This paper will explore different approaches to teaching atonal music through an examination of ‘Painful Wrestling’ and ‘Finger Exercise’ from Bartók’s Ten Easy Pieces (1908). This collection was written to expand twentieth-century repertory for younger piano students in Hungary. In line with Australian standards, they are best suited to second to sixth grade students. While ‘Painful Wrestling’ and ‘Five-Finger Exercise’, are not in the strictest sense ‘atonal’, neither are they truly ‘tonal’. They do, nonetheless, provide a conduit for bridging the gap in understanding between the familiar forms of expression in tonal music with the seemingly disconnected language of post-tonal and atonal music. When I have taught these pieces, I have found that by identifying musical patterns and paradigms at the start of the learning process, I am more likely to achieve a positive learning experience that can in turn enhance learning outcomes for the student.

The years 1907 and 1908 were perhaps the most important in Bartók’s stylistic development, sparked by his discovery of Hungarian folk music in 1904, as well as his encounter with the music of Debussy in 1907, and later in 1908, the music of Schoenberg. Up until this time, Bartók’s compositional style was aligned with the highly chromatic language of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Bartók’s Ten Easy Pieces are part of a collection of works for piano composed in 1908 which reflected this stylistic change: namely the Fourteen Bagatelles Op.6 and the two Elegies Op. 8b. Bartók began composing his four volumes, in two books, of short pieces For Children, in 1908, completing the set in 1909. The pieces For Children reflect Bartók’s interest in folk music. Volumes one and two are based on Hungarian folk melodies, and the pieces in volumes three and four are based on Slovak folk melodies. Some of the works composed in 1908 were written with a specific pedagogical purpose in mind which may in part, have been in response to Bartók’s appointment as professor of piano at the Budapest Academy of Music in the previous year, 1907. Bartók stated that he wrote the collection For Children ‘in order to acquaint the piano-studying [Hungarian] children with simple and non-Romantic beauties of folk music’ (Suchoff, 1993, p. 129); the Ten Easy Pieces were written as a ‘complement’ to the ‘difficult’ Bagatelles (Antokoletz, 1993).
1993) ‘to supply piano students with easy contemporary pieces’ (Suchoff, 1993, p. 126). This paper will examine two of the Ten Easy Pieces that stand outside the confines of conventional tonality: numbers 2 ‘Painful Wrestling’⁵ and 9 ‘Finger-Exercise’. These pieces have been selected in order to lay the groundwork for examining approaches to teaching atonal music that incorporate analysis at the beginning of the learning process.

Bartók’s Ten Easy Pieces (1908), is a collection of short one to three page pieces, that would be suitable for Australian intermediate level piano students. The pieces that have the greatest popular appeal for Western students are the tuneful numbers 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10, which are either directly inspired by or based on Hungarian folk music. Numbers 2, 4, 7, and 9 together with a ‘Dedication’ as an eleventh⁶, are original compositions, that combine seemingly alien and disembodied melodies with discordant and unconventional harmonies. This demarcation points to an underlying logic governing the sequential progression of the pieces. The numbers inspired by folk music alternate with original compositions; and numbers 5 and 10, which divide the collection into two parts, represent a synthesis or fusion of both styles, as illustrated in the table in Figure 1 below.⁷

![Figure 1: Béla Bartók, Ten Easy Pieces](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Peasant's Song</td>
<td>folksong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Painful Wrestling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Slovak Peasant’s Dance</td>
<td>folksong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sostenuto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>An Evening at the Village</td>
<td>synthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hungarian Folksong</td>
<td>folksong text⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Hungarian Folksong</td>
<td>folksong text⁹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Finger Exercise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bear Dance</td>
<td>synthesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst ‘Painful Wrestling’ and ‘Finger-Exercise’ are not in the strictest sense ‘atonal’, neither are they truly ‘tonal’. However, anyone listening to them for the first time could be forgiven for considering them atonal. Students often consider

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⁵ László Somfai, the eminent Bartók scholar notes that Bartók’s original title for no.2 was ‘Frustration’.  
⁶ Bela Bartók Essays, 432.  
⁷ Somfai, trans., R Prockl, record sleeve notes, 7.  
⁸ Text for No. 6: ‘When I was a young peasant man, I fell asleep near my animals, and I woke up at midnight, and realised that the chickens had gone. There’s a musical party or celebration somewhere near the end of the village. Let’s go there my darling and we will have fun, but my darling is crying and her kiss will stick on my lips and I will never forget it’.  
⁹ Text for No. 8: ‘People say they will not allow me to get together with my darling, my little pigeon, that instead I will have the daughter of some cow-man’. 

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atonal music confronting and this can make it challenging for a teacher who wants to add these pieces to their pupil’s repertoire as well as broaden their student’s field of vision. An analysis of the music reveals that it is the predominantly symmetrical pitch structure that tends to weaken the pull of the underlying tonal centres, which is only truly confirmed at the end of each piece. In ‘Painful Wrestling’ this is revealed in the concentration of tritones in the left-hand part, and in ‘Finger-Exercise’, by the prevalence of alternating whole-tone configurations in the perpetual semi-quaver keyboard figuration. By taking an inventory of all of the notes in ‘Painful Wrestling’, further observations can be made that demonstrate how the tonality is obscured here: in bars 1 to 11, Bartók configures each of the left-hand four-note patterns to include a tritone as well as implementing a process of chromatic completion; with the exception of bar 13, this technique is repeated in the second half of the piece, in bars 12 to 22. Further, when ordered in close position, the notes from the tritone pairs form a symmetrical pattern of alternating semitones and tones – SSTSSTT – beginning on D, bars 1 to 11 in the first half of the piece, and beginning on D-flat, bars 11 to 22, in the second half of the piece.

Even though this analysis sheds some light on why the piece might sound atonal, understanding its construction does not necessarily help one to learn, play or teach it. Analytical thinking is important, however, labelling musical elements is really the end product of an analysis. What is important is making sense of the score, and one way of doing that is to be able to identify repetition and contrast.

When teaching an atonal or post-tonal piece, the process is to get students involved as active participants in the teaching and learning of the music. One way of doing this is to go on the hunt for musical patterns and paradigms. A pattern is a design, arrangement or configuration. A paradigm is a template, original, model or archetype. I will refer to the cartoon Where’s Dudolf? shown in Figure 2, to help to explain these concepts. Where’s Dudolf? created by Gergely Dudás10, is the Hungarian equivalent of the well-known children’s cartoon and picture book Where’s Wally? The principle is the same. However, instead of finding Wally in a sea of minutiae, the challenge is to find Dudolf the Cat in a sea of owls; which puts a new twist on the phrase ‘putting the cat amongst the pigeons’, or owls in this case.

10 Used by permission of the author Gergely Dudás
In Figure 2, the paradigm is represented by the owl, the pattern is represented by the varied replications of the owl, and Dudolf the Cat, represents both a new paradigm as well as a corruption of the established pattern, which is not obvious at first glance. Similarly, in music, patterns and paradigms are not always immediately obvious – they require teasing out. However, once we know what we are looking for we tend to find Dudolf, I mean Wally, I mean Dudolf, everywhere.

**Figure 2: Where’s Dudolph?**

One of the challenges facing students in learning any new piece lies in decoding the score. The unmarked score of Bartók’s ‘Painful Wrestling’ looks much like one of those Where’s Wally? or Where’s Dudolf? puzzles. Despite notable differences in musical language and expression, some of the musical patterns and paradigms typically found in tonal music, can also be found here. The principle of repetition and contrast, both at the macro as well as micro level, tends to underpin musical design. The identification of musical paradigms can help to bridge the gap
between the familiar and the unfamiliar. On a macro level, design features that relate to the underlying formal structure of the music – such as binary, ternary, rondo, variation, and sonata form amongst others – typify paradigms based on the principles of repetition and contrast. On a micro level, musical form is made manifest through paradigms related to texture, rhythm, systems of pitch organization, harmony and melody. For example, textural paradigms can be linear or chordal; rhythmic paradigms typified by metrical patterns, include the iconic waltz or ragtime beat; harmonic paradigms include patterns associated with specific musical styles such as the twelve-bar blues in jazz; and melodic paradigms typically include compositional devices such as motive, sequence, and antecedent and consequent phrases.

In ‘Painful Wrestling’, for example, the left-hand ostinato may at first appear unyielding and ‘difficult’ to play, however, closer examination reveals that the ostinato resembles the Alberti Bass paradigm found in music from the Classical Period. Additionally, the first four-notes of the left-hand pattern remain essentially the same throughout the course of the piece apart from a few transpositions and variants. From a teaching perspective, once the four-note pattern in the first bar has been mastered, the student might be encouraged to find all repetitions of the pattern, followed by any transpositions, and variants. A highlighter pen or coloured marker, could be used to box up and colour code repetitions, transpositions and variants of the pattern.

Similarly, when looking at the right-hand part in ‘Painful Wrestling’, the teacher might begin with the first phrase in bars 3 and 4. Once the student is familiar with the look of the rhythm and melodic shape of the phrase, played it a few times, they might be asked if they could find the same shape somewhere else on the page. If prompting is needed, I will find a repeat and together with the student, we take our time to compare the phrases note by note to verify if they are the same. It is important not to rush this process to avoid stressing the student. I also want to give the student the sense that they have made the discovery. Then, as with the left-hand part, we work through the piece, chunk by chunk, until it is learned. Even though this may seem a slow process, I have found that skill acquisition is acquired more rapidly than if I had marked up the fingering and set a portion for home work. The length of time it takes to learn a piece will vary from student to student. What is important here is that learning becomes a mindful exercise in which both student and teacher can engage in
collaboratively. Through mastery of smaller chunks of the score to scaffold learning, the student can achieve success incrementally and become a partner in learning.

For the purposes of this paper, and using conventional analytical terminology, a fully marked up score has been given in Figure 3, ‘Painful Wrestling’ Paradigms. With my students however, depending upon their age and theoretical background, I generally use plain language and rely on colour and sound to develop pattern recognition. For example, instead of referring to a phrase as an antecedent or consequent, I use the terms question and answer.

**Figure 3: Béla Bartók, ‘Painful Wrestling’, Paradigms**

![Image of musical score with labeled Paradigms]

In Figure 3, Paradigms at the macro level include the A-B-A ternary form, which represents both large-scale repetition and contrast; and the ostinato in the left-hand part, which represents repetition on a large-scale. At the micro level, the antecedent and consequent phrases are melodic paradigms; and the Alberti Bass in the left-hand part, is an accompaniment paradigm. Patterns at the macro level include the repetition and transposition of the melodic phrases, as well as the ostinato. Patterns on a micro level include the contrast between the first and
second phrases, the varied repeat of the first phrase in the third phrase, and the repeated four-note pattern in the left-hand part.

Bartók’s ‘Finger-Exercise’ also makes use of the ostinato paradigm together with another musical archetype which recalls the five-finger exercises typically found in Hanon’s *The Virtuoso Pianist*. The ostinato pattern first occurs in the right-hand part in the first page, and then in the left-hand part in the second page dividing the piece into a two-part binary form. The marked-up score, in Figure 4, shows the binary division, which represents contrast on a macro level; as well as repetition and contrast on a micro level with the melodic phrases. Phrases 1 and 2 are related as antecedent and consequent. Phrases 3, 4 and 5 are related thematically. To teach the melodic line, it would be best to focus on one phrase at a time. Once a phrase has been mastered, the student might be encouraged to find repetitions, transpositions and variants of that phase. This process can be repeated until all of the melodic material has been learned. The melodic ideas need not be taught sequentially. By breaking up the line into more manageable chunks, and starting at a point at which the student feels most comfortable, can make the score appear less daunting.

**Figure 4: Béla Bartók, ‘Finger-Exercise’, form and phrase structure**
Similarly, the marked-up score in Figure 5 draws attention to the two alternating whole-tone scale patterns that underpin pitch structure in ‘Finger Exercise’. While the hand position changes, the notes generally belong to one of these two whole-tone scales. Group 1 contains the notes C-D-E-F#-G#-A#, and Group 2 contains the notes Db-Eb-F-G-A-B.\footnote{Although sometimes Bartók’s note spellings vary, as in the case of writing a-flat instead of a g-sharp.}

I would suggest that the teacher select and target one chunk of one the whole-tone five-finger patterns for study, to reinforce fingering and the physical shape of the pattern, before adding variants. Similarly, the melodic line can be taught by selecting a single melodic phrase for focused study, before identifying other phrases that share common elements and thereafter cumulatively introducing the more intricate and complex phrase structures to build a complete performance.

\textbf{Figure 5: Béla Bartók, ‘Finger-Exercise’, whole-tone patterns}

Undoubtedly, more details of complex pitch relationships remain for further discussion in both of these pieces; however, as the scope of this paper is limited...
to a focus on the practical application of analytical observations for children, no further theoretical speculation will be engaged in here.

In conclusion, by looking for patterns and paradigms in the music, it is possible to connect the familiar with the unfamiliar and make atonal and post-tonal music more accessible to students. By viewing compositions as games, and by breaking down complex streams of information into smaller and more manageable chunks, learning unfamiliar music can be made less daunting and provide students with an opportunity to develop problem solving skills that may facilitate decoding patterns in other genres and styles of music.
References


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Scores

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Helen Kasztelan Chapman is a senior AMEB piano examiner with over twenty-five years’ experience in examining and adjudicating in piano eisteddfods. She is currently enrolled as a PhD candidate at Charles Darwin University, investigating new approaches to analysing the works of Béla Bartók. Before the birth of her son, she was a member of staff, VCA School of Music for fifteen years. Here she devised and implemented courses in Keyboard Harmony, Harmonic Resources, Music Analysis and History; supervised Honours and Masters Theses and conducted Aural classes. She has also lectured and tutored in Analysis and Harmony at Melbourne University.