

# Mix Theology

You have a limited amount of volume to work with, so if you start with the energy and then add the rest, you'll have energetic music that's not too loud!

Whether you're a pastor, sound tech, drummer, vocalist, worship leader, or second keyboardist, you know the disappointment of a flat worship set where a song didn't work because of...well, what actually made that not work!?

There are tons of reasons that could cause a song to not "work," so let me ask you this to focus on one possible cause. How does your technology empower you to accomplish your mission? More importantly, how does your training empower your teams to accomplish your mission? Do you feel like the way the music is played and mixed helps or hinders what God wants to do?

Another way to ask this is "Do you hear 'it's too loud' in one ear and 'it's too quiet' in the other?" [welcome to church leadership] While a simple quick fix might be to just turn it down and ignore one side's request [hoping people will still engage], there's a far better, solution that all begins by looking at something I call your Mix Theology – the philosophy and practice your sound guy and worship leader use to arrange and mix the music. In other words, what drives you to make the choices you actually make when playing or mixing?

## Everyone has a Mix Theology

Everyone has a Mix Theology [even the lady in the 4<sup>th</sup> seat from the back singing at the top of her lungs and the scowling dude in the 5<sup>th</sup> seat from the front with his arms permanently locked across his chest – though they may have a tough time articulating it]. The goal is to identify what your own Mix Theology is, figure out what it should be as a team, remove the inconsistencies, and put into practice a consistent Mix Theology. Learning this art plays a key role in going where God is taking your worshipping community.

I really encourage ongoing conversations between leaders whoever is mixing each week especially about energy. You might want to say something like "Here's how I feel God is inspiring us to lead. We've decided to use these songs this week, so we need to arrange the music and build the mix in a way that supports these songs [and ultimately the spirit of worship they were written to inspire]. How do you think we can pull this off together?"

This can be a really tricky area, but training is essential for both the band and the tech arts team. Agreeing in both theory and strategy [Mix Theology] are vital. This is why I started by asking if you felt like you're able to accomplish your mission. I just want you to be effective in the mission that God has called you as a body to accomplish. I don't want the lack of unity or training to keep you from this.

I realize that [as in many areas], sometimes it takes someone from the outside to rephrase or even repeat these principles. At Ad Lib Music, it's our mission to enable God-directed transformation to accomplish your mission. If we can be that outside voice, we're here for you!

## The Music We Play

If you're playing modern worship songs [think Chris Tomlin, Hillsongs, & Passion], I believe it's nearly impossible to consistently lead worship encounters with the LORD *without* energy in the music – especially in the “up” songs. [*energy* and *volume* are related, but are not the same] Once you decide to do a certain kind of song, there are requirements for it to actually “work.”

I think a good question to ask when arranging and mixing a song is “What’s carrying the song?” A good way to find the answer is to ask “Would this song make sense if sung a cappella?” or “How would this song change without the instruments?” or “Would this song work without a drummer or a strong lead guitar player?” Many of our songs would and many would not. The answer has implications in both how we play the song and how we mix the song. The saying “The band plays the music, the sound engineer plays the band” speaks of the interdependent relationship between the two. The band needs to think in these categories when each player is deciding what to play and the sound engineer needs to think this way in building the mix.

## History of Contemporary Worship Music

Here's a bit of the history of how “contemporary” music evolved in the church. It started with a cappella singing, and then a piano or guitar was added. Then percussion, a flute, or other “support” instruments were added. During this time, the piano [or guitar] was the “lead instrument” and other instruments were mixed under it. “Can I hear the singers and the lead instrument?” was the main question.

The music we use today is significantly different, but we often arrange and mix the same, old way, which doesn't work. Most of the songs we use now are not written, recorded, or meant to be played with this understanding. Let's look instead at the way almost everything we listen to on the radio or modern worship CD's is mixed.

### A Great Mix Theology

1. Start with the “railroad tracks” the band rides on – the drums and bass guitar – these must be primary and foundational in the mix. [It's a good practice during sound check to begin building your mix with nothing but bass and drums and then add the rest] To test the truth of this, the next time you're listening to your car radio, turn it all the way down and slowly raise the volume, noting what instruments you hear first. [thanks to John Mills for this idea]
2. Then we need to hear a strong lead vocal and rich background vocals.
3. Finally, we add the rest of the instruments, paying special attention to any instrument that “makes” the song – perhaps a melody line on the secondary keyboard or a rhythmic strumming pattern on the guitar, or an arpeggiated riff on the piano. When you listen to recordings of these songs, notice how this is exactly how they're mixed. There is rarely a “lead instrument,” and sometimes there is a “lead-off instrument” that starts the song, but then settles back into the mix.

This order is important in part because the reality is that you have a limited amount of volume to work with, and if you mix with a “lead instrument and vocals” approach, you won't have any room left for the real energy of the music – the drums and bass. But if you start with the energy – the drums and bass – and then add follow-able voices and supportive instruments, you'll have energetic music that's not too loud! Hooray!

What is most notably missing from a prominent role, is the piano and acoustic guitar [the previous “lead instruments]. Again, if it “makes” the song [usually for an intro or on a slower song], then of course it should be up in the mix. But since we work with a limited amount of “space” when we mix there are two basic ways of highlighting an instrument [or creating a mix] – either turn something up or turn other things down [you can also highlight with EQ or panning]. Often a mix is out of balance simply because the worship leader’s guitar or piano is too prominent in the mix when it doesn’t need to be – adding unwanted volume to the mix and killing any headroom. There’s this weird effect with music and balance. For example, singers can sound out of tune when in reality they are only out of balance – if the tenor is singing a harmony part and it’s too loud in the mix, it can make the chord created by the rest of the singers sound out of tune. Crazy, huh!?

An essential skill for both players and techs is to learn to listen to music in tracks – where you can pick out what the bass player or the tenor is doing and feel how it fits in with the whole. You MUST listen to each other! Soloing on the Avioms [if you have them] for the band, and the solo button on the console for the techs can help develop this skill.

The mix should be dynamic and musical. This means that we need to be sound ARTISTS. The musicians are playing with feeling and emotion. It is necessary that we are properly conveying what the musicians are doing. When the electric guitar plays a fill riff, feature it. Pull back non-essential elements of the music [often acoustic guitar and piano], for this will also give room for elements that should be featured. One phrase of the music may require piano, another the rim-shot of the snare, and another the “singing” of the e-bow on the electric guitar. Certain vocalists should also be featured at certain times, especially when the lead vocal switches to a harmony – listen out for this. The mix is never “set” or “done”. It is always changing, playing along with the band.

We at Ad Lib Music delight in training you to enable God-directed transformation that accomplishes your mission...we’re here for you!

We hope you’re encouraged by the Worship Fertilizer, a free resource from Ad Lib Music, *“in simple love and pure devotion to Jesus, we are eradicating isolation and burnout so that leaders bear much fruit!”*