

Post-Tonal Postcards: Communicating Analysis and Reflection through Prose Writing

ANGELA RIPLEY

Postcard assignments provide a concise alternative to the traditional analysis paper. In this article, I outline a series of four postcard assignments developed for an undergraduate post-tonal theory course, discuss connections to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (particularly to Self-Determination Theory), and examine student responses and pedagogical benefits. Synthesizing analysis and reflection, each postcard includes a 300- to 500-word essay as its message and a single page of annotated musical examples as its picture. Students analyze complete compositions through the lenses of specific themes; for example, students discuss pentatonic collections and pitch centrality in Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (*Préludes*, Book 1, No. 8). By addressing each postcard to a different recipient (peer, novice, expert, and future self), students learn to communicate effectively in diverse rhetorical contexts. Additional pedagogical benefits include greater independence in music analysis and increased confidence in writing about music.



My freshman-English professor taught me to read all my essays aloud. "Even if you are on your way to my office to turn in your paper," she told our class, "stop in the stairwell and read your paper out loud. You can make any necessary corrections in pen." While this editing tip has proved useful for subsequent writing endeavors, it also opened my eyes to connections between written words and verbal communication. By keeping in mind the sound of written words, I became more aware that the essays I wrote were meant to communicate with my readers.

When they graduate, undergraduate music students should be able to write effectively about music for a range of audiences. As professional musicians, they may write program notes, concert reviews, grants, letters to parents and booster organizations, blogs, conference papers, and job applications, among other forms of written communication. The importance of effective communication for educated musicians is reflected in the competencies described by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), which state that undergraduate students should possess the ability to "think, speak, and write clearly and effectively." Furthermore, music students with liberal arts degrees should "communicate with precision, cogency, and rhetorical force," and music students with professional degrees ought to be able to "communicate musical ideas, concepts, and requirements to professionals and

laypersons related to the practice of the major field.”¹

As a field in which precise language joins argumentation in support of music-analytical interpretations, music theory provides fertile ground for students to practice writing about music. However, the process of writing and grading essays in music analysis can be arduous and time-consuming for both students and instructors. Additionally, students may consider these papers limited in relevance to their future communications as professional musicians. In this article, I propose the “postcard” assignment as an alternative to the traditional analysis paper. After outlining the structure of a postcard assignment and exploring connections to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, I present a series of four postcard assignments developed for an undergraduate course in post-tonal music theory. I conclude by discussing student responses and pedagogical benefits. The responses included in this article (shared with students’ permission) come from the juniors and seniors enrolled in my course during two consecutive fall semesters with ten students enrolled in the course each semester.

Each postcard includes a 300- to 500-word essay as its message and a single page of annotated musical examples as its picture. Students address every postcard to a different recipient. Calling these essays “postcards” emphasizes communication—addressing music-analytical observations to specific recipients—and encourages students to prioritize their most important material, since space constraints prevent them from including all aspects of their analyses. The bookstore at my institution has a postcard that features the music building, so I hand out copies to my students on the first day of class. After we discuss the information and priorities conveyed by this postcard—the picture shows the front exterior of the building, not the rear parking lot—I introduce the postcard assignments as souvenirs of our learning throughout the course.

In their postcards, students analyze complete compositions through the lenses of specific themes. For example, students in my post-tonal theory course explain how imitation and z-cells provide unity and contrast in a selection from Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos*. Because one of my goals for these assignments is for students to work independently within a specified framework, we do not discuss the pieces in advance. I assign four postcards per semester and require students to complete at least three of the four assignments. While all four postcards synthesize analysis and reflection, the

¹ See, respectively, sections VII.D.1.a.(1) and VIII.A.6.a.(1); VII.D.1.a.(1); and VIII.C.2 of the NASM *Handbook 2019–20*, <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/accreditation/standards-guidelines/handbook/> (accessed November 18, 2020).

final postcard assignment emphasizes reflection by inviting students to choose their own repertoire to illustrate the concepts they found most important in the course.

By addressing each postcard to a different recipient, students learn to communicate effectively in a variety of rhetorical contexts. As noted by John Bean, students who write with an awareness of their rhetorical context—the purpose, audience, and genre of what they write—become better writers and more effective communicators.² The recipients I specify for the postcard assignments include a student at an earlier stage of music theory study, a friend or loved one who knows very little about music, a music theory professor considering the student’s application for admission to a graduate program in music, and the student’s future self. In broader terms, students address their respective postcards to peers, novices, experts, and their future selves.³ Students explain musical terms as needed and connect their analyses to recipients’ experience and interests—thus building rapport and promoting deep learning by linking new information to recipients’ previous knowledge.⁴

The underlying theoretical framework for the postcard assignments comes from Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as discussed by Christopher Niemiec and Richard Ryan.⁵ SDT encompasses both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as humans’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When people are intrinsically motivated, they do something because they find it inherently interesting and enjoyable. On the other hand, people who are extrinsically motivated do something to achieve an outcome that can be separated from the activity itself. Actions are autonomous when people freely choose to engage in behavior that is congruent with their sense of self, and the need for competence is met when people experience their actions as effective. Finally, relatedness refers to a sense of belonging

2 Bean (2011, 39–51). Sources from the music theory literature also highlight the importance of considering one’s audience when writing about music. For example, Bourne’s students contribute to Wikipedia articles on composers and pieces they study (2017), and Jenkins’s students write program notes for concerts they plan to perform, conduct, or compose (2017). Assignments that emphasize rhetorical contexts within the field of music history appear in Strovas (2014).

3 McGee (1993) also incorporates peer, expert, and novice audiences into his music theory writing assignments.

4 For a brief discussion of the impact that connections between old and new knowledge have on students’ learning, see Lang (2016, 93–100). Drawing on research from the fields of brain biology and psychology, Lang explains that building comprehension in students “consists of helping them forge rich, interconnected networks of knowledge—ones that enable each existing piece of information in our content area to connect with lots of other information, concepts, and ideas” (2016, 96).

5 Niemiec and Ryan (2009). For an application of SDT to research in music education, see Evans (2015).

that encourages shared behaviors and values.⁶

Student autonomy plays an important role in the postcard assignments. According to Niemiec and Ryan, instructional approaches that support student autonomy facilitate both intrinsic motivation and effectively internalized extrinsic motivation among students.⁷ Requiring students to complete only three out of four postcard assignments provides flexibility for students' schedules and enables students to choose the assignments they find most interesting. Other elements of choice appear within the postcard assignments themselves. For example, students choose between two themes for Postcard 1, explain which pitch-class set they consider most influential in the piece they analyze for Postcard 3, and select their own repertoire for Postcard 4 to illustrate the course concepts they deem most important.

Having examined the structure and theoretical underpinnings of postcard assignments, I will now share, by way of illustration, a series of four postcard assignments developed for an upper-level undergraduate course in post-tonal theory.⁸ Interspersed with my description of these assignments are samples of students' work. To help students approach post-tonal repertoire—which differs aesthetically from music they have previously studied and requires new analytical tools—with curiosity and open minds, I frame the course as a virtual study-abroad experience. On the first day of class, I introduce the study-abroad metaphor for the course and encourage students to consider potential benefits of exploring different countries and cultures, and, by extension, different styles of music.⁹ I also invoke our study-abroad metaphor during the course to encourage students to consider compositions on their own merits without comparing them to compositions in other styles, much as we might adopt an adventurous approach to sampling different styles of cuisine

6 Niemiec and Ryan (2009, 134–39).

7 Niemiec and Ryan (2009, 136–39) discuss four types of extrinsic motivation (external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation) that reflect increasing degrees of autonomy; the greater the degree of autonomy, the more students tend to internalize their extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is internalized when students perceive an internal, rather than external, reason for their actions.

8 I use the term “post-tonal” to refer to twentieth- and twenty-first-century compositions that are organized according to principles other than functional tonality. Guidelines for all four postcard assignments appear in the Appendices.

9 Ripley (2016, 27–28) discusses parallels between learning a new language and learning to analyze twentieth-century atonal music. Connections between exploring post-tonal music and learning a new language are also integral to the framing study-abroad metaphor for my course. Students hear the new “language” during listening exercises, speak it through sight-singing activities, read it in analysis assignments, and write (about) it through compositions and post-tonal postcards.

when visiting other countries.¹⁰ Students embrace the notion of a virtual study-abroad experience, and several students reflected this in their postcards by referring to their imagined locations, such as France or Russia, when writing about music by Debussy or Stravinsky.

For the first postcard assignment, students focus their analysis of Claude Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (*Préludes*, Book 1, No. 8) on either of two themes: 1) pentatonic collections in melodic and harmonic contexts, or 2) pitch centricity, including the establishment of pitch centers, tonal ambiguity, and tonally functional and non-functional harmonic progressions. (The guidelines for Postcard 1 appear in Example 1; excerpts from the score appear in Example 2.) While students receive clean copies of the score, I include several of my own analytical observations in Example 2 to highlight facets of the piece that reflect the themes for this postcard.¹¹

Color-coding in Example 2 reflects the following categories: green = pentatonic collections, purple = tonally functional progressions, red = tonally non-functional progressions. The example further highlights the following: a) Pentatonic collection (missing one note) in a melodic context; b) Tonally functional IV–I progression in G-flat major; c) E-flat major established as local tonic by V–I progression; d) Alternation of G^b⁷/F^b and A^b⁷/G^b suspends functional tonality; e) Pentatonic collection (missing one note) in a harmonic context; f) Tonally non-functional V–IV progression in G-flat major; and g) Confirmation of G-flat major as overall tonic of the piece.

¹⁰ While the study-abroad metaphor provides a positive frame for students' perceptions of post-tonal music as "strange" or "foreign," instructors may also wish to emphasize connections between tonal and post-tonal music. For example, Arthurs (2004) discusses similarities between sonata form and the form of Schoenberg's twelve-tone *Klavierstück* Op. 33a, and Harter (2009) proposes a taxonomy of early-twentieth-century cadences that links examples from Prokofiev's piano sonatas to common-practice-period counterparts such as authentic and deceptive cadences.

¹¹ Alegant and Sly (2004, 25-36) offer a pitch-collection-driven approach to teaching this prelude and have students create "road maps" as visual representations of their analytical findings.

Postcard Assignment 1*(At least three out of four postcard assignments must be completed.)***Postmark (due) date:** Wednesday, September 12, at 11:00 a.m.**Recipient:** Address your message to an imaginary music student who has studied tonal music theory but has not yet encountered any post-tonal music.**Picture:** One or more excerpts from the score of Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (*Préludes*, Book 1, No. 8). The total length of these excerpts must be at least one-half page, but no more than one page, long (8.5 x 11 inches). Analytical annotations should be marked on the score.**Caption:** Write a brief caption (at the top of your message, like a title) that communicates the theme of your postcard in a concise and creative way. Note: the caption is included in the word count for your message.**Message:** Keep your message brief (300–500 words). Your entire message, with caption, must fit on a single page (8.5 x 11 inches), with a 12-point font and margins of at least 0.8 inches. Include your word count at the bottom of the page.

Focus on one of the following themes, using the musical excerpt(s) to illustrate your discussion (refer to specific measure numbers).

1. Pentatonic collections throughout the piece (in both melodic and harmonic contexts)
2. Pitch centrality throughout the piece: establishment of pitch centers (locally and for the piece as a whole), tonal ambiguity, and tonally functional vs. non-functional harmonic progressions

Remembering your intended recipient, provide brief explanations of new terminology (e.g., pentatonic scale) as needed and, when possible, connect your message to the recipient's previous experience with music theory.

Include an element of personal reflection in your message (e.g., something in the music that you found surprising, or comments on the aural experience of hearing this piece).

Grading: Your postcard will be graded on the basis of these criteria: following assignment guidelines, accuracy and quality of analysis, clarity and organization of writing, neatness and effectiveness of annotated score excerpts, creativity and conciseness of caption, and appropriate tone for the intended recipient.**Example 1.****Guidelines for Postcard 1.**

a

G♭-[A♭]-B♭-D♭-E♭, outlines Ebm7

b

G♭: IV I

c

E♭: V I

d

G♭7/F♭ A♭7/G♭ G♭7/F♭ A♭7/G♭

e

Cédez - - # Mouvt (sans lourdeur)

G♭-[A♭]-B♭-D♭-E♭

f

Cédez - - # au Mouvt

G♭: V IV

g

G♭: I (V) I

Example 2.

Author's analyzed score for Debussy, "La fille aux cheveux de lin"
(*Préludes*, Book 1, No. 8), mm. 1–9, 23–31, 35–39.

In their second postcard, students discuss compositional unity and contrast in Béla Bartók's "Chromatic Invention 1" (*Mikrokosmos*, Book 3, No. 91), focusing on the z-cell (prime form [0167]) and points of imitation.¹² My analyzed copy of the score appears in Example 3. The opening four notes present Bartók's z-cell, and each point of imitation begins with a new statement of this cell. As shown by brackets on the score, the piece is composed almost entirely of imitative material. The only break from imitation appears in mm. 10–12, after which all remaining points of imitation are inverted. Intervals of imitation are partially symmetrical around this break: the points of imitation immediately preceding and following the break appear at the octave, while the next point of imitation in either direction follows at the major ninth (or sixteenth). Points of imitation are marked with brackets whose colors represent the respective intervals at which the lower voice imitates the upper voice. Z-cells are circled in purple, and rhythmic or melodic aspects of the upper voice that are modified or omitted by the lower voice are highlighted in yellow.

Two students were especially effective in communicating their Postcard 2 analyses to musical novices. Here is how the first student described imitation to a friend:

Imitation in music is almost exactly the same as the way I imitate you sometimes. Obviously, you say something, and then I repeat what you said, and I can say it in a bunch of different ways. I can repeat it in a higher or lower pitch, faster or slower, or perhaps while doing an impression of Donald Duck. In a piece of music, you can take a melody or group of notes and do the same thing to them. First the melody or group of notes is played, and then I can take that same melody or group and repeat them in different ways, higher or lower, faster or slower, etc.

The second student addressed Postcard 2 to his uncle at a salsa dance retreat in Miami and introduced Bartók's x-, y-, and z-cells with this explanation:

When notes move around pitchwise in a piece of music, it feels like they are dancing, and cells are essentially dance moves, with different cells having different step movement patterns.

In both cases, the students connected their use of terminology to recipients' prior experience, enabling them to follow the music-analytical discussion without the barrier of unexplained musical jargon.

¹² Roig-Francolí (2008, 41–47) explains Bartók's symmetrical motivic cells (including the z-cell) and provides a useful summary of imitative procedures. For a discussion of form and contextual transformations in this piece, see Lambert (2000, 56–60). Pervasive imitation, contrapuntal texture, and the title "Invention" invite comparisons between this piece and the two-part inventions of J. S. Bach.

91

p, espr.

*p*¹ Imitation at P8

Imitation at M6

mp

mf

mp Imitation at M9 (M2)

mf

Imitation at P8

p

*p*⁵ Imitation at P8, inverted

più p

pp

rallentando

smorzando

Imitation at M16 (M2), inverted

pp Imitation at P18 (P4), inverted

[55 sec.]

Example 3.

Author's analyzed score for Bartók, "Chromatic Invention 1" (*Mikrokosmos*, Book 3, No. 91).

"Mikrokosmos" by Béla Bartók

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The third postcard explores pitch-class sets and their relationships and influence throughout Anton Webern's *Four Pieces for Violin and Piano*, Op. 7, No. 3. I mark segmentation on the score to enable students who are new to set-theoretical analysis to engage with this piece.¹³ My analyzed copy of the score appears in Example 4, and a similar analysis by one of my students appears in Example 5. Matching colors in Example 4 denote shared prime form among sets, and the prime form of each set is marked on the score. Arrows show transformations between sets with the same prime form. Some students may also identify T₂I or T₈I relationships between sets with prime form (0167).

For this assignment, students find the prime form of each marked set, discuss transposition (T_n) and inversion (T_nI) relationships among sets that share the same prime form, and argue for which set they believe is the most influential in the piece. Because the first and last sets marked on the score share the prime form (012), students frequently cite the framing function of this set as evidence that it is the most influential in the piece; other students identify (0167) as the most influential set because of its frequent appearance and timbral emphasis in mm. 6–9 of the violin part.¹⁴

13 My segmentation for this assignment focuses on trichords and tetrachords. An analysis including larger sets appears in Forte (1977, 126–31). For comments on the uniaggregational nature of the piece, see Alpern (1996).

14 As an alternative to the question of which set is most influential, students could choose one set and trace its history, or outline a narrative, throughout the piece. For pedagogical examples of narrative analysis, see BaileyShea (2011) and Alegant and Sly (2004).

T₂
or
T₈I

Example 4.

Author's analyzed score for Webern, *Four Pieces for Violin and Piano*, Op. 7, No. 3.

Four Pieces for Violin and Piano

Op. 7, No. 3

Composed by Anton Webern

III.

Sehr langsam (♩ = ca 30)
mit Dämpfer

Violin

Piano

T₈I

(012) (0156) 5 (016)

ppp ohne cresc.

ppp

äußerst kurz

ppp

6 (0167) col legno T₃ → (0167) T₉ → (0167) T₃ → (0167) (015) (0167)

Vln.

Pno.

ppp subito

(0125) (013) (014)

9 10 kaum hörbar am Steg

Vln.

T₈I

Pno.

(012) kaum hörbar

kaum hörbar

ppp

kaum hörbar - "scarcely audible"
am Steg - "on top of the bridge"
mit Dämpfer - "with mute"
äußerst kurz - "extremely short"

Example 5.

Sample student analysis for Postcard 3.

The final postcard assignment emphasizes the relevance of music theory to students' own specializations within the field of music. Students address Postcard 4 to their future selves and link their messages to the professional work they hope to do in five years. I have students write to their future selves not only to remind themselves of concepts they once knew but also to encourage them to think more broadly about their future goals and to consider ways in which the knowledge and skills they acquire during their undergraduate studies can contribute to their long-term success. For example, a music therapy student developed a plan for a musical intervention focused on pattern recognition and voice leading in Debussy's "La Cathédrale engloutie" (*Préludes*, Book 1, No. 10). That student later commented that she really enjoyed writing to her future self because this made her consider music theory in relation to her chosen field of music therapy. In her thoughtfully written postcard, the student concluded, "Atonal music may not be a common client request; however, with the effectiveness of client-preferred music, it is imperative to be able to adapt this genre of music." Two music education students respectively encouraged their future selves to challenge their students with pieces that employ frequently changing meters and to acquaint their students with twelve-tone compositions in order to demonstrate the expressive power of atonal music. Finally, a student with a double major in literature and music drew parallels between set theory and literature, concluding that both literature and set theory "involve taking the most basic form of a motif and seeing how it develops artfully to represent art in new ways."

For this final postcard, students choose their own pieces of twentieth- or twenty-first-century art music to illustrate the course concepts they consider most important. When introducing the assignment, I suggest two possible avenues for selecting appropriate repertoire and topics. Students can either decide on a topic they consider important and look for a piece that demonstrates it, or they can begin by choosing an interesting piece from which they draw an appropriate course-related topic. I stipulate that the piece must be a work of twentieth- or twenty-first-century art music and, because one of the objectives of the assignment is learning to create effective musical examples, I require students to analyze pieces for which scores are available. The repertoire selected by my students includes works by composers such as Britten, Poulenc, Stravinsky, Thomas, and Webern. Some of the topics my students explored include diatonic modes and octatonic scales, asymmetrical and changing meters, transformational relationships among pitch-class sets, and twelve-tone rows. Example 6 lists the repertoire and topics chosen by my students, and Example 7 summarizes all four postcard assignments.

Depending on class size, the individually selected repertoire may pose challenges for grading. For small classes, the topical focus of this postcard assignment and its one-page limit for musical examples keep the grading load manageable, even if students choose repertoire with which the instructor is less familiar—I find that the grading time required for this assignment is comparable to the time I spend grading one of the other postcard assignments. Instructors of large classes may prefer to have students choose from a list of approved repertoire; alternatively, instructors could require students who play the same instrument to analyze the same repertoire (e.g., all clarinetists choose the same piece).

Composer	Repertoire	Topic
Bartók	<i>Forty-Four Duos for Two Violins</i> , Sz. 98, No. 33, “Harvest Song”	Diatonic modes, octatonic scales, transposition
Bartók	<i>Mikrokosmos</i> , Book 6, No. 141, “Subject and Reflection”	Pitch-class set theory (prime form)
Britten	<i>Rejoice in the Lamb</i> , I, “Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues”	Asymmetrical meters, changing meters
Copland, Ives	“At the River” Comparison of the composers’ respective settings: Copland, <i>Old American Songs</i> , Set II, No. 4 Ives, <i>114 Songs</i> , No. 45	Consonance and dissonance, metric modulation [The concept of metric modulation was mistakenly applied here.]
Debussy	<i>Préludes</i> , Book 1, No. 10, “La Cathédrale engloutie”	Patterns and repetition (sets and voice-leading)
Debussy	<i>Rêverie</i>	Tonal ambiguity, motivic repetition
Debussy	<i>Estampes</i> , I, “Pagodes”	Pentatonic scales
Ives	<i>114 Songs</i> , No. 43, “The Things Our Fathers Loved”	Musical borrowing
Lockwood	<i>Piano Burning, Piano Garden, Piano Drowning, Southern Exposure</i>	Aleatory music
Poulenc	<i>Sonata for Oboe and Piano</i> , I, “Élégie”	Pitch-class set theory (prime form, subsets and supersets)
Ravel	<i>Ma mère l’Oye</i> , III, “Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes”	Pentatonic scales, world music
Schoenberg	<i>Drei Klavierstücke</i> , Op. 11, No. 1, “Mässig”	Pitch-class set theory (prime form, motives)
Schoenberg	<i>Suite for Piano</i> , Op. 25, No. 1, “Prelude”	Twelve-tone rows
Schoenberg	<i>Concerto for Piano and Orchestra</i> , Op. 42, No. 1	Twelve-tone rows

Example 6.

Student-selected repertoire and topics for Postcard 4.

Composer	Repertoire	Topic
Stravinsky	<i>Rite of Spring</i> (various excerpts)	Changing meters, metric displacement, polyrhythms
Thomas	<i>Spring Song</i>	Pitch-class set theory (prime form, motives)
Webern	<i>Five Movements for String Quartet</i> , Op. 5, No. 3	Pitch-class set theory (prime form, transformational relationships among sets, subsets)
Webern	<i>Drei Lieder nach Gedichten von Hildegard Jone</i> , Op. 25, No. 1, “Wie bin ich froh!”	Twelve-tone rows, musical narrative

Example 6 (cont’d).

Student-selected repertoire and topics for Postcard 4.

I announce the due dates for all four postcard assignments at the beginning of the semester. The repertoire and themes for each assignment, which I announce one week in advance of their respective due dates, reflect current course topics. Choosing brief compositions keeps the analytical process manageable for students and enables students to show substantial portions of each piece within the one-page limit for musical examples. I require students to complete only three out of four postcard assignments, so each student can skip one assignment. If students choose to complete all four assignments, the postcard component of their course grades reflects all four grades, thus providing a way to minimize the impact of a low grade.¹⁵ The three-out-of-four policy and concise format of the postcard assignments help streamline the grading process. If time permits, students can revise their postcards in response to comments from the instructor. A copy of the rubric I use to evaluate Postcard 1 appears in Example 8, and I use a similar rubric to grade the other postcard assignments. The range of criteria included in the rubric provides opportunities for students to shine in their areas of strength while also receiving targeted feedback for growth. For example, one student who struggled with analytical accuracy excelled at creating pithy captions. I calculate percentage grades based on a total of 24 points by assigning the following numeric values to each column of the rubric: excellent = 4, competent = 3, not yet competent = 1. Therefore, a postcard assignment that earns a grade of “excellent” for four criteria and “competent” for two criteria would receive an overall grade of 22/24, or 92%. Instructors may also choose to emphasize certain criteria by weighting them more heavily than others.

¹⁵ Postcard assignments contribute 20% to students’ course grades. Other assessments for the course include exams, quizzes, analysis assignments, and a composition project.

Repertoire		Theme	Recipient
Postcard 1	Debussy, "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (<i>Préludes</i> , Book 1, No. 8)	Choose one: - Pentatonic collections throughout the piece (in both melodic and harmonic contexts) - Pitch centrality throughout the piece: establishment of pitch centers (locally and for the piece as a whole), tonal ambiguity, and tonally functional vs. non-functional harmonic progressions	<i>Peer:</i> Music student who has studied tonal music theory but has not yet encountered post-tonal concepts
Postcard 2	Bartók, "Chromatic Invention 1" (<i>Mikrokosmos</i> , Book 3, No. 91)	Compositional unity and contrast, with a focus on Bartók's z-cell and points of imitation (be specific about type[s] of imitation and pitch and time intervals)	<i>Novice:</i> Friend or loved one who cares about you but knows very little about music
Postcard 3	Webern, Four Pieces for Violin and Piano, Op. 7, No. 3	Identity of pitch-class sets, relationships among sets, and the influence of sets throughout the piece - Find the prime form of each set that is marked on the score and label sets with their respective prime forms. (Remember to put the sets in normal form before calculating their prime forms.) - Discuss the relationships between any sets that have the same prime form (e.g., related by T_{12}, related by $T_{12}D$), and consider their similarities or differences in instrumentation, register, and voicing. - Explain which pitch-class set you consider the most influential in this piece, and why.	<i>Expert:</i> Music theory professor considering your application for admission to a graduate program in music (postcard serves as sample of music-analytical writing)
Postcard 4	Choose one: - A piece we have studied this semester (see examples in the textbook, etc.) - Another piece of 20th- or 21st-century art music that demonstrates one or more of the concepts we have studied this semester	One of the most important concepts you learned this semester (explain the concept and why you consider it important)	<i>Self:</i> Your future self, five years from now

Example 7.

Summary of post-tonal postcard assignments.

	Excellent	Competent	Not Yet Competent
Following assignment guidelines			
Accuracy and quality of analysis			
Clarity and organization of writing			
Neatness and effectiveness of annotated score excerpts			
Creativity and conciseness of caption			
Appropriate tone for the intended recipient			

Example 8.

Rubric for Postcard 1.

While the preceding sample assignments focus on post-tonal repertoire and topics, postcard assignments can also be used effectively in other music theory courses. For example, Theory III students can explain common-chord modulation to a student enrolled in Theory I (peer audience), and Theory II students can explain the difference between half cadences and authentic cadences to a neighbor who knows very little about music (novice audience). To help students adapt their tone and musical vocabulary to a range of audiences, I recommend incorporating a series of postcards addressed to a variety of recipients (such as peer, novice, expert, and self). If time constraints preclude assigning multiple postcards in the same course, the students enrolled in the course can address their postcards to different recipients (e.g., some students write to expert audiences, some write to novice audiences, etc.) while engaging with the same topic and repertoire. By reading and discussing each other's completed postcards, students can grapple with the changes necessary to communicate effectively with different audiences.

According to student comments, the brief format of the assignments provides an accessible way to practice music-analytical writing while simultaneously challenging students to communicate their analytical findings concisely. One student explained,

The postcard assignment was a non-intimidating way to start writing about music. In the past we [were] asked to dive in to 4- [to] 5-page papers of analyzing music. I never felt fully prepared for that. This short writing style was helpful and having a specific recipient gave me direction.

Postcard assignments, with their brevity and strict word-count requirements, can prepare students both to write more extensively about music analysis and to write

persuasive prose within the concise parameters of genres such as program notes, academic conference proposals, and newspaper letters to the editor. By addressing their postcards to specific recipients, students learn to communicate clearly in different rhetorical contexts while simultaneously satisfying their own need for relatedness. If desired, the postcard assignments can become even more interactive: students can send one or more postcards to real recipients who provide feedback on the effectiveness of students' communication. Postcard 1, for example, can become a pen-pal exchange between students in a post-tonal theory course and students enrolled in a tonal theory course. Similarly, students can share Postcard 2 with their friends or loved ones and discuss its effectiveness via a phone or video call.

Students commented positively on the creative-writing aspect of the postcard assignments and enjoyed sharing their analyses with different imagined audiences. In their course evaluations, several students mentioned creative activities and assessments as the aspects of the course which they most liked, and one student specifically mentioned the postcard assignments when praising the creative course design. Students demonstrated their engagement with the postcard assignments by developing clever titles as captions and sometimes formatting their assignments to look like real postcards, complete with recipients' addresses, return addresses, and hand-drawn postage stamps. A student-designed postage stamp appears in Example 9, and another student's creatively formatted postcard assignment appears in Example 10. Examples of creative student captions include the following:

- "DebuSee These Pentatonics?" (Postcard 1)
- "It's Easy as X, Y, Z!" (Postcard 2)
- "Webern in His Prime" (Postcard 3)
- "The 'Right' Rhythms of Spring" (Postcard 4)



Example 9.
Student-designed postage stamp.

FROM: [Student Name]
[Residence Hall Room]
Residential Quad [College Name]
[City, State, ZIP]

December 3, 2018

INSERT
STAMP

Transforming Scales and Transforming How We Think About Music

Dear [Student Name],

Congratulations on passing the board exam and landing your first full time music therapy position; you're living the dream just like I knew you would! Remember your first semester of senior year, and how stressed you were? Remember how daunting Theory V seemed? Well now it's all a memory, but here's some analysis to remind you of the good old days of Dr. Ripley's class. We are going to analyze Bartók's *Harvest Song (Ara lászor)* Violin Duo # 33, in regard to the composer's use of diatonic modes and octatonic scales.

In measures 1-5, Bartók creates an octatonic scale beginning on D# and including the pitch classes: D#, E#, F#, G#, A#, B, C#, D. The scale is almost complete except for the A# which should be an A. Bartók relates measures 10-15 to 1-5 by transposing the octatonic scale using the T., resulting in the following scale: G#, A#, B, C, D, E, F, G. Re-visiting the concept of octatonic scales after learning set-theory and transposition operations, makes the analysis of music more nuanced. It allows the listener to take seemingly unrelated passages and understand a connection. This connection is heard upon listening to the piece. The listener can hear stark tempo and mood contrasts between the A and the B section, but the overall tone stays the same. The second half of the piece creates uses the same methods, but transposes, as noted by the teal brackets in the image.

At the end of the piece, Bartók begins to repeat material from section A, however instead of forming an octatonic scale, Bartók creates the Ab Dorian scale. This is seen in measures 30-34. In these measures, Bartók returns to the original tempo

and uses the same material from m. 1-5, transposed down a perfect 5°, and enharmonically spelled. Again, this gives the piece a sense of unity.

I felt that this piece was an important one to analyze because it took a concept from the beginning of the semester, octatonic scales, and applied through the use of a concept we learned during Set Theory Survivor: transposition. This analysis shows the progression of the course and my learning. It also demonstrates my new appreciation for post-tonal music. I hope that you look back on undergrad fondly and continue to embrace life with the same vigor you did five years ago.

Remember to have fun,
[Student Name] (of the past)

TO: [Student Name], MT-BC
[Address]
[City, State]

WORD COUNT: 402

Example 10. Student creative format for Postcard 4. Despite several errors in analysis and grammar, this student's assignment exhibits a good tone for the intended recipient (future self) and demonstrates high engagement with the assignment through creative formatting to look like a real postcard.

Students also demonstrated creative engagement with the assignments through their choice of recipients. For example, the recipients for Postcard 1, which was addressed to a music student who had not yet encountered post-tonal music theory, included historical characters such as Ludwig van Beethoven and Clara Schumann. Recipients for Postcard 3, addressed to a music theory professor evaluating the student's graduate-school application, included students' current and former professors as well as the imaginary Professor Prime and Dr. Form, Professor Smartypants, and Dr. Music-Theory-Professor-Who-Holds-My-Future-In-Their-Hands. (The last of these imaginary professors teaches at the University of Hard Music Stuff.)

When asked to share their suggestions for future versions of these assignments, students advocated for maintaining the policy of completing three out of four postcards and suggested expanding the element of choice to include additional options of repertoire and theme for each assignment. After the first iteration of the course, students suggested having a sample postcard to demonstrate the desired scope of the postcard assignments; during the second iteration of the course, in response to this feedback, I prepared guidelines for a practice postcard exploring the topics of form and text-music interactions in Poldowski's song "Effet de Neige," which we worked through together in class one week before the first postcard assignment was due.¹⁶ When reflecting on the second iteration of the course, several students expressed a desire for additional guidance for the self-selected repertoire of Postcard 4; one student-suggested approach is to supply a list of composers whose music frequently employs specific techniques discussed during the course. Finally, a student also proposed addressing a postcard to a former mentor, such as a high-school theory teacher or band director.

Several students mentioned the thrill of discovery as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the postcard assignments. One student described this as the "opportunity to 'discover' trends in the music for myself." Another student explained, "Sort of getting thrown out into the deep end with a piece (of music) and trying to determine what is going on is intimidating at first, but I really enjoyed the feeling of figuring things out for myself when the assignments were complete." Other students enjoyed "applying concepts to real-world examples" and observed, "It's nice to sit down and do a more in-depth analysis of a single piece rather than skimming through brief examples."

Students credited the communication aspect of postcard assignments with

¹⁶ Poldowski was the professional pseudonym of Régine Wieniawski (1879–1932). The score for this piece is available at <https://musictheoryexamplesbywomen.com/examples/effet-de-neige-poldowski/> (accessed November 18, 2020).

promoting deep learning; one student remarked, “I feel I learned the concepts from the postcards better because I was forced to comprehend them well enough to explain them to another person,” and another student concluded, “It’s difficult to build a strong enough foundation of a concept to explain it well to another person. It takes time & work, and that’s good.” Students’ perception of the postcard assignments as challenging, yet attainable, indicates that this series of assignments is effective in meeting students’ need for competence. Students hone their critical-thinking skills as they learn to construct analytical arguments and write coherently about music-theoretical topics for different audiences. In so doing, students learn to understand music analysis as a form of communication. With insightful analytical comments and language tailored to their intended recipients, the postcards become souvenirs of learning from students’ exploration of music theory.

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Appendices: Guidelines for Post-Tonal Postcard Assignments

Postcard Assignment 1

(At least three out of four postcard assignments must be completed.)

Postmark (due) date: Wednesday, September 12, at 11:00 a.m.

Recipient: Address your message to an imaginary music student who has studied tonal music theory but has not yet encountered any post-tonal music.

Picture: One or more excerpts from the score of Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (*Préludes*, Book 1, No. 8). The total length of these excerpts must be at least one-half page, but no more than one page, long (8.5 x 11 inches). Analytical annotations should be marked on the score.

Caption: Write a brief caption (at the top of your message, like a title) that communicates the theme of your postcard in a concise and creative way. Note: the caption is included in the word count for your message.

Message: Keep your message brief (300–500 words). Your entire message, with caption, must fit on a single page (8.5 x 11 inches), with a 12-point font and margins of at least 0.8 inches. Include your word count at the bottom of the page.

Focus on one of the following themes, using the musical excerpt(s) to illustrate your discussion (refer to specific measure numbers).

1. Pentatonic collections throughout the piece (in both melodic and harmonic contexts)
2. Pitch centrality throughout the piece: establishment of pitch centers (locally and for the piece as a whole), tonal ambiguity, and tonally functional vs. non-functional harmonic progressions

Remembering your intended recipient, provide brief explanations of new terminology (e.g., pentatonic scale) as needed and, when possible, connect your message to the recipient's previous experience with music theory.

Include an element of personal reflection in your message (e.g., something in the music that you found surprising, or comments on the aural experience of hearing this piece).

Grading: Your postcard will be graded on the basis of these criteria: following assignment guidelines, accuracy and quality of analysis, clarity and organization of writing, neatness and effectiveness of annotated score excerpts, creativity and conciseness of caption, and appropriate tone for the intended recipient.

Appendix 1. Guidelines for Postcard 1.

Postcard Assignment 2

(At least three out of four postcard assignments must be completed.)

Postmark (due) date:	Monday, October 15, at 11:00 a.m.
Recipient:	Address your message to a friend or loved one who cares about you but knows very little about music.
Picture:	The entire (one-page) score of Bartók's "Chromatic Invention 1" (<i>Mikrokosmos</i> , Book 3, No. 91) Analytical annotations should be marked on the score.
Caption:	Write a brief caption (at the top of your message, like a title) that communicates the theme of your postcard in a concise and creative way. Note: the caption is included in the word count for your message.
Message:	Keep your message brief (300–500 words). Your entire message, with caption, must fit on a single page (8.5 x 11 inches), with a 12-point font and margins of at least 0.8 inches. Include your word count at the bottom of the page. Focus on the following theme, using the score to illustrate your discussion (refer to specific measure numbers). Theme: Compositional unity and contrast, with a focus on Bartók's z-cell and points of imitation (be specific about type[s] of imitation and pitch and time intervals); to review these topics, see pp. 41–47 of Roig-Francolí's <i>Understanding Post-Tonal Music</i>. Remembering your intended recipient, provide brief explanations of new terminology (e.g., z-cell, imitation) and use analogies that connect your message to the recipient's experience outside the field of music. Include an element of personal reflection in your message (e.g., how your experience of listening to the piece changed once you analyzed the piece).
Grading:	Your postcard will be graded on the basis of these criteria: following assignment guidelines, accuracy and quality of analysis, clarity and organization of writing, neatness and effectiveness of annotated score, creativity and conciseness of caption, and appropriate tone for the intended recipient.

Appendix 2.

Guidelines for Postcard 2.

Postcard Assignment 3*(At least three out of four postcard assignments must be completed.)*

Postmark (due) date:	Monday, November 5, at 11:00 a.m.
Recipient:	Address your message to a music theory professor at a university where you are applying for admission to a graduate program in music. Imagine that this postcard will be included in your application as a brief writing sample and demonstration of your music-analytical abilities.
Picture:	The entire (one-page) score of Webern's <i>Four Pieces for Violin and Piano</i> , Op. 7, No. 3. Analytical annotations should be marked on the score.
Caption:	Write a brief caption (at the top of your message, like a title) that communicates the theme of your postcard in a concise and creative way. Note: the caption is included in the word count for your message.
Message:	Keep your message brief (300–500 words). Your entire message, with caption, must fit on a single page (8.5 x 11 inches), with a 12-point font and margins of at least 0.8 inches. Include your word count at the bottom of the page. Focus on the following theme, using the score to illustrate your discussion (refer to specific measure numbers). Theme: Identity of pitch-class sets, relationships among sets, and the influence of sets throughout the piece • Find the prime form of each set that is marked on the score and label sets with their respective prime forms. (Remember to put the sets in normal form before calculating their prime forms.) • Discuss the relationships between any sets that have the same prime form (e.g., related by T_n, related by T_nI), and consider their similarities or differences in instrumentation, register, and voicing. • Explain which pitch-class set you think is the most influential in this piece, and why. Because you are writing for an expert audience, you will not need to provide explanations of terminology such as “prime form.” Your challenge, however, will be to make insightful observations about the piece and convey these observations clearly.
Grading:	Your postcard will be graded on the basis of these criteria: following assignment guidelines, accuracy and quality of analysis, clarity and organization of writing, neatness and effectiveness of annotated score, creativity and conciseness of caption, and appropriate tone for the intended recipient.

Appendix 3.

Guidelines for Postcard 3.

Postcard Assignment 4

(At least three out of four postcard assignments must be completed.)

Postmark (due) date:	Monday, December 3, at 11:00 a.m.
Recipient:	Address your message to your future self, five years from now.
Picture:	One or more excerpts from the score of a piece you choose, which may be either 1. A piece we have studied this semester (see examples in the textbook, etc.), or 2. Another piece of 20th- or 21st-century art music that demonstrates one or more of the concepts we have studied this semester The total length of these excerpts must be at least one-half page, but no more than one page, long (8.5 x 11 inches). Analytical annotations should be marked on the score.
Caption:	Write a brief caption (at the top of your message, like a title) that communicates the theme of your postcard in a concise and creative way. Note: the caption is included in the word count for your message.
Message:	Keep your message brief (300–500 words). Your entire message, with caption, must fit on a single page (8.5 x 11 inches), with a 12-point font and margins of at least 0.8 inches. Include your word count at the bottom of the page. Focus on the following theme, using the musical excerpt(s) to illustrate your discussion (refer to specific measure numbers). Theme: One of the most important concepts you learned this semester (explain the concept and why you consider it important) Remembering your intended recipient, briefly review terminology as needed and connect your message to the recipient’s professional work (in other words, think about the work you hope to be doing in five years). Include a significant element of personal reflection in your message that will help your future self understand why you want to remember this concept.
Grading:	Your postcard will be graded on the basis of these criteria: following assignment guidelines, accuracy and quality of analysis, depth and thoughtfulness of reflection, clarity and organization of writing, neatness and effectiveness of annotated score excerpts, creativity and conciseness of caption, and appropriate tone for the intended recipient.

Appendix 4.

Guidelines for Postcard 4.

