

MIXING MUSIC

A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK



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STEP 1: PRE-MIX EQ

Cleaning your tracks before you start

Before we start addressing the individual tracks to make them sound beautiful together, we need to clean them up first. Most recordings will come with unwanted noises and frequencies, which build up to create muddiness and frustration.

The best thing to do is to apply an EQ to each of your tracks, then use the sweep-and-destroy method (taking a frequency band, narrowing the slope, and boosting the band at least 10dB) to isolate the problem frequencies.

Once you find a frequency you dislike, notch that frequency out to your desired setting. Note that there are no strict rules here, but keep in mind that slight and subtle moves add up gradually over the course of a mix.

STEP 2: STATIC MIX

The most crucial step in the mixing process

The static mix is just a fancy way of saying, "balance your tracks". What you do in this step is:

1. Bring every instrument's fader down to the bottom so you hear nothing.
2. In the loudest section of your song, bring your lead instrument (vocal, solo instrument) up to a conservative level (0dB max).
3. Balance your other instruments around the lead instrument, in order from most important to least important instrument.

This step will take time. It's important that you establish a solid volume balance among all your instruments so that the overall track sounds quite good already. This step will give you about 80% of the results.

STEP 3: GAIN STAGING

Aim for around -8dB on your master bus

This is a simple step, but not one to be overlooked.

Take a look at your master bus (where everything is outputting to). If the meter on the bus is hitting yellow, or even worse, red, you are digitally clipping. This will cause problems when you export the mix.

To solve this, highlight all of your tracks (excluding the master bus), and drag them down around -10dB. This should lower the peak of the master bus to a level where it is nowhere near clipping.

This is a fundamental step!

STEP 4: TOP DOWN MIXING

The quicker but more effective way to mix

The traditional way to mix has always been to start from the individual instruments, apply processing (EQ, compression, reverb, etc.) to each instrument, then work up to the group busses, then finally to the master bus.

I approach mixing the opposite way. I learned this technique from Graham Cochrane over at Recording Revolution on Youtube. He mixes in a way where he begins his mix on the master bus, doing subtle EQ, compression, and saturation so he can establish a radio-ready sound quickly.

This method makes sense because any processing you apply to the master bus affects all of the group busses and individual instruments. So while this isn't as detailed, these general moves result in a good sound in minutes.

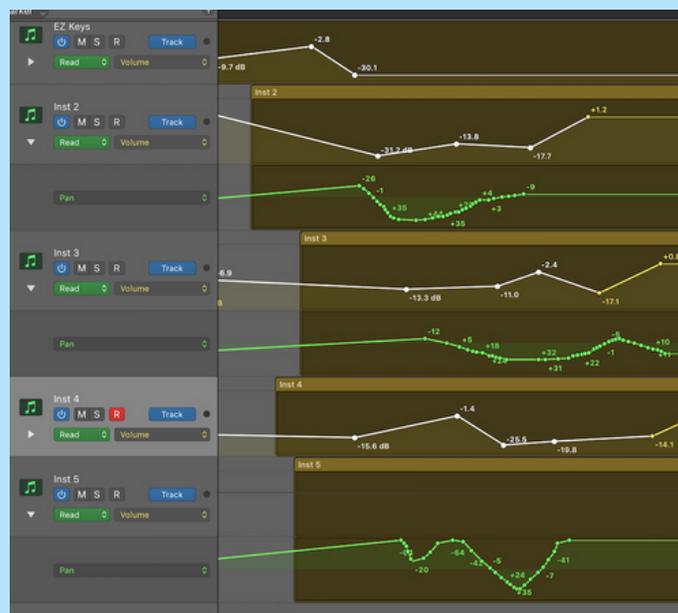
STEP 5: AUTOMATION

*Making manual adjustments so your DAW
will ride the fader automatically*

After you've applied your processing to your master, group, and individual tracks, it's time to polish up your mix.

Even with something as efficient as compression, which decreases the loudest peaks of your instrument so the dynamic range is lessened, you will need to draw in your own automation to catch anything the compressor might have missed.

The picture below demonstrates what automation can look like. Take your time!



STEP 6: MASTERING

Final polishing & commercial volume

After you've polished up your mix with automation, listen through to your mix a few times. If nothing stands out to you as being amateur, then your mix is finished!

Moving on to mastering, in this step our goal is to bring our music up to commercial volume so it's competitive with already published music. You may might some general EQ and compression to the overall mix, but most importantly, apply a limiter to the master so that you can raise its volume.

The tool I recommend is Ozone 8 Elements. It's extremely easy to use and affordable (sometimes free!), and it applies EQ, stereo imaging, and limiting to your mix. If your goal is to wrap up your song and apply that professional sheen, I wouldn't look anywhere else.

RESOURCES

Channels I recommend

RECORDING REVOLUTION

- Mixing in mono: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57iD9HhVHOo>
- Static mix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEHf57RoC4s>
- Mix bus processing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Zgn5t-tflw>

JOËL DOLLIÉ

- Frequency masking: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5eX9CoPJR0>
- Reverb automation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW6txRugUfk>
- Dynamic EQ: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQN31ic8J4U>

BEHIND THE SPEAKERS

- Mixing vocals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7d3gRZAI718>
- How to use reverb: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwOUTYCDWc0>
- Compression mistakes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0zhE55-plk>

These are some of my favourite resources to learn about mixing/mastering. These are also super great guys! They know what they're talking about, and are generous in answering questions.

That's all from me! If you have any additional questions about the music-making process, please don't hesitate to shoot me an email!

I wish you the very best in your personal and musical career!

Your friend,
Chris
