



Mix-ability

It's important to create interesting contrasts in your production.
Steven Helstrip paints a musical picture.

Let's take a further look at production and mixing techniques, having covered the basics of the approach and structure of commercial music in last month's *Hands On*. I've included plenty of ideas for adding those little extra details in recordings, too.

It's the little things that count

When you listen to a song for the first time it's often quite difficult see (or should that be hear?) the overall picture. This is probably because you are concentrating on listening to the vocal. But how many times have you heard a song and said to yourself "Eh? I've never noticed that bit before"? Whether it's a subtle piano chord, a distant vocal harmony or a weird analogue sound, these are the makings of a great production.

Last month, we briefly covered pre-

production. At this stage, the most important item on the agenda should be to lay down a rough "Lego" mix of the song. The demo should capture the overall feel of the track, though, and have a solid structure.

When you're happy with the demo, have a rest from it for a few days. If there are any problems when you listen back to it with a fresh pair of ears, they will stand out like a sore thumb — the outro chorus needs to lift more, for example. At this point write down any ideas you have; it's amazing how quickly you'll forget.

Planning ahead

Whether you're recording a song in a friend's bedroom with a four-track recorder, or booked into Sarm West for three days, it's important to plan ahead. I've always found that writing down ideas helps because it's easy to go off on a

tangent when you have access to new gear. If you want the track to sound similar to another song, take along the CD.

Probably the most important, and often the most difficult, aspect of the production is creating interesting contrast. If the track is all on one level, the listener will get bored. Contrast covers many areas of the production, not just its dynamic range. Here are some ideas which can help create interest.

1. Increasing and decreasing the dynamic range

Building up to the chorus means it will have more effect. Then at the second verse, drop down to a lower level. As part of the building process, double up sounds: for example, layer four string pads and gradually increase the level of each part. With pianos, copy parts over three octaves, leaving the middle octave

Creative Essentials: Trance Formation



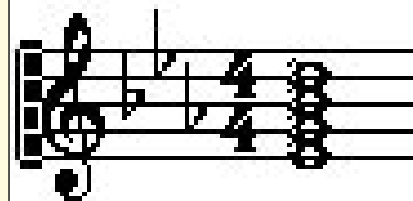
The latest CD from Creative Essentials — warm, sweeping and, yes... trancy

Trance Formation is the sixth CD in the Creative Essentials library. It contains over 200 professional samples in both audio and Windows .wav format. If you've had the chance to audition the Korg Prophecy synth and liked what you heard, you will love this CD. Warm, analogue-esque synth sweeps, dreamy LFOs, trancy sequences and filtered film scores can be found on each and every track. Most of the samples have been recorded with stereo effects giving them a spacious and deep quality. Like many CDs in this genre, many of the sounds are impossible to describe. Names the producers have come up with include Haunting, Prayer Wheel and Fairy Dust — great names, equally fantastic sounds. Wherever possible, the inlay card describes each track by way of tempo and key. There are however no loop points given.

Among the trancy timbres you'll also find a limited selection of bass and percussion sounds. Every sample in the Creative Essentials range is 100 percent original and safe to use. As usual, you can find a selection of samples on this month's free, cover-mounted CD-ROM in *Hands\Sound*.

Chord of the Month

This month's gem is E flat with a major seventh. The notes in this chord are E flat, G, B flat, D. Cole Porter's favourite key must have been E flat, as most of his songs are in this key and this chord pops up regularly.



more prominent.

2. Introducing and dropping instruments
 This can also help the build up to the chorus.

3. Changing the instrumentation
 In a middle eight, for example, you may lose the bass line and compensate with a pedalled, or sustained, note using a strings timbre.

Changing the instruments that play melodies can have a great effect, too.

4. Key changes

Key changes are great for adding contrast. There are several possibilities, the

Super Sonic forges ahead

Sonic Foundry has released version 3.0 of its digital audio editor, Sound Forge. I recently installed a copy and was more than surprised at what it had to offer.

If, like me, you spend loads of time editing and generally messing about with digital audio, chances are you resort to "alt-tabbing" between a handful of editing packages to get simple jobs done. Sound Forge, however, appears to have all the features you'll ever need for mainstream two-track editing.

In addition to the standard features you would expect (cut, paste, fade, insert silence) Sound Forge offers time stretching, normalising and resampling, and a range of effects that include flange, distortion, reverb and noise gates. There's also a 10-band graphic equaliser and a wave generator.

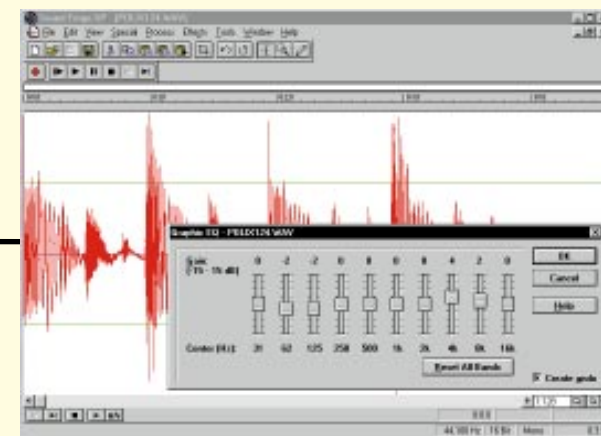
Just as important as the feature set is ease of use, and Sound Forge has it. You shouldn't need to open the manual, since everything is so straightforward.

Version 3.0 uses native 32-bit code for Windows 95 and NT and there are definite performance gains.

Alternatively, there's Steinberg's new 32-bit editor, WaveLabs.

Although I haven't yet seen the program, Steinberg claims it's the fastest editor to date.

Version 3.0 of Sound Forge has an impressive array of features, including this 10-band graphic equaliser



most obvious being to shift the whole song up one or two semi-tones for the outro chorus. You can try a more dramatic key change at the middle eight section; a four tone shift, for instance. This will grab the listener's attention.

5. Inverting chords

This is a subtle way to change contrast. You may also like to try splitting up the chord and playing each note on a different instrument to form new textures.

6. Effects

Effects can be used greatly to create contrast. Here are some examples. Try alter-

nating between a dry (untreated) vocal and one with reverb and a short delay. Single-line harmonies can be treated with over-the-top effects to introduce new textures. Try movement between mono and stereo reverbs and delays.

7. Treating effects

There are many ways to use effects processing units. The most obvious is to patch them into the auxiliary buses, which enables you to send an output from any channel to the effect. If you are low on effect units it is possible to pre-process your sounds before going to tape. This often produces excellent result and frees up your valuable effects processor for another instrument. The down side is that you cannot change the effect at a later stage.

If, on the other hand, you have several units to play with, try combining the effects. For example, send the signal to a compressor, then take the output from the compressor to a reverb, then to a delay or chorus. Different effects can be produced by experimenting with the order in which you chain the effects.

Voyage of Discovery

Discovering Music is a new CD-ROM from Voyetra. It's like a musical rendition of Microsoft Works, only instead of a word processor, spreadsheet and database you get a MIDI sequencer, a score writer and an electronic band to jam along with. There's also a multimedia exploration of music history and theory.

The package is aimed at 10-year-olds and above and introduces just about every

genre of music from Baroque through to modern-day sequencing. Within the Music Conservatory you can learn the difference between musical consonance and dissonance, what a canon is and how counterpoint works.

There are also video clips and musical examples of 75 instruments, and courses in music theory.

Whether you're studying music at GSCE or A-level and need a valuable reference, or you simply want to have a bit of fun with MIDI, Discovering Music has it all. And it's a bargain at £79.95.



Above
Discovering Music from Voyetra provides an entire musical education

Left *Jam along with a virtual band*

PCW Contacts

Readers' contributions to the Sound column are music to our ears. If you have any hints or tips, any MIDI-related items or general comments, send them in to the usual PCW address, or to steven_helstrip@pcw.ccmil.com.

Sound Forge **£149**. Voyetra's Discovering Music **£79.95**. WaveLabs **£299**. All from **Arbiter** 0171 379 5148. Trance Formation **£19.95** from **Time + Space** 01442 870681

