Preparing your mixes for mastering

LUMINESCENT MASTERING

The more you get right in the mix, the more the master can do for it. This guide covers how to prepare and send your mixes and stems. If someone else is mixing your music, pass it on to them before the final bounces. If anything is unclear, email luminescentmastering@gmail.com.

MIX BUS PROCESSING

Keep the mix bus as clean as you can and leave the mastering to the mastering session. Limiters, clippers, maximisers and all-in-one mastering plugins take away options that can't be won back later, so switch them off before you bounce.

A bus compressor or saturation that is part of your sound can stay on. Mention it in your notes so we know it was a choice.

If you have been listening to a louder, limited version while mixing, send it along as a reference and label it clearly so it isn't mistaken for the mix.

Fix problems on the track that causes them: phase issues, rumble or noise, harsh sibilance, a crash or bass note that jumps out, parts that need riding. Mastering can correct some of this, but it works on the whole mix at once.

LEVELS

Keep peaks on the mix bus between −10 and −4 dBFS and never above −3 dBFS. Get there by lowering channel and group faders, and leave the master fader at 0 dB.

This isn't about leaving headroom for mastering. Mixes that run close to 0 dBFS produce intersample peaks, overs that happen between the samples where most meters can't see them. They distort on the way into an analogue chain and can't be removed once the mix is bounced.

If you mix on a console, record the stereo return at conservative levels, with peaks around −4 dBFS.

FILE FORMAT

Send stereo interleaved WAV or AIFF files at 24-bit or 32-bit float.

Keep the sample rate of your session and don't convert it up or down. If the release needs another rate or bit depth, the conversion is done at the end of mastering.

Don't normalise the files, and don't add dither or noise shaping.

STARTS, ENDS AND FADES

Leave one or two seconds of silence before and after each track. Final trimming happens in mastering.

Print the fades you want into the mix. If you'd rather leave them open, note where each fade starts and how long it lasts.

If tracks should run into each other without a gap, say so in your notes.

NAMING AND SENDING

Name each file with track number, artist, title and version, for example `03_Artist_Title_Mix.wav`.

Put all files for the release into one folder and zip it. The zip carries a checksum, so we can confirm that every file arrived exactly as you sent it.

Email one download link with the artist name, release title, number of tracks, running order, release date and format (streaming, vinyl or both), plus one or two reference tracks and any notes on the sound you're after.

LOUDNESS

Tell us how loud you want the master, ideally with a reference track. Loud can be right for the music, but past a certain point more level costs punch, depth and clarity, and streaming services turn loud masters down anyway. Without a reference, the level is set to suit the music.

STEM MASTERING

Stem mastering starts from a finished mix. The stems are that mix split into groups, so the balance stays as you set it and the extra control goes into detail and technical fixes.

Split the mix into six to eight groups, for example kick, bass, drums, percussion, music, effects and vocals. Print every effect, send and bus process into the stems.

Bounce all stems from the same start point to the same end, in the format and at the levels described above.

Before sending, import the stems into an empty session and play them against your stereo mix. They should sound identical. If they don't, check the bounce settings, routing and send effects first.

Send each song in its own folder, with its stereo mix included.

VINYL

De-ess vocals carefully. Sharp esses distort when the record is cut and played, and once they're inside a finished mix they can't be taken out without dulling everything else in the high end. Use more than one de-esser at different frequencies if needed, then check the vocal level again: with the harshness gone, it often needs to come up a little. If you're unsure, send the mix without vocals and the vocal as a separate stem.

Give us the side split and running order with the time of each side. Long sides have to be cut quieter, so keep that in mind when you plan the track list.

Book your cutting engineer or pressing plant in advance. We don't cut lacquers, so the vinyl master goes straight to them.

BEFORE YOU SEND

- [ ] Listen to every bounce from start to finish.
- [ ] Check for clicks, pops and distortion. Mastering makes them louder along with everything else.
- [ ] Play the mix loud once in your room. Harsh mids and highs show up quickly at high volume.
- [ ] If you mixed on headphones, check the mix on speakers too.
- [ ] Tell us anything you would never want to happen to your music.

DELIVERY

Masters come back as a download: 24-bit WAV at your session's sample rate, plus 16-bit/44.1 kHz versions if your distributor needs them. If you need another format, mention it with your order. One revisit is included.

Questions before you send? Email luminescentmastering@gmail.com.