

Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo): Loudness: the myth, the saga, the full story. Part 1

I was born in the 70's. It was the time of vinyl and the time of the 8-Track cassette player in big fancy cars. It was the analog era with analog made music on analog carriers.

Analog in the 70's meant real analog. Digital audio did not exist at the time and there was plenty of space, time and budget to let music sound as good as possible without compromise.

Soft passages in a song were soft and loud passages were loud. Technically spoken the dynamic range of music made in the 70's was rather large. The dynamic range represents the difference between the softest and the loudest passages in a song.

You would say that having a sensible dynamic range is beneficial to a good music experience. If we only knew what the musical landscape would look like 25 years later!

The dynamic range has been diminished drastically in a quarter of a century due to a phenomenon known as the "loudness war."

What the loudness war implies and what it's effects are on the experience of music will be discussed later. This is a triptych so I have to leave something to talk about in my other two columns about loudness.

It all started back in 1984. Ironically also the title of the literary masterpiece by George Orwell which was written in 1948 and far ahead of its time. 1984 was the year of the introduction of the first car CD Player: the Pioneer CDX-1 which was released only two years after one of the very first CD Players for domestic use: the famous Philips CD-100.

When car CD Players were released on the market something strange happened: car drivers could no longer hear the softer passages in songs due to traffic noise. When they'd turn up the volume the louder passages became really loud!

This had a simple reason: because of the technical superior CD quality the dynamic range rose to a (theoretical maximum) value of 96dB causing bigger differences between softer and louder passages. And exactly this was considered a "problem."

This so called problem led to mastering engineers being asked to reduce the dynamic range of music using compressors and limiters. When used wisely and sparingly this can definitely increase the impact of music. Little did we know that the use of these compressors and limiters would lead to a global volume war in the 90's. The war caused severe "damage" to the audio quality in general and its main victims were dynamics.

Next month the loudness triptych will be continued. It may sound unlikely but there's a happy ending to the story!

And we lived happily ever after 😊.

Renzo

Renzo (Masterenzo) is a Rotterdam based mastering engineer. He has worked for artists like Gery Mendes (GMB), Charlie Dée and Phil Bee's Freedom. More info about mastering can be found on his [website](#).

