Book Reviews

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Book Review

Mixing Music: Perspective on Music Production. Russ Hepworth-Sawyer and Jay Hodgson (eds) (2017)

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The practice of mixing music is one of the last creative stages of the music production process and as such, it is a highly sought-after skill and employable attribute. Yet as a result of the development of the digital analogue workstation (DAW) the practice of mixing has become democratized for professionals and amateurs alike. Subsequently, the current discourse surrounding mixing often comes from a vast array of perspectives.

Within online blog sites, aspiring practitioners portray mixing as a mystical art, and scholarly work to date often focuses on technical, sonic or pragmatic approaches. In contrast to this, professional texts often promote a musical approach that foregrounds emotion whilst mixing, and there seems little ontological, epistemological and philosophical work done in this area. This provides, at best, a fragmented resource for education and minimal innovative work for professionals to engage with. Therefore, an opportunity now exists for holistic resources that link the musical and aesthetic approaches of many professionals with the ontological, pragmatic and theoretical/skill-based approaches of scholars. As a result, this literary opportunity makes the timing of Routledge's *Mixing Music* very fortuitous.

The editors of *Mixing Music* – Russ Hepworth-Sawyer and Jay Hodgson – describe the book as the first in a series of multi-authored texts that are imminent surrounding ‘record production’. Many would be intrigued as to why the series starts with a text on mixing rather than a systematic process where songwriting, pre-production, and recording were investigated first. To counter this argument, the editors suggest that the mix is always being manipulated within the producer’s mind throughout all stages of record production, and this inspired rationale helps to connect the book to the tacit knowledge of professionals. Yet, the book is very diverse, and there is a combination of hands-on, critical/theoretical, ontological and genre-focused chapters. These chapter categories provide an opportunity for this review to contextualize the content of the book within the field whilst providing a brief descriptive overview of the individual chapters.

Hands-on

Phil Harding's chapter on 'top-down' mixing is a pragmatic explanation of a mixing technique that begins with the lead vocals before the mixer works through the arrangement to the drums. This is in direct contrast to more conventional approaches or 'bottom-up' mixing, where one would start balancing the drums and work their way through to the vocals. Harding's historical account is important because 'top-down' mixing was very common in the late 1980s when third-party mixing became prominent and many sought out new methods to connect to musical and artistic intentions. In comparison, Justin Paterson's discussions on mixing in the box (ITB) cover the diverse developments that the DAW has catalysed within the practice of mixing. These 'overlaps' between producer and mixer suggest that the mixer's role is, in fact, capable of production-based processes. The DAW's impact on mixing is also questioned because of the 'sensory overload' resulting from visual and graphic distraction. As a result, the reader is left weighing up the balance between the plethora of options facilitated by the DAW and the musical and creative practice of mixing.

Jay Hodgson's ethnographic/musicological discussions with professional Alistair Sims on editing's role in mixing include downloadable links of audio examples. The chapter covers various topics such as musical competency and an overview of common editing techniques that target rhythm, pitch and timbre. There is no doubting whatsoever editing's important role as a music production tool and this chapter clearly articulates this. What still remains unclear, however, is if editing is, in fact, a tool of mixing. Sims himself suggests that 'all editing would be done before mixing'. This suggests that editing – albeit available during mixing – may be still, at best, a mix preparation practice.

Dylan Lauzon's discussion on the interrelationship between pre-production and mixing focuses on the author's process of pre-production. This is defined as a process where the producer records a demo version of the song in its entirety during which all parts and combinations of sounds are considered. In this way, the author describes pre-production as a 'mix-forward' perspective that allows the producer to consider mix elements during the pre-production stage and subsequently throughout the entire recording process. Focusing further on practitioner's words Dean Nelson's chapter entitled 'Between the speakers' has literally no scholarly referencing and consists of the author's subjective opinion on how he likes to mix. As one who was trained as an assistant engineer in a large facility – similar to the author – I can attest that this chapter is exactly the type of writing the academy needs to engage with to connect to the professional world. Dean's discussions are simple but essential in understanding that mixing is an intuitive process. His ideas have broad applicability and plasticity where mixing approaches are shaped to address the musical content. The author describes moods, lyrics, performances and various aspects of musicality that connect the mixer and the mix on a creative/emotional level.

Chapter 15 changes tack a little when Joshua D. Reiss continues his research into the development of intelligent mixing systems. Reiss sets up the chapter by discussing many ideologies and research-based developments surrounding the systems and algorithms in this field. The chapter covers many of the possible applications of these systems but tables the elusiveness of the artistic intentions of the musician as a future challenge. Yet, Reiss is dogged in his attestation of the niche these systems may fill for musicians and engineers alike. To conclude the 'hands-on' category, Rob Toulson's

chapter on the signing off process of mastering is a wonderful insight into a very often neglected process. The chapter alludes to the 'porous' reality that mixing and mastering has become as a result of the DAW and its ability to facilitate both of these processes for aspiring professionals.

Critical/theoretical

Martyn Phillips discusses how the mix is analysed and understood by hypothesizing new perceptions of what the mixer engages with whilst mixing. He uses terms such as platonic, incompleteness, illusion, limitations and numerology, unpacking mixing in a multitude of ways. Subsequently, there are many micro considerations that are important for product development and to promote the listener investing in the product. William Moylan's chapter on multimodal critical listening is inspired reading that connects to the tacit knowledge of working professionals. This chapter suggests that mixing is a personalized process that is developed through the individual's listening experience and that skilled mixers learn 'what' to listen for and to listen deeply on many macro and micro levels including timbre, spatiality, musicality and performance. A seminal underpinning of this chapter is Moylan's assertion that skilled mixers adapt their listening from individual sound to a holistic 'whole mix' listening experiences when necessary.

Ontological

Ruth Dockray's chapter is an intriguing insight into the concepts of proxemic interaction. The author discusses these within notions of the sound box and how our ideas of 'mix space' can be influenced by the manipulation of dynamics, stereo width and distance perception. The author uses examples from various recordings by artists that include Kylie Minogue and the Foo Fighters to unpack variously designed proxemics including

intimacy as compared to a social scene. Robert Wilshire and Christopher Johnson's chapter discusses ontological perspectives from within the mix where the actual meaning of 'the mix' is defined as both a singular and a multiple entity and, as a result, some authenticities are recognized including 'function' and 'pretentiousness'. The work is framed from philosophical foundations and as such is perhaps best suited to those who appreciate this style of thought-provoking, contextual writing.

Mark Marrington's chapter 'Mixing metaphors' contemplates the aesthetic influence of the mixer. The author suggests a connection to practice is achieved by unpacking the rhetorical approaches and idiolect of the mixer's practice. In essence, this is described as the musical and sonic language that mixers impart, and illuminates the impact the mixer has on a musical work. This is a must-read as it really helps to promote that the mixer's footprint can be a massive part of a musical work, and allows the reader to ponder whether it should be. Similarly, Jay Hodgson explores his theories regarding a critical re-alignment of music production studies by discussing a concept of 'Mix as auditory response'. Within this chapter, Hodgson hypothesizes theories surrounding musical communications as 'auditory' rather than 'acoustic' and proposes that the listening experience is a response – past tense – to how some sounds were once ideally heard. Hodgson then goes on to use various examples and this is a theoretically dense and demanding but nonetheless thought-provoking read.

In a manner divergent from traditional research approaches, Gary Bromhall asks the question 'how academic practice can inform mix craft?'. This topic, which is usually penned in reverse, offers a unique and interesting perspective. After citing the differences in the recording studio since the development of the DAW, Bromhall clarifies that the

future of mix education is best situated within a collaboration of traditional industry-based models and higher education practices. Subsequently, Bromhall declares his support for innovative education via academic institutions as they provide an opportunity for scientific research to exist alongside aesthetic reflection.

Genre focused

Jay Hodgson continues his ethnographic interview style with some discussions on mixing for markets – genres – with professional mix engineer Alex Krotz. Whilst investigating topics such as ‘learning how to mix’, some interesting discussions are uncovered on theories of ‘mixing as you go’ and ‘how to engage appropriately with mix notes and revisions’. The overriding context of this chapter broaches the question as to whether one’s mixing approach should change with a variance in genre. It is therefore timely that the book ventures to Andy Devine and Jay Hodgson’s chapter which discusses mixing for modern electronic music. Within this chapter, the reader learns that mixing for electronic music varies from traditional music production by often blending in as part of the production process and therefore is labelled as a more ‘creative’ than ‘corrective’ practice. Matt Shelvock’s chapter – which explores mixing contemporary hip hop – similarly suggests that being fluent in mixing is a skill that is necessary during the hip hop production life cycle. These ideas blur the lines between mixing and production during beat creation and other forms of creative practice where the rhythm, bass and vocal are highlighted as key elements for mix consideration. Given the amount of electronic and hip hop music that is currently being engaged with by the public Devine’s and Shevlock’s chapters are a must-read for any aspiring professional.

Conclusion

It was my intention to critique *Mixing Music* within the above headings so as to allow an overview of the book rather than drilling into the specifics of individual chapters and, as a result, I trust that it is evident that this book truly has something in it for everyone.

However, I would warn that everything within this text is not ‘for’ everyone, as some of the writing is so detailed and at times philosophical, that some may struggle, as I did.

Personally, I would have liked more chapters like Dean Nelson’s that reinforce musical processes and emotional responses whilst mixing. These approaches are promoted by renowned industry professionals such as Manny Marroquin and Chris Lord-Alge.

However, the lack of scholarly work in the field of mixing justifies the editors’ broad scope of content, and, as a result, this holistic text unpacks mixing thoroughly. *Mixing Music* is well informed, well written and a highly diverse insight into the many epistemic realities and unique facets of the practice of mixing.