

THE MIXING BALANCE 1

You have recently developed an idea using your digital audio workstation (DAW) and think its time to hone in on the mixing. Or you've recorded sounds from various instruments in your home studio and are ready to turn the individual tracks into a complete song. Regardless of your particular situation, mixing remains a cornerstone in music production. It (mixing) is the art of merging various sounds into form, by balancing, refining, and blending individual tracks, to create a sculpture that is connected, clear and well-defined. When a song or a composition is properly mixed, one is able to hear everything: each sound is given its own space and position, within the audible frequency range of humans, in which to operate in. And while mixing is typically a subjective process that is best learned by practice, the advice below can make your process a little less daunting.

To have a rough or default mix, play the song through, and adjust the volume of each track in the song to a loudness that suits you. Pan all the tracks to the center. This default mix may be considered the starting point of an otherwise repetitive journey.

Understanding the Surroundings

Understanding your room's acoustics and it's effect on the sounds you create/record is very important. Acoustics are the effects of sound produced in an enclosure. For instance, are there boxes around your speakers? Is your home studio located in a small room without windows? Are there high ceilings in your recording space? What materials are the walls made of? Knowing how your recording space affects what you create gives you greater control in mixing; any effect a room has to a sound can be compensated for while mixing. For instance, if one has tall ceilings, he/she might hear unintended echoes while listening to a default mix. By being aware of this, such a person is careful to avoid inaccuracy by trying to eliminate the echoes from the mixing board/interface.

Optimize your room's acoustics by repositioning the objects contained in the recording space. The goal is to be able to achieve a wide and comprehensive sound-scape of the music. As a case; if your

speakers are placed beside a couch, removing the couch or placing the speakers on stands, at opposite ends of the room, will help to minimize the absorption of bass frequencies and pick up the most sound.

In addition to understanding your room's acoustics, know your speakers/monitors. This can be done by listening to your favorite compositions, mixes or songs. How does each song sound through the speakers? Subjectively, is what you hear what the producer/composer of the song intended? Do the monitors carry a little much bass? What do the high-, mid- and low-ends sound like? By knowing the speakers through the music of those whom one admires or respects, one will be able to compare the sound of a mixing project to the sound of a work very familiar. Your view of the work will arise from a more objective viewpoint. This helps one to better manipulate within the parameters of each sound towards the best possible mix.

It is advisable to keep the volume relatively low through most of the mixing process. Keeping the volume loud through the course can alter your perception of the music. You will often need to listen to what you have done on a very loud volume, to ensure it works. However, also bear in mind that a good mix sounds well balanced when played quietly.

Musical Traditions

The category of music one is mixing typically directs the manner in which the song is mixed. As you may know, there commonly is more emphasis on the bass and drums of a Hip-Hop/electronic-based song than a folk/country song. Know the various kinds of music intimately, by listening for the various techniques used by contemporaries or other professionals of such genres. Get to know how their mixes sound in your home studio. Be a critic. As with all things worth while however, this takes some time. The reward is that, by absorbing various influences, your mixing capabilities are broadened: Not only will you uncover the basic fundamentals of each genre, you will also have the opportunity to creatively further the limits of the respective genre you're dealing with. It is time worth the effort, one that will always show itself in the end-result.

In addition to familiarizing yourself with the different kinds of music out there, get to know your gear and its capabilities. Understanding the capabilities of ones instrument(s), DAW, mixer and so forth gives such an individual more space in which to express ideas creatively. Practice consistently to become proficient at what you do, to understand what you do. It is these little fundamental things that make all the difference.

The Story/Context

Before you begin the mixing process, it is beneficial to consider the context: The idea(s) on what you plan to achieve. Planning ahead allows you the room to intuit how to fit each individual track into the whole puzzle. Also remember that such ideas are prone to change, once the actual mixing process begins. One way to develop ideas on what to achieve is to allow the music direct the flow: Rather than imitating someone else, bring out the novelty in what you have.

Record vocals and instruments flat without using effects. In lieu, find the right microphone for the singer or the instrumentalist. For instance, some producers consider ribbon microphones preferable to condenser microphones. The reason is that ribbon microphones record sounds more naturally, closer to the mechanism of an eardrum (due to the very thin vibrating ribbon in a magnetic field), than condenser microphones (uses electrical manipulations to achieve a perceived flat sound). Try placing the microphones unconventionally to create more natural sounding changes (without adding or subtracting from the recorded track by using the EQ). Use double tracking or overdubbing to allow a singer to harmonize themselves. This allows him/her to focus on one role at a time, contributing to a mature finish. Lastly, when mixing in the vocals, place the a cappella in such a way that it *sits comfortably* in the mix.

Listen to each individual track by itself. Pay attention to the details by eliminating clicks or unwanted noises. Mold each track to its best sound by differentiating them through the use of the EQ, **not** panning. An EQ can adjust the shape of an instrument's/sound's frequency spectrum. Thus, it is,

arguably, more effective to start the mixing process with all tracks/instruments panned to the center while using the EQ to carve out the various frequency domains and ranges. However, try not to overuse the EQ; use it only to attain something specific.

Pan into position individual tracks from left to right and, in surround sound, from front to back. Try to make even the rhythmic sections on both sides of the panning field. A good way to know where to place an individual sound/track within the mix is to imagine yourself setting up a stage for a live rendition of the song you're mixing. What, and where, would you like the audience to hear? You can intuitively place effects and support sections on either side of the panning field; so long as they only add texture or feeling to the song, without affecting the rhythm.

Create dynamics in a song by manipulating or tweaking the fader levels, EQ levels and effects, live, as the mix progresses. Subtract some instruments and add them back, in variation. Increase the volumes of certain individual tracks and then soften. Vary the tempo, slightly or drastically, throughout the mix. Changes in dynamics can breathe life into a mix, shaping and manipulating the balance (and hence the story or context) from moment to moment.

Avoid using too many effects. Doing so will create clusters in your sculpture. Though effects like the delay, the reverb, and the phaser may give your mix additional character, it's also important to give the arrangement some breathing room. Let the instruments/sounds speak. Use effects with caution, only when demanded. Using too much reverb can cloud a mix, as nice as it may sound. This similarly goes for delays, phasers and so forth.

Simplify the process by grouping similar sets of instruments together. Label them into groups. Doing this will save you time in the long run. Also, try to apply effects to several sounds, through one track, for a cleaner output. You can also EQ your effect returns, to free up more space in your mix. Some producers prefer to assign individual faders to individual tracks or instruments. It all depends on your set-up and what you're comfortable with.

Refreshen your Ears

Save your work regularly. Make it a habit.

Take notes on particular details you might not want to forget. Record your ideas by any means.

What exactly did you do to get the snare to sound like that? What of the synth from the keyboard? Did you forget the notes that you thought would sound great, for the supporting guitar? One is less likely to forget something written down or recorded. As obvious as this sounds, you'd be surprised at its importance.

Play your work to others for critical feedback. They will hear things you didn't and raise questions you didn't think of for consideration. Remember that constructive criticism, honestly considered, causes improvement.

Listen to your mixes in more than one pair of speakers. Most (if not all) professional studios have at least one extra speaker (of lesser quality) for this purpose. While a song might sound great on your home studio's monitors, you might notice accentuation in the mid-ranges when listening to the same song on a car stereo, PC speakers, headphones, a friend's sound system and so forth. Listening to a mix in more than one pair of speakers will expose different aspects of your mix that need to be emphasized or diminished. In addition, you will be able to create a blend that will maintain most of its integrity in the diverse world of speakers.

A clear mind creates better mixes. Take note of your productivity; spending more time on a mix might make it worse. If you feel like you are not progressing with a project, turn it off and come back to it later. You can also refer to this [article](#) on the importance of taking breaks.

Experiment with your mix. Take some time aside to play with the sounds of the various instruments. You'll be surprised at the insights you gain through experimentation alone.

If you are working with an artist or a band, it might be beneficial not to involve them in the mixing process until the song is almost ready for mastering. For instance, a band member might want his/her

instrument to be prominent within the mix; this might ruin the song. Absurdly however, working with artists or bands through the mixing process can very well develop into a learning experience for all involved. The key is to find what you are most comfortable with, what brings out the best in the capabilities of all involved.

Mixing is a long and complicated process. It can be very painful: Little changes usually make a world of difference and getting a perfect mix usually opens up Pandora's box. But there is always hope. Mixing can be the most rewarding part of music production: It requires a level of skill that is recognizable and respected among musicians alike.

Oh and...remember to get your final drafts mastered.

More on mixing in the future....

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