

Critical listening for producers

The most important equipment in any studio is almost certainly the ears of the producer.

Smart producers not only hear songs but listen to and analyse the elements that go into making the recordings, and that is what this exercise is all about.

By understanding how hit tracks are put together you'll get a much better idea of how to make your recordings sound awesome too.

Exercise: Choose a hit record in the current charts and listen carefully to it as many times as you need to, and write down everything you can hear in the track using this guide.

As you progress with your productions you'll add your own elements to this list but here are a few pointers to get you started.

To start learning this skill, find a song you like, grab a notebook and listen to the song very carefully, making notes as you go. Feel free to listen multiple times until you have all the information you need.

Beats

1. How do the drums change in different sections of the song
2. Do any additional kick drums, snares or drum loops feature in the chorus
3. How does the percussion change in different sections of the song
4. What sort of effects, such as compression, reverb and delay are used on the beats and where are the effects used



Instrumentation

1. What musical instruments are used and where do they feature
2. Do any instruments feature throughout the entire song
3. If you hear a keyboard, what type of keyboard is it e.g. Grand Piano/Upright Piano/Fender Rhodes/Clavinet/Hammond Organ etc.
4. What's the highest instrument you can hear in the song and where does it feature
5. What's the deepest instrument you can hear in the song and where does it feature
6. What effects are used on the instruments
7. What type of guitars, if any, are used in the song e.g. Acoustic/Electric and what effects are used on them

Vocals

1. What effects are used on the vocals and how do the effects change during the song
2. Where are the lead vocals 'doubled' i.e. an additional vocal sung in unison with the lead vocal to 'fatten' the sound
3. Where are vocals used to harmonise along with the lead vocal
4. Where are vocals used that provide a background for the lead vocal
5. How many vocal tracks can you hear
6. Have the vocals been chopped up and used as samples?



Pan

Where is everything panned in the mix? This is easiest to determine by using headphones.

Levels

Notice how loud different instruments are in relation to other instruments and particularly the lead vocal.

Effects

Listen carefully for any of the following

1. Reverbs
2. Delays
3. Compression
4. Distortion
5. Phase/flange/chorus
6. Side-chain: where an instrument, or a whole track, sounds as if the level is pumping up and down/in and out

Although this particular challenge is to write down what you hear, there's nothing to stop you critical listening any time you listen to music: in the car, on TV, at the movies etc.

Do it as often as you can and your production will benefit from it.

Have fun!