Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo):
Album mastering versus mastering for songs (playlists)

Playlists versus albums, a comparison we could hardly think of 20 years ago. Single tracks were taken from albums or a special single edit was made. If there was any room within the budget a remix (and remaster) was made of that single.
Back in the eighties twelve inch versions on vinyl were very popular: special single remixes, often much longer than the original. Whether that version was adding something musically remains to be seen but it worked wonders on dance floors in clubs.

Nowadays playlists dominate the market. Playlists are a collection of songs by various artists compiled by yourself, by others or by record labels.

I already discussed loudness normalization in some of my previous columns. A music streaming service like Spotify uses this to ensure equal perceived loudness for each song in a playlist.

For mastering this ongoing revolution means a different approach. If we look at an album, musical impact is what comes first (I'll leave out the effects of the loudness war). After that to be followed by dynamics (or how loud the album is).
When mastering an album the following rule should be taken into serious consideration: **Let the album sound like an album**, including all dynamic changes like the differences between ballads and up-tempo songs.

When tracks are mastered for music streaming services the thing that comes first is controlling dynamics. Tracks are being listened on various machines and in various locations. Think of the car, train, at work and most importantly think of earbuds!
So actually mastering for Spotify is mastering with a sense of dynamics in mind. It's a process of controlling those dynamics. Gently as we don't want to cause a second loudness war by tackling tracks with fierce and brutal compressors!

When it comes to mastering for Spotify, the integrated loudness of -14 LUFS (**L**oudness **U**nits **F**ull **S**cale) should be considered as a guideline for how loud the music should sound. But -14 LUFS is a bit soft for CD (even if we leave out the loudness war).
This means that a master nowadays is a sort of compromise. A compromise between a master for music streaming services or a master for CD or vinyl. It's not bad if the level for a master for Spotify is not exactly -14 LUFS. There's nothing wrong with a couple of dB's deviation in loudness. Spotify doesn't even use LUFS to measure loudness. They use their own system, equivalent to approximately -14 LUFS.

The only medium very sensitive to level in general is vinyl. I always deliver separate masters for a vinyl release. A vinyl master is a special one and will always be double checked by the pressing plant to ensure good playback.

I currently deliver my masters at a level roughly between -9 and -12 LUFS. Roughly, since mastering a jazz track is a different cookie than mastering a vicious rock song.

I can imagine that you might have some unanswered questions like: "How do you control those dynamics for masters for music streaming services?" or "Who the hell are LUFS?"
To answer all of your questions I'd like to refer to my next month's column in which I will try answer

them. So if you have a question about mastering for music streaming services or loudness in general, shoot me an e-mail at renzo@masterenzo.nl and I 'll do my very best to provide you with answers.

See you next month!

Renzo

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