

## **The Anxiety of Influence in Contemporary Music**

“I would rather quit composing, period, than be viewed as a neo-Romantic, or a reactionary, or a naïve composer.” So avowed composer Andrew Norman in a 2015 interview with the New York Times. Why is Norman so loath to be labeled neoromantic? Why group this label with reactionism and naivety, words with undeniably negative connotations? This seemingly innocuous statement reflects a reality of contemporary music criticism, which dates back a half century to the stylistic tyranny of serialism. A backlash against serialism’s perceived oppressiveness opened the floodgates for eclectic mixtures of styles; critics today extol such novel stylistic mixtures. But one aesthetic continues to be left behind, implicitly dismissed as “backward-looking”: “reactionary” and “naïve” neoromanticism.

The fetishization of stylistic fusion and fluidity ends with the hint of a post-Romantic idiom, scorned as unadventurous and derivative. Contemporary music’s insatiable striving for “newness,” a drive famously highlighted by serialist-turned-neoromantic George Rochberg, does not sour us on idioms dependent on Stravinsky, Messiaen, or even Couperin (as in the music of Thomas Adès); rather, critics laud the incorporation of their styles today.

Does the condescension reserved for neoromantic music by critics and composers alike indicate a new, subtler brand of stylistic tyranny? This investigation forces us to consider how we understand the concept of influence today: why are certain models legitimate and celebrated, while other models are disdained? It is vital to examine this reality, because it affects how we teach young composers, program concerts, and excite audiences about the artistry of contemporary music.