

Are musical influences important to the composer
or is it necessary to be original?

Throughout musical history, from medieval plainsong and chant, through to the serialism and minimalism of the 20th century, music has evolved. I believe this evolution has occurred due to a combination of influences and originality.

All composers are given an education including musical theory and instrumental lessons. The facts they learn during their education, and the pieces they play when learning an instrument form the basis of their musical influences. It is impossible to play a piece without, to a certain extent, analysing it; whether one likes the piece, or dislikes it, it becomes part of your musical background that influences you. As such, and because all composers must learn the history of music, and play music written by other composers, I do not believe that musical influences are so much something that is important to the composer, as something that is unavoidable. Whether or not it reflects in the pieces that they compose, all composers are influenced by the works of past composers.

However, given that music has developed so greatly over the past few centuries, it would be impossible to say that there is no evidence of originality. Looking back, it is possible to see moments of originality that have allowed new musical techniques to be pioneered. The Mannheim school, comprised of composers who wrote for the orchestra at the court of Mannheim in the second half of the 18th Century gave rise to a great many of these new techniques. Most notable of these is the Mannheim sky-rocket, wherein the music rises in a series of ascending arpeggios from the bottom of the bass clef, right up to the upper reaches of the treble. Other techniques pioneered here include; the Mannheim Sigh, which was an evolution of the Baroque practice of putting more emphasis of the first of a pair of tied notes; the Mannheim roller, where an ascending melodic line over an ostinato like bass line is accompanied by an extended crescendo; the Mannheim birds, which used higher register instruments to imitate the twittering of birds, and the Grand Pause, where the music stops to create a moment of complete silence, before it restarts again with vigour. Without the originality of the composers that were writing for the orchestra at Mannheim, it is quite possible that the style of music would not have developed as rapidly as it did during that period.

However, one must consider not only if originality or musical influences are necessary, but also whether they are successful. A great many composers have relied on the fact that, by studying the techniques by other composers, whose music is known to be popular with the public and using them as influences, they will be able to produce music that will be equally popular. However, although their work may be popular during their lives, more often than not, their work is forgotten after their death. Many libraries throughout Europe are filled with the compositions of hundreds of forgotten composers; only those that pioneered the techniques that were then copied by the masses are truly remembered.

Even so, it is not true to say that those whose music is utterly original will be remembered by posterity. Many composers throughout history have come up with radical and forward thinking ideas for their music, but unfortunately, often these ideas have been a little too radical and forward thinking. The general public may not be ready for the new techniques and styles, and as such, the composers may not gain the acclaim that they, perhaps, deserve. Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), for example, shunned the German Romantic traditions of Wagner and Brahms, and chose instead to develop techniques of atonalism. He is known for his famous development of serialism, and the use of "note rows", which consist of each one of the 12 notes in the octave used once in a seemingly random sequence. Despite his innovation and originality, he was often not well received; in March 1913, in a concert featuring his Chamber Symphony No.1 in E Major, clapping had to contend with hisses and laughter. A newspaper reported that "one could hear the shrill sound of door keys among the violent clapping and in the second gallery the first fight of the evening began", and later on, more fights erupted, as Schoenberg interrupted the performance to declare that any trouble makers would be thrown out.

I conclude therefore, that their must be a fine balance between reliance upon the influences from other composers, and development of one's own original ideas; relying too heavily on influences from the past leaves music that is often popular in its day, but soon forgotten; too much originality and innovation, and a composer can find their music disliked by the general public, which makes building a name for oneself very difficult indeed.