

*Many people have said that when you're just starting out as an artist, the most important thing isn't your own style, the most important thing is the fundamentals and making as much art as possible, and your own style will naturally come out in time. This is true, but that shouldn't stop you from exploring the styles of your influences, and relate them to the kind of work you yourself would like to do.*

*Artist Anthony Jones recently posted this on his twitter feed: "If your style is influenced by one source, it's recognizable. If it's influenced by many, it becomes unrecognizable."*

*At about the same time, artist Ben Mauro had the good idea of creating these collages of the work of specific artists or art movements. It really lets you see a person's style at a glance.*

*This got me thinking of a fun little thing to try. I picked a number of my favorite artists, created groups of some of my favorite images of theirs, and then wrote down the 5 things the images had in common. In other words, analyzing the style of my influences. What are the 5 elements an artist has that really define their work compared to other artists? What 5 things say "ah yes, this work is made by artist X".*

## Analyzing The Artistic Style Of Your Influences

**- By Neil Blevins**

I believe this same artistic “style” concept can be applied to musicians & sound engineers/recording artists in much the same capacity. Part of our work relies on the craft, but the particular character that comes across in the creative choices we make even in the “craft” portion of our work can be drawn upon our influences that weigh most heavily on us.

In songwriting - as a composer or being a guitarist, vocalist, or any type of performer, we will have some very profound influences that could be very diverse or very focused and narrow; even in the craft of recording arts, mixing, and mastering (the more subtle crafts imparted on contemporary music). Those influences could easily arise from our collective listening experiences throughout our childhood and even then will continue through to our adult life, but some of the most profound influences will also be “revelatory” moments. Whether it’s a particular song that turned you on to progressive rock, or Jazz, or maybe inspired you to start discovering concert orchestra and classical music.

Whatever the case, this particular exercise can be looked at as a self-discovery experiment. The original lesson was developed by Neil Blevins and catered to visual arts.

## **Exercise 1 – From the perspective of a songwriter**

Analyze your influences. For this, I've picked 5 of my musical influences, not necessarily my most important influences, but 5 I felt would be good examples to analyze.

### Sevendust

- Balance of heavy metal (aggressive sounding) but yet emotional guitar riffs.
- Drums! (Sonics and performance)
- Vocal/lyrical connection, emotionally charged. Tend to be about personal perspectives & life lessons
- Vocal prowess, ability to evoke emotions and deliver powerful vocals.
- Not always conventionally written songs, arrangements can get clever and interesting.

### Trent Reznor

- Weird, interesting and unique sound design.
- Pension for dark, brooding moods
- Lyrical & vocal delivery is full of imagery and sonic texture.
- Arrangements clever and unique
- Plays up “ugly” in sonic character, not afraid to sound “dirty” as opposed to pleasant and clean.

### Hans Zimmer

- Bombastic percussion!
- Powerful, emotional compositions (string based instruments especially)
- Compositions can pull on heartstrings so well, very emotionally charged
- Sound Design, ambience and space to build in - soundscapes
- Clever use of instrumentation, orchestration is well written for its purpose (not concert)

### Sascha Dikiciyan (Sonic Mayhem)

- Earlier (Q2-Q3 etc) very aggressive metal and electronica blend
- Transcended to scoring more orchestral/synth-based work
- Aggressive Sonics – somewhat dirty when necessary (Borderlands, MAG, Tron Evolution)
- Dark & brooding atmospheres (Borderlands, MAG)
- Spacious arrangements, sound design oriented (Borderlands, Mass Effect 3)

### Paul Leonard-Morgan

- Synth-based productions, sound design oriented
- Unique compositional perspectives, instrumentation (see “Dredd” and “Limitless” scores)
- Blur the line between sound-design and sound-track in the films and musical-score.
- Fun elements, almost game-like arrangements at points.
- Guitars implemented in clever sound-design ways.

Now try it with 5 or more of your own influences.

<b>1.</b>	
<b>2.</b>	
<b>3.</b>	
<b>4.</b>	
<b>5.</b>	

## Exercise 2

Now, if you're just starting out, and you feel you don't have a strongly defined style, try this exercise:

First do exercise 1. Next, note that some things may show up again and again. Like 3 of your influences may all be in the same genre. Or 2 of your influences feature the same style of vocals, etc.

Choose 5 or more of these reoccurring things that appear in your influences, and work on references based on those 5 things, as these are probably 5 of the things that are most important to you. I've tried to categorize what it is that sticks out to me into 4 categories listed below. You don't have to do this, you could instead sort them into 5 musical genres if most of your reoccurring things fall into those categories.

My examples are below based on my answers in Exercise 1.

### Composition

- Emotionally Charged
- Aggressive, brooding, dark, or atmospheric
- Metal, Industrial, and Symphonic (based on influence references)
- "Ugly", "unpleasant" = dissonance. Creates a certain provoking mood.
- Sound design focus.
- Bassline complexity (Sevendust, Sascha Dikiciyan)

### Arrangement

- Emotionally charged – requires contrast: knowing range of moods major, minor, augmented and suspended chords can create.
- Spacious, minimalist (less = more)
- Lyrics & vocal performance equally about mood (the right voice, expression, etc)
- Sound design focus
- Chord progression = emotional impact (Hans Zimmer, Paul Morgan)

### Instrumentation

- Balance of heavy metal (aggressive sounding) but yet emotional guitar riffs.
- Guitar, Synth, and Strings (symphonic) recurring elements.
- Bombastic Percussion

### Sound Design

- Sound design
- Synthesis – sound mangling
- Vocals – Where vocals are present – delivery & timbre = texture, not just lyrical message.
- "Ugly", "Unpleasant" = dissonance. Creates a certain provoking mood.
- Drums! Bombastic percussion (sonics and performance)

Now try it with 5 or more of your own influences.

<b>1.</b>	
<b>2.</b>	
<b>3.</b>	
<b>4.</b>	
<b>5.</b>	

### Exercise 3

If you're an established artist who has a recognizable style, as well as doing exercise 1, do the same thing with your own body of work, or have a close friend do it for you if you want a more unbiased opinion. I'll do the exercise with my own:

- Heavy, brooding guitars
- Electronic, synth oriented
- Spacious, minimalist arrangements
- Dark, brooding, or emotionally charged
- Sound Design, sound-mangling
- Focus on Symphonic strings, guitars, interesting sounds with stringed instruments
- Contrast in arrangements – emotional melodic to aggressive or brooding.

Once done, choose 10 reoccurring things that appear in your influences, but remove from the list any things you're already exploring in your own work, and then make that highlight the remaining items on the list.

For example, several of my influences use strong support of bass-line & chord progressions, and I don't do that as much in my own work. So in future projects, I'm going to explore focusing on bass-line and chord progressions.

<b>1.</b>	
<b>2.</b>	
<b>3.</b>	
<b>4.</b>	
<b>5.</b>	
<b>6.</b>	
<b>7.</b>	
<b>8.</b>	
<b>9.</b>	
<b>10.</b>	

## Conclusion

Remember, this sort of analysis is a guide. You shouldn't feel trapped by the results. If you notice you have extremely heavy distorted guitars in all your works, this doesn't mean that you need to put heavy distorted guitars in all your works or they won't sound like your style. Artists work are constantly changing and evolving, and going with your gut is the most important thing.

A perfect example of the evolution of an artist through their body of works is Linkin Park. If you follow from Hybrid Theory all the way to Living Things, there is a clear divergent path away from Nu Metal into more pop and alternative, but they still have a distinct style that blends multiple genres.

Hopefully these 3 exercises not only help you analyze your influences, but suggest areas of new exploration for your own work. Don't be afraid to experiment and try new things.

A big thanks to Neil Blevins for the original lesson designs that these are inspired by. You can check out his [website here](#) and the [original lesson article here](#).

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