

## Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo):

### Loudness, the myth, the saga, the story. Part 3

The loudness war began in the middle of the nineties and lasted until far in the century we now live in. Right about now in 2017 we're getting rid of the evil force from the dark side which lets music sound louder than music from the competition, just because we thought it would improve impact and sales.

Audio quality nowadays can be seen as a beautiful thing again. Music is allowed to sound great instead of being a marketing driven tool to reach more people and to make more profits. The way we experience music has changed however. Walking down the streets it's impossible to ignore the many ear pods and even larger headphones. Due to the rise of vinyl, music listening at home fortunately has not at all disappeared.

The end of the loudness war is caused by a combination of factors, just like the beginning of it. By far the most important factor is called *loudness normalization*. This technical instrument normalizes music, letting all tracks sound equally in terms of volume.

Why master a track louder? In fact, the louder a song has been mastered, the more the algorithms used by services like Spotify and YouTube will let the music sound equally loud as the "competition" and degrade it's audio quality and headroom by lowering the overall volume.

*Loudness normalization*, Apple calls it Soundcheck. A very simple way of putting it and not really faithful to the truth since the sound is not only checked for volume and loudness but also being adjusted accordingly. But still this is one of the great bringers of peace in times of war.

Another anti-loudness war-factor is the aforementioned revival of the vinyl industry. This is actually quite simple: vinyl has its technical limitations regarding volume. Overly compressed and limited tracks sound horrible on vinyl (if even they pass quality control). The grooves of a vinyl disk are becoming wider as the volume increases (increasing low-end) and playback time decreases. This causes the stylus having more difficulty following the groove of the record.

There are more factors contributing to the ending of the loudness war but I won't bother you with technical terms like LUFS, LKFS, EBU R128 etc.

If you are interested in reading more on this subject, search for '*loudness Camerer*' in Google and you'll find a well written and clear to understand paper about the technical aspects of loudness (metering and normalization). Although it was written in 2010, I still find it very useful and relatively up-to-date.

Besides all of this, Dutch university teacher Eelco Grimm (HKU, Utrecht) has written a magnificent white paper containing recommendations for *loudness normalization*, including the benefits of *album normalization* against *track normalization*. Take a look at [www.music-loudness.com](http://www.music-loudness.com) where you can find this more than great document.

The loudness war has been torturing our music for over 20 years. An incredible fact considering the important role music plays in our daily lives.

Fortunately the near future rewards us, hippies of sound, with some very positive energy. Lossless or even Hi-Res music streaming is coming into sight, without any of the hassle of how loud the song was mastered.

La vita è bella.  
Life is beautiful.

Renzo

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