

The Note Reader

some thoughts on

Musical Arranging and Mixing

by Mark Gaare, originally from The Note Reader, published by MG MUSIC Company, Mesa, AZ, 1990.

The Role of the Producer

The producer must be truly concerned with the presentation of the music as a whole. He or she must also have the authority to alter the music in its best interest. Preferably, the producer should be someone who has not been involved in the conception of the music. This makes them an impartial judge. And there should only be one producer, to which the musicians resign the ultimate decision making. This is not to say that the arranging/mixing process should not be a participative experience. It should be a cooperative effort. Consider the referees in American football: There are many line judges and referees that lend their viewpoints, but it is the field umpire who has the final say.

The producer/arranger is someone who can step back and look at the whole, big picture. This person can serve as a mediator between the musicians. He or she directs the traffic of all the individual parts, and ultimately assigns the right-of-way to the part which is best accomplishing the overall effect of the music at that particular moment.

Pitfalls of the Performing Musicians

Know when to stop. You can create musical ideas for a particular phrase ad infinitum. It's like a multiple choice test: sure, all the answers are correct, but the producer's responsibility is to choose the best answer. A classic example is having a drummer whose hidden agenda is to put as many fills as humanly possible into every song. A part can be overwhelming even if it isn't obvious to the person who played it.

The players need to detach themselves emotionally from any individual part. Professional musicians must make concessions everyday with their creative ideas. They must be resigned to knowing that every note that comes out of their instrument may not be included in the final mix of a song.

During the mixdown, the musicians should not be thinking of how their live performance is going to appear. If a keyboard feature song needs only a few guitar licks, then the guitarist can do several things in the interim. He can: 1) rest, 2) air guitar (it's just like lip-syncing and it's done all the time), or 3) go take a break. Performance is, after all, a very visual experience. Maybe that small part can even be sequenced or pre-recorded in some way. You do not have to be playing at all times.

Observe big bands or orchestras; each musician plays perhaps 30% of the entire musical performance. This is because the music was written with the purpose of creating different, interesting effects through the use of voicings, counterpoint, and varying layers of density.

Finally, if a musician feels that a particular producer is not looking out for the best interests of his songs, then by all means, find someone else who will care as much as you do. If, on the other hand, a musician finds himself constantly bemoaning the producer for cutting/condensing/modifying his parts, if he feels threatened by having someone else judge his creative ideas, then perhaps that musician is not ready to be a professional. Every song, every book, and every piece of art has its critics and editors.

EDIT RUTHLESSLY!

It's just like editing in the film industry: most of the film ends up on the cutting room floor. The people who win Academy Awards for Editing were the ones who knew just what to cut, and just what to leave in. Many producers choose the minimalist route. That is, leave in the bare minimum of parts that will still achieve the overall musical effect. All the musicians should probably NOT be playing the entire length of the song. Indeed, the entrance and exit of instruments is a great tool for adding interest. In the rock idiom, the bassist and the drummer are the only ones who are allowed some monotony. This is because they define the harmonic structure and the rhythm/time/beat of the song (respectively). But they too can enter and exit a piece to create different moods and effective interludes.

Avoid Unnecessary Padding

Musical "padding" is when blocks of chords are used to state (or more often, overstate) the obvious harmonies. When a song is being developed, these chord progressions define its basic structure and sequence. They are also an aid to creating melody lines and solos. But when the song has been sufficiently fleshed out, many of these pads can be removed. The song will not suffer because all the harmonies are probably still there in the bassline, the vocals, and the riffs. In fact, by eliminating all the extraneous sounds, your songs will be cleaner, less confused, and catchier.

Many producers choose the minimalist approach. That is, leave in the bare minimum of parts that will still achieve the overall musical effect. Singers are frequently seen strumming a guitar while they're singing. But more times than not, the guitar is merely being used as a visual effect. The chords that the singer is producing are usually just padding, and are seldom heard in the mix.

It is very easy to get carried away with padding. On chord-producing instruments, one strum or press of keys can create numerous harmonies whose effect can last exceedingly long. Use these effects sparingly to add emphasis, and not just for the sake of playing. Every musician does not have to be playing the entire length of the song. Indeed, the entrance and exit of instruments is a great tool for adding interest. In big bands and orchestras, each musician plays perhaps 30% of the entire musical performance. This is

because the music was written with the purpose of creating interesting effects through the use of different voicings and varying layers of harmonic density.

Pads are most effectively used to *EMPHASIZE* and stir the emotions of the listener. *BUT IF YOU'RE ADDING EMPHASIS ALL THE TIME THEN IT KIND OF LOSES ITS POTENCY.* (See what I mean?) Try varying the emotional contour of a song. You can preplan the impact of the music with the use of dramatic devices such as building, climax, and recovery. In popular music, the best time for pads seems to be at the chorus sections. Listen for the entrance of strings at the chorus of some of those award-winning songs.

Arranging Music Effectively

The overall effect of the music must take precedence over the individual parts. The musicians should be sure that their parts mesh well together before getting locked into playing that part. And avoid parts that conflict with the vocalist or solo instruments at all costs.

The formation of music in a group should be based on cooperation and not competition for solos or "the limelight." The bassist and the drummer should work their parts out first, because it is these two instruments that set up the basic framework for the entire song. There are three techniques for meshing these parts together: unison, counterpoint, and soloing. A unison approach simply means that the bass drum is hit with every note on the bass guitar. Counterpoint, in this instance, refers to a musical question and answer "conversation" between the two musicians. This is also known as trade-offs, or "trading licks." A soloing technique is used when one of the two players has a unique musical statement to make. The solo needs to be something really hot if it is going to be pulled into the foreground. Listen to Phil Collins for examples: "Sussudio" has a wild bassline running the length of the song, and "I Don't Care Anymore" has a unique drumline that sets the mood for the entire piece.

Next, the polyphonic (or chord-producing) instruments need to coordinate their background parts. Polyphonic instruments can produce a wide variety of background effects. These include: rhythm, padding, arpeggios (also called ostinato), and riffs (short leads usually derived from the bassline). It is very easy to get carried away here. One strum or press of keys can create numerous harmonies whose effect can last exceedingly long. Use these effects sparingly to add interest, and not just for the sake of playing. You can create as many of these as you like at first, but be sure to remove all the fluff in the end or your music may sound like a jumbled mess.

The foreground elements should now be added into the music. First and foremost in rock music is the vocals. If the audience can't hear the words, then you've probably lost their attention. Instruments in the foreground can include: solos (by any instrument), melody lines (also called leads or themes), or fills (short solos). It is most important to keep the background music steady and simple when playing behind a lead or vocal line. Also, the band as a group needs to coordinate who is allowed fills and where.

The drummer cannot be playing a fill with triplets in it at the same time the bass player is playing an eighth-note fill. It just doesn't jive together.

Without pre-planning of this nature, the band will soon get into a monotonous groove that can't be broken. The musicians will be limited to playing only those conservative things which fit well behind spontaneous, unplanned music. To avoid this monotony, pre-plan some triplet fills, fast breaks, or sudden stops. Pick the drummer's brain, for he is usually thinking rhythmic possibilities beyond the basic context of the song. Listen to R*U*S*H drummer Neil Pearl for ideas on how rhythmic breaks can add interest and increase the complexity of the song's structure.

Conclusions

Music that lacks basic planning, organization, and thoughtfulness is a tell-tale sign of an amateur band. Just "being together" is not enough. Break out of the standard, monotonous structures. By employing the concepts above, you can add interest and vary the emotional contour through the course of each song. It can make the difference between being a professional band and just another garage band. And finally, listen constructively to music. Understand exactly what musical effects stir the emotions. Don't rely on "trial and error." Analyze your musical idols and find out just what made them or their songs exceptional.