

Mixing.

Here are some tips for mixing your music that I've picked up over my years of working with big-time engineers and producers. These are basic rules of thumb to get you started with a good balance. Ultimately there is no right or wrong way so this is meant to be a guide, not an absolute methodology!

Drums.

A good starting point is to get your kick drum and bass sound at roughly the same level so that they sound locked together.

Bring up the snare drum until it's almost as loud and add a touch of reverb. A plate type reverb always works well with the drums and keep it short, less than a second. If the snare is dripping in reverb it'll sound dated and lose its attack.

Toms and cymbals can be panned wide apart as they are spread out on a real kit. Again use a touch of reverb to make them sit with the snare sound. Using several different types of reverb on one kit may give you great individual sounds but as a whole can make the kit sound disconnected. Be careful not to make the cymbals too loud. Most people only notice the cymbals when they're wrong! (same can be true of the bass). If your drum mix sounds a little thin, try turning down the cymbals, too much sizzle can have that effect. The traditional high hat is panned to 2 o'clock as this is where it sits in a real kit.

A big studio will include ambient (or room) mics in the drum recordings and you can emulate this by putting a little bit of room reverb on the whole kit, less to more in this order: kick, hats, snare, toms, cymbals.

Instruments.

Pick your sounds. Those old favourite presets are quick and convenient but to everyone else they sound old and preset. The same goes for old samples and loops - they quickly sound dated. Get or make some new ones!

Try to imagine the sound you want and find a way to make it.

Be careful with the bass, don't overdo the bottom end. If you need to hear a bit more attack to 'lift' the bass part, try boosting the middle range (2-3kHz). This is one of the hardest parts to get right.

If you're using more than one guitar track, don't be afraid to pan them wide apart.

Stereo keyboards should be panned to 3 and 9 o'clock as a starting point, otherwise they sound unnaturally wide.

If you are using conventional band-type instruments then try panning them all slightly apart, balancing left and right. For example acoustic guitar 10 o'clock, electric piano 2 o'clock, bass centre. When you watch a band playing they are not all standing directly in front of you!

Vocals.

Main vocal should be straight up the middle and prominent in the mix. Too much reverb or delay will make them sound dated. If you find yourself putting reverb on 'for the sake of it' then take it off, go back and figure out why the vocal doesn't sound right and fix it!

Backing vocals should be panned full left and right with a bit of compression (if you have it) and a little reverb for a sense of space.

Processing.

In this day and age many musicians have access to a huge range of processing devices such as compressors limiters and reverbs. In my capacity as mixing/producing troubleshooter I'm always coming across mixes that are stifled by all the layers of processing that have been applied. Software demos use lots of processing because they are showing off their systems, this is not usually the best way to present your music. If you are mastering your own music then a stereo mix compressor/EQ/limiter may be necessary, but the bulk of your mixing should be done without it. If you intend to give your mix to a mastering engineer then leave that kind of stuff to them.

It will always sound better to redo any parts that have real problems. If this is not possible then you may be able to improve things by using some kind of processing, but unless you have such a specific reason my advice would be to avoid them. So, use 'em if you really need 'em. If you don't really know why you're using that compressor/limiter/exciter etc then don't use it.

Common Problems.

Don't be scared of a good level. A few red light moments will probably be ok. Learn to trust your ears to hear if anything's distorting and take the time to get the best level you can especially when mixing down to stereo for a listen. If necessary, go too loud deliberately so you can learn what clipping sounds like on your system and be able to recognise it. (Be careful of your speakers here!). If you mix down at too low a level it will sound clean but may lack energy or punch.

Don't bury the main vocal just because you're sensitive about the sound of your own voice. Very common this one - it's a psychology thing. If in doubt get a second opinion (that you trust). Try to listen to the song objectively, as if it was somebody else's mix.

Your mix should sound clear, fat, open and punchy with an easy-to-hear vocal. Try to listen to your mix on as many different speakers as you can to see how it translates, (this can really help with identifying any problems with the response of your room and speakers) and pay special attention to the bottom end. Also make sure that you know if you're listening to a system with a subwoofer.

The best recordings I've ever heard are those where the engineer has taken the time and trouble to honestly translate the sound of the musician's fingers or voice and allowed the performance to come through on the recording.

Happy Mixing!