

Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo): Perception of music (is never the same)

Music is a strange phenomenon. Objective perception is also a strange thing and the combination of the two makes music a rather strange and complex experience.

How can it be that the feeling you get when you listen to a song can vary strongly from moment to moment? Perception can hardly be objective this way.

Imagine being at a party (you know, a gathering of different people together in a room, often accompanied by some drinks and food) and you hear this great song blasting out of the speakers. At that very same moment you look into the eyes of your soon to become husband or wife. You couldn't be happier!

You'd imagine that the next time when you hear that same song you experience that same euphoric moment the night you met your dream prince or princess. But truth is that it doesn't necessarily have to be like this.

On the contrary, the next morning you're experiencing a hangover. You turn on the radio and there it is, that same terrific song as yesterday evening. The music sounds flat and dull due to broadcast processing (compression!) and your hangover is not contributing to a joyful listening experience. Finally, the absence of your dream prince or princess puts a last penny in the bag. So actually, that great feeling you had yesterday couldn't be further away.

The above explains why mastering can be a complex profession at times. Our job is to let music sound better. But what exactly do we mean with "better"?

On Tuesday "better" has a different meaning than on Wednesday; not a single day is the same. So, our job is to stand above all this and to deliver that great sounding master. You'll probably understand why mastering is not the easiest job in the world.

When in doubt during my work I catch myself grabbing some lunch, a cup of coffee or to go outside for some fresh air. And every time when I return to my desk any trace of doubt vanishes like snow in the sun. It's fascinating how this works. As if my brain (perception) is in need of a different opinion (lunch, coffee, fresh air) before it can make the right decisions.

Mastering is so much about feeling the music. Feeling the client's feelings and emotions and to translate that in a great sounding master fitting the music like a glove. It's not very difficult to let music sound nice and balanced. The real challenge is to actually feel what is needed (or not needed) and how to move and shape the music in just the right direction.

The above also explains why mastering is such a great profession. It's a fascinating interaction between perception, feeling the client's needs and letting the music shine at its best. The gear we use and the knobs we twist play a minor role in this mission. Well okay, except maybe for some gentle colouration...

Mastering is the final stage of a music production. During a session everything seems to come together to a point where we decide how your song(s) will communicate to the outside world. Objective or rather subjective perception is a vital part of it, and it couldn't be more different each and every day.

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 Ocobar, Black Nazareth and Hédi Carlee (Charlie Dée).

More info about Masterenzo Mastering can be found on masterenzo.nl.