The Dresser Drawer Analogy

Imagine you have a bunch of clothes and a 3-drawer dresser. How might you fill up the dresser with the clothes?

The quickest, easiest solution would be to stuff all the clothes into one drawer. But if you do this, you'll find that one drawer quickly fills up. Suddenly, your clothes will be flying out the sides of the dresser. Not a great idea...

But what if you decided to distribute your clothes evenly among the different drawers? (Socks and boxers in the top drawer, shirts in the middle, and pants in the bottom.) Suddenly everything fits!

This analogy is a great way to think about mixing. In a mix, the **different areas of the frequency spectrum are like different drawers**. The low end might be the bottom drawer. The midrange could be the middle drawer, and the top end could be the top drawer.
If you take the time to distribute your tracks evenly among these different drawers, you'll create clarity and separation in your mixes.

Here are a few tips and techniques to pull this off...

1. Use Panning

The easiest way to create more separation in your mixes is to take advantage of proper panning.

Whenever two tracks are competing, use panning to separate them in the stereo image. For example, if a vocal and guitar are both panned center, pan the guitar off to one side. This will create more clarity and separation between these tracks. Suddenly, you'll find that you can hear both more clearly.

2. Use The Mute Button Method

If you're mixing a session with a lot of tracks, it can be difficult to figure out which track(s) are causing a lack of clarity or separation. The Mute Button Method can help. Here's how to pull it off:

1. With the entire mix playing, mute the first track in your session.
2. Listen and ask yourself—do I hear more clarity or separation?
   a. If YES, you've found the source of the problem.
   b. If NO, unmute the track.
3. Mute the next track in your session.
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 until you find the problem track.

Once you identify the source of the problem, you'll know exactly where to focus your efforts to solve it.

3. Mix In Mono

Mixing in mono will force you to work harder to create separation in your mixes. You won't be able to rely on panning to create clarity. This will force you to EQ more.

When you flip your mix back to stereo, everything will sound clearer. The resulting mix will also sound better when played back on mono systems.

4. Avoid The Solo Button

Avoid listening to and/or processing tracks in solo. If you're soloing tracks, you have no idea how they fit into the context of the rest of your mix.

If you're trying to make two tracks fit together, you need to listen to them in context with each other. This will give you the information you need to make the right mixing decisions.

5. Tackle Frequency Collisions

When two tracks occupy the same “drawer” of the frequency spectrum, they often compete. This can lead to a muddy, unclear mix.
Sometimes, it's easy to find and fix these problems with your ears alone. Other times, some visual assistance can help.

You can use a spectrum analyzer to compare the frequency makeup of two different tracks. (To pull this off, you'll need an analyzer with a sidechain input.) This technique makes it easy to identify exactly where your tracks are competing. You'll then know exactly how to EQ them to fit together.

6. Last Resort (When All Else Fails…)

So you've tried EQ, but your mix is still a mess.

What now? Try sidechain compression.

You can use this technique to add clarity and separation to your mixes. For example, you can set it up to turn the bass down whenever the kick hits. This will help eliminate competition between these two tracks.
Sidechain compression can also create a pumping effect when used aggressively. This is a hallmark sound in EDM, which makes it a great choice for this genre. But in most circumstances, this technique should be your last resort.

Why?

Because sidechain compression can destroy the natural dynamics of a performance. This can leave your tracks sounding unsteady or inconsistent.

You can take this technique further using multiband compression or TrackSpacer. These plugins will apply selective compression to certain areas of the frequency spectrum, which can often produce more transparent results.

For more mixing tips and tricks, visit BehindTheSpeakers.com.
Discover The Keys To Crafting Radio-Ready Mixes That Sound Clear, Punchy, And Professional.

Mix By Design is an online training course that will teach you how to mix like a pro. You’ll discover a simple, step-by-step system you can use to break through overwhelm, sink into the creative flow, and make your best mixes yet.

“I went from having a mix I was constantly needling and nitpicking to a mix that I was like — YES, that’s where I want to be. That mix sounds big...that mix sounds pro.” - Christopher Woudstra

“I just finished a new song that is my best work to date by using Jason’s system.” - Brian Watts

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