

Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo):

Gear talk! Gear as a musical instrument.

Just like an instrumentalist a mastering technician uses his instruments. Often those pieces of gear are seen as single operating units, each with a unique sound and character. During mastering equalisers, compressors and limiters are used to supply a mix with a gentle but pristine sounding layer of audio varnish. Sometimes to add some extra colour and vibe but ever so many times as natural as possible. All to connect your music to the listening audience of the world.

Before I got intensely engaged into mastering I was a guitarist. At the age of 16 I had a pile of Hi-Fi brochures under my bed but I also got my very first electric guitar. It was a white Washburn, a variation of the well-known Stratocaster, accompanied by a very heavy 100 Watt EL34 tube amp (brand unknown but very clean sounding), a 4x12" speaker cabinet and the famous *Rat* distortion pedal by Proco.

Not long afterwards I had my first band: "Fast Fingers (Happy Girlfriends)". The name suggests otherwise but I was as green as grass and particularly nervous about our upcoming first gig in neighbour centre "De Velder" in my hometown Ede in the east of Holland. Of course the gig was extremely successful.

What followed was a career as a professional guitarist, including a study electric guitar at the conservatory here in Rotterdam.

The *instrument* never let go of me. After I made the decision in 2015 to focus solely on mastering, I kept seeing my gear as instruments. Apparently people are born musicians? The instrument is the tool you're working with. I was (and still am) in love with my guitars and by now I cherish warm feelings for the gear I use during a session.

But still it remains a static set of tools. Actually the best tools available for a human being are very nearby: our ears determine the decisions we make. Without these experienced audio tools our expensive equipment would be useless. What good is a set of expensive tools when you don't know how to operate those machines?

Nowadays I look at my gear as being two instruments. My two chains provide me all kinds of possibilities to enhance mixes to a professional level. The first chain is the transparent basis that comprises two equalisers and two compressors. The EQ's and compressors are opposites of each other. One EQ applies global processing and sounds very musical. The other one is analytical and sounds more neutral. The same applies for the compressors: one compressor is slow and offers a choice between a valve or class A solid state signal path. The other compressor is much faster and offers another set of colouring options.

The second chain consists of two equalisers filled with valves, input and output trannies and discrete op amps. So, these are the units that provide your mix with subtle colouration. Don't expect large changes but a rather delicate change of sound. Will your mix sound better with these tools? Sometimes yes, but in other cases a mix sounds better without these colour boxes. I found out that especially bass heavy electronic music (synths) doesn't particularly match with valves. Valve colouration tends to make a tight low end a bit muddy.

My two chains now go by the names "Chain 1" and "Chain 2". Perhaps I should give them real names. Ideas? Anyone?

Renzo

Renzo (Masterenzo) is a Rotterdam based Dutch mastering engineer. As the owner of premium mastering studio Masterenzo Mastering he has worked for many independent artists like Voncken, Black Nazareth and the John F Klaver Band.

More info about mastering and about Masterenzo can be found on [the web](#).