositions that begin in a variety of atypical ways: on a non-tonic harmony, a tonicized non-tonic harmony, a non-tonic key area, and with modal ambiguity. In terms of uncommon ending strategies in music, Cutler reviews examples that end on a I^6 chord, on a vi^6 chord, and other possibilities. Cutler also addresses the reverse Picardy ending technique (that is, concluding a major-key work with a minor tonic harmony). In Chapter 13, Cutler discusses key-shifting compositions—those that begin and end in two different keys—and distinguishes them from off-tonic openings. He highlights the role of the text in songs involving key shifting, illustrated with an analysis of Schubert’s “Klage an der Mond,” D. 436.

Chapter 14 posits the question: How much dissonance is too much dissonance? Whereas extended dissonance is a regular feature of twentieth-century music, Cutler illustrates that densely dissonant music occasionally occurred in tonal compositions, such as Jean-Féry Rebel’s “Le chaos” from *Le élémens* (1737), which begins with a seven-note cluster chord. Cutler also discusses examples of atypical chromatic dyads, as well as the use of all-chromatic trichords, tetrachords, and pentachords in typical tonal music.

The Title, Repertoire, and Other Matters

The book’s subtitle, “Lessons from Great Composers,” will undoubtedly raise eyebrows for some readers, especially given the ongoing efforts among many music academics to diversify the music curriculum at their institutions. Much attention has been paid in recent years toward widening the range of musical examples and repertoire taught in modern music theory courses. Several online databases of musical excerpts, such as Music by Women (Murdock, n.d.), Diverse Music Theory Examples (Maust, n.d.), and Expanding the Music Theory Canon (Mendoza, n.d.), have given music teachers a range of new musical excerpts to use in theory classes to teach common topics in the curriculum, alongside those from more familiar composers. (Many of these online databases are modeled on Cutler’s own Internet Music Theory Database [Cutler, n.d.], mentioned above.) Reading the words “great composers” in the year 2022, and seeing a book with music examples drawn exclusively from music by white European men, may seem jarringly anachronistic, given the amount of effort paid toward diversifying the repertoire in music curricula.

In the preface, Cutler mentions that the kinds of music-theoretical transgressions

he is interested in are not as exceptional as one might be led to believe from reading music theory textbooks, and are a regular aspect of the tonal repertoire. Cutler writes,

These departures from the status quo are not incomprehensible acts of artistic fancy; seldom do composers flippantly disregard a rule. Nor should we portray digressions from musical law as the exclusive right of geniuses who composed unshackled from the restrictive tethers of music theory. Additionally, we needn't mine the esoteric fringes of tonality to witness occurrences of rule-bending. Deviations from standard practice are a *regular* feature of tonal works and can be explained rationally and musically as extension of textbook regulations (viii).

This last statement—that rule-bending is common in lots of tonal music, and by composers few would hesitate to claim as the canonic composers that otherwise fill the pages of music theory books—is central to Cutler's thesis, and informs his choice of repertoire. In some ways this is the thesis, that one needn't look hard to find examples from under-studied music to illustrate deviations from the rules as taught in theory courses. Whereas individual instructors may work to include a greater representation of music by women composers, music from historically under-represented minority composers, pop music, film and video game music, and music from vernacular cultural traditions to illustrate concepts in their courses, one is free to do so, *while also* acknowledging that composers from the European classical tradition occasionally bent some of the rules, often for artistic effect.

One small production issue involves the sizing of some graphics in the text. The great majority of musical score excerpts are well-produced and legible; however, there are a number of shorter musical figures that seem far larger than expected. For instance, Cutler's Example 2.2 (p. 14) displays enharmonic spellings of a perfect fifth interval. The sizing of this graphic is such that the annotations on it appear far larger than the font used for the text in the book. The same can be said for many other shorter graphics in the text, which seem far larger than needed for their context. If pressed to provide other critiques of this text, I would suggest a more careful attention to graphic sizing throughout the book for subsequent editions.

Another consideration involves a question over the intended market for the text. Cutler's purpose is clear, well argued, and generously illustrated with carefully chosen musical examples. I believe that many music theory instructors may benefit from having it on their shelves for reference, and at \$65 for a 300-page text, I believe it is fairly priced. While I believe students may also benefit from studying from it, I believe it would make a better reference book than a required purchase for the general undergraduate music student, who already is overloaded with many required texts for

their courses. If instructors were to require students to purchase this text for their courses, it should be regarded as a supplementary text, in addition to their regular music theory textbook(s).

Summary and Conclusion

These critiques notwithstanding, I believe Cutler's *Bending the Rules of Music Theory* will be a welcome addition to the range of teaching materials related to the undergraduate core music theory curriculum. It provides a unique perspective on the purpose of rules in music instruction, rule-bending, and the inherent flexibility with which composers viewed seeming transgressions in their own music. This book will be of interest for many students who have wondered whether the rules they are learning in their theory courses are ever bent in actual practice, and in what contexts these digressions may occur. It will also be of benefit for many music theory instructors, if for no other reason than to temper their instruction on a variety of concepts, and perhaps their attitudes toward the music of "great" composers. As Cutler shows, nearly every conceivable rule that teachers usually would say "always" or "never do this," could be amended to "most of the time" or "only in certain circumstances should you do this," and he illustrates cases where such flexibility is allowed. By way of conclusion, we might consider Cutler's own rejoinder to the famous saying: Every time someone writes *good* parallel fifths, Bach *pets* a kitten.

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