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ASTON FEARON: Balance and imbalance

by Aston Fearon
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Audio Pro International has expanded its editorial offering further still with the addition of Aston Fearon as a regular contributor.

Midlands-based Fearon is an experienced freelance event sound engineer, specialising in mixing front of house, having worked with a number of venues, PA hire and event production companies in the UK. In his first piece for API, he explains how following one of the traditional 'golden rules' of sound engineering, but forgetting the bigger picture, can lead to missing out on the best possible mix...



From a young age we are definitely taught about balance and are made aware of the benefits of having a balanced diet or living a balanced lifestyle. Any careers description detailing the sound engineer's responsibilities will probably include the task of 'balancing instruments'. Balance is a great state to aim for in our mixes, but are there not better, more clearly defined aims like that of having our mixes impact our audience? In my opinion impact trumps balance every time. In fact, can we have a dynamic mix that excites our audience without some form of imbalance?

We don't often remember the importance of judgement and skill in choosing to highlight certain things over others in order to make a mix great – the ability to make decisions to let some instruments fade slightly so that others may be more prominent and have more space to assert themselves. A principle much known in the visual arts (including graphic design) is that of 'negative space'. Its basic premise is that the space between objects is just as important as the objects in question. Any visually pleasing photo or picture will have both light and shade; any well shot cinematography consists of both foreground and background.

Likewise, if we consider the material we have, we can achieve our ideal mix with less acoustic energy and more impact. Our mixing decisions can so easily be aimed at making everything blend together as well as possible. This is a good aim but the enemy of the great is often the good; and the problem is that most gig goers don't go to see their favourite band for a balanced experience. They go because they yearn for the experience to be great, to have the hairs on the back of their neck stand on end as the set crescendos and ebbs and flows.

We know that the human ear loves to translate music that is dynamic. Sometimes, though, we may forget that subtractive techniques (like reducing levels before raising them) can be just as effective if not more so depending on what we want to do with our mix. One of the reasons that subtractive mixing is usually a better way of us working as engineers is because it works from the principle that we only have a certain amount of headroom and that we are working with material (in our case acoustic energy) rather than creating it.

If I want to make a guitar solo really powerful and clear, rather than just merely loud, I may begin with boosting it slightly. But if I ignore the other side of the coin, it may not occur to me that I can create an equal amount of impact by dropping the keyboards or increasing the reverb send on the other instruments very slightly – pushing them further back in the mix for the duration of the solo. If I do all three then I have just tripled the impact that the guitar solo had.

It's true that loud mixes are often exciting but when we're constrained to mix within tighter SPL limits, we hopefully come to realise more dynamic ways of creating excitement. This usually requires small sacrifices, prioritising certain sources over others and creating a sonically pleasing imbalance in the process. When we are then given an extra 5dB of headroom on a subsequent show we can still carry over the same processes because we realise that they are more 'ethical' ways of adding excitement in our mixes, protecting the long term hearing of gig-goers at the same time.

Over recent years there has been a lot of debate about much of the recorded music in the charts being of inferior sonic quality, due to the effect of over compression and other bad practices in the mastering process. This has all been with the attempt to grab a listener's attention by making everything as loud as everything else. Our ears are designed to judge everything in our environment from a small whisper to a 747 taking off. Maxing out and hitting the limit constantly leaves our ears in a state of fatigue or damage. At the same time, by not utilising the full scope of our dynamic range, our ears can easily get bored.

If we can put ourselves in our audience's shoes (or festival wellies), we can ask ourselves what they want to hear at any given moment of a set. A good mix at 0:30 into the song might be very different to the mix at 2:30 – purely because what's going on musically is different. It's because of this that I really believe mixing in real time is crucial, rather than being just satisfied at setting a good balance and not moving the mix along with the set. As well as this we should feel free to abandon our need for balance in pursuit of a better audience experience. There is usually much more we can do with our mixing, with less than we think.

(Picture credit: Tom Bell, Vineyard Records UK).

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