



PRODUCTION IN THE MIX

PART 1 - USING REFERENCE MATERIAL

Quality music usually inspires us to write our own, but how can reference material help us through that process? Liam O'Mullane explains.



BIOGRAPHY

Liam O'Mullane has years of experience with electronic music as a producer and DJ. He has also taught music technology courses at various educational establishments.

For many years, reference material has been used as a production aid, allowing you to replicate, aspire to and be inspired by its standard of content. Its primary use is a quality reference point, making it easier to keep your production level at a high standard. The process of switching to a reference track at regular intervals helps reset your ears to the correct audio perspective throughout a session. Your reference might be anything from a well-crafted, timeless classic, to an of-the-moment, cutting edge example of a new and evolving genre. Whatever type of music you're aspiring to produce it's there to serve as a reminder of the rules of that particular game.

Another use of reference material is from a composition perspective. Analysing an appropriate track helps to guide your own work by setting a clear set of goal posts to follow in order to layout your track.

This feature covers a fresh approach to setting up, analysing and producing with a reference track. By maximising on the technology at your disposal, you will use reference material in tempo within your project. This makes it much easier to spot any of your production flaws as A/B crossfading puts your material in a more critical position against the reference track.

Arrangement analysis is also enhanced by these in-project and tempo techniques. You will learn how to map out your reference track's structure on your sequencer's arrangement page – this will serve as a constant visual aid, keeping you focused on your objective to finish your song layout.

You will also find that this in-the-mix approach brings a great vibe to any songwriting session, as you are constantly listening to the very music that inspired you to start writing – or to want to make music in that style – in the first place.



Choosing reference material

The sound quality of the music you're going to use as reference material needs to be the highest possible. Choose to purchase in WAV format when buying downloadable music as MP3 doesn't give you enough quality for referencing purposes. Recordings from vinyl are also inferior, due to their lack of high frequency content; and, in this context, the slight tempo drift inherent in the creation and playback of the format will cause tempo issues. CDs are fine and tracks can be easily converted to WAV or AIFF format using your sequencer or a third-party application.

In exceptional circumstances, where you can only obtain relevant material in a sub-par format, you can still roughly judge your production levels against it, but you will need another full quality reference file to help monitor your high frequency content and other areas of general fidelity.

Although you can use material with loose, human timing, because the tempo will vary dramatically, it won't lock to your sequencer's grid system without use



For a head-to-head sonic comparison, cut back and forth between the reference track and your own as a DJ would between two records.

of time correction, which is prone to causing a loss in sound quality. So leave it in its original form and turn off any snap options – you can still analyse song structure, though you won't benefit from any in-tempo elements of this feature.

Analysing your reference track

The first step is to analyse your reference track, to get a feel for how it works structurally, and break it down into blocks of sound that will be your reference points as you start laying down sounds of your own. The way we're going to do this is to break down the track into blocks, and colour-code those blocks on screen so you can see at a glance how the track is put together.

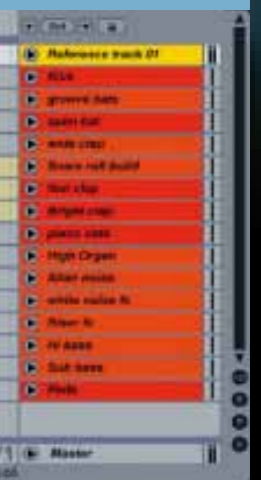
So, start by dividing your reference track into phrase blocks by using a split-editing tool. A phrase is an easily distinguishable section of music with a definite beginning and end. The first phrase starts when the song begins; once a noticeable change occurs in the music (eg, when the vocal comes in) then the first phrase is finished and the next has begun.

You'll notice that in simple and easily digestible music, each phrase tends to be similar in length (or of a length that's either half or double that of the other phrases). The more complex a piece of music is, the more irregular phrase lengths can be, so its best to start this process on simple and regular music.

Now you've split the basic blocks for the track, they can be selected and looped quickly by choosing a loop current selection option in your sequencer. Listen to ▶

Working in the mix alongside your reference material one phrase section at a time helps you to improve your mastery of your production tools.

It's easy to see how few elements there can be in a professional-looking track by the number of tracks per sound.



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