

Make an EP in 30 Days

Ableton Course

Day 16

Dialing in your mix

Mix techniques & concepts

Dialing in your mix

In today's lesson we are going to do our first round of dialing your mix in. This is where we use some simple engineering techniques to get your mix sounding a bit more presentable.

If you have been following each lesson up to this point, you should be in pretty good shape & have a decent understanding of the tools we will be working with.

Troubleshoot your mix

The first step in dialing in your mix is to listen to it critically & try to see if there are any issues you can detect off the bat. It is helpful to go back to your reference track (at -15db) and compare your work to a song you like. Remember that this song has been mastered, so you can't expect your song to be at that level yet, so you'll want to think in general terms.

Here are some things you might want to put your focus on:

Muddiness

A muddy mix is a mix that needs work. If you have used your eq properly to remove unnecessary low frequencies via previous lessons, you are probably in better shape than most.

That said, it's good to make sure you didn't miss anything that could messy up your low end, or high end.

You might find that you don't need as much low end on a snare when you listen to your overall mix. Often when a part sounds dull in your mix, you can sharpen it a bit by removing more low end, or making a cut at the offending frequency.

Sound not cutting through?

If you have a sound that isn't cutting through your mix, there can be several things you can do to fix the problem. Let's take a look:

1. There are 2 or more parts sharing the same panning space, allowing none of the sounds to sit well in your mix.
2. There are 2 or more parts in the same eq frequency
3. Your sound needs a bit more compression, Saturation, or eq boost in its fundamental frequency.
4. The transient of your sound is weak & can use an extra “click” layer.

Too clean?

Believe it or not, there is such a thing as a mix that is too clean. We discussed in a previous lesson the importance of ambience in your mix to avoid silence, but it can also help to dirty up your individual sounds as well.

Look into some of these Ableton effects to add a bit of dirt. You can add them directly to your instrument or as a send/return:

- Cabinet
- Dynamic tube
- Erosion
- Overdrive
- Redux
- Saturator
- Vinyl distortion

Too cluttered?

If your mix sounds cluttered, it is often because something needs to be lowered or removed from certain parts of your arrangement. Try muting certain parts & see how it affects your mix.

You may also want to look at your panning. You may have too many things going on in the center of your mix. Try spacing things out. Even small movements can make a big difference. The autopan effect used in small amounts can also give sounds some movement & life. Do not underestimate the importance left & right space & movement in your mix.

EQ trick



If you find yourself with a sound that is not cutting through, it usually means there is another sound fighting for the same frequencies. The solution is to make reductions in the eq frequencies on the conflicting instruments so the sound you want to hear clearly cuts through better.

Let's say there is a lead sound battling with the vocal on your song. Obviously the vocal part is going to be more important, so you will want to find the most important vocal frequencies.

Here's how:

1. Add another EQ8 to your vocal track
2. Keep an eye on the eq spectrum & see which frequencies are the most prominent.
3. make a cut of around 5 db on those frequencies
4. Turn the EQ8 off.
5. Now simply copy this eq to any track that is conflicting with the vocal & turn it on.

You can use this technique for more than 1 instrument & it can really help clean up your mix. Watch the added video in today's lesson for a full explanation.

Call & response

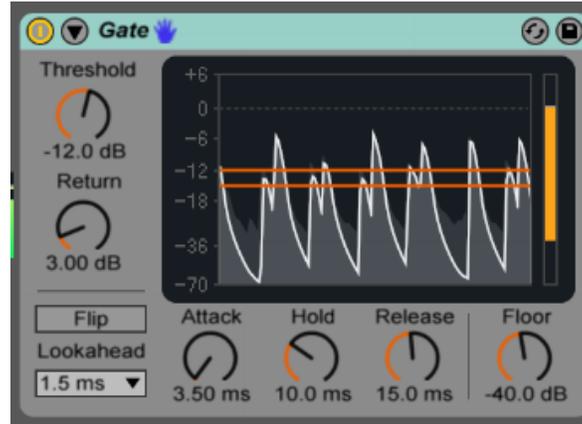
Earlier I mentioned the importance of proper panning. One thing that works really well is to have certain parts play off each other, 1 part left & 1 part right.

I like to call this the *call & response*. Think of the old *Miller Lite* commercials with one group shouting “great taste!” and the other group shouting “less filling!”. If you imagine one on the left & the other on the right, you have an idea of how this works.

An example could be one percussion part split left & right. Or maybe a couple of voice snips calling & responding to each other.

This can be very pleasing to the ear & it's something that can take some attention away from the center of your mix.

Gating

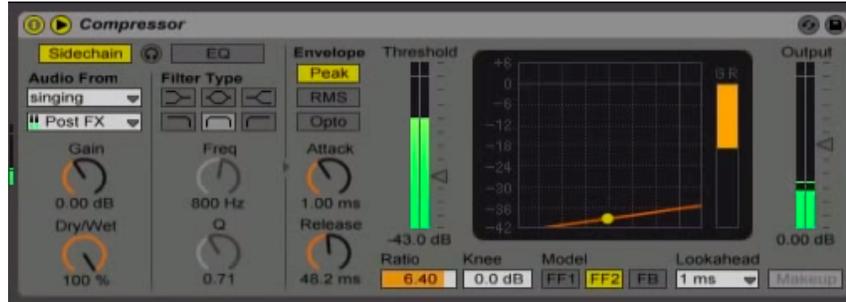


In an earlier lesson I explained how the gate plugin works. It can shorten the decay time of sounds, which can create a tighter & snappier mix.

It can be particularly good at shortening long reverbs or delay effects. It also can clean up drum loops, so they don't make your mix sound washy.

When troubleshooting your mix, consider whether any sounds are taking up a bit too much space & use a gate to clean it up a bit.

Sidechain tricks



Many of you are already aware of the importance of using sidechain compression to keep the kick & bass from interfering with each other, but I also use it as a mixing tool.

So I don't have to automate volume changes every time a certain instrument needs to be more prominent in the mix, I let sidechain compression do the job.

Sidechain compression

Pad sounds, for example, are usually meant to fill the empty spaces in a song, but aren't as important when a stab, lead or vocal comes in. For this reason, I will add a new sidechain compressor effect for each of these. I typically make the gain reduction fairly subtle, maybe only 3db, but in other cases I might go for something more dramatic.

I do the same on my return tracks to make sure my effects don't muddy up my mix. I've added a video in today's lesson to give you a full explanation of how this works.

Apply

Go through your song & apply these tips to get your song sounding more dynamic, interesting & engaging.

Homework

1. Homework: Complete your first mix, save & render to your desktop or project folder.