

H O W T O G O F R O M
D E M O T O

PRO

THE TOP 5 MUSICAL
MISTAKES

BASED ON LISTENING TO HUNDREDS OF TRACKS FROM MUSICIANS ALL OVER THE
WORLD, THIS GUIDE WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO AVOID THE TOP 5 MUSICAL MISTAKES
THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AMATEUR '**DEMO**' SOUND, AND A
PROFESSIONAL COMMERCIAL SOUND

WHY READ THIS BOOK?

I constantly get people asking me to review their tracks and give them some ‘constructive criticism’. This is great, because it tells me that they want to learn and improve.

Unfortunately, I had to stop reviewing tracks years ago as it’s just impossible to get to them all.

Of course, I made an exception when a good friend of mine asked me to listen to some of her recordings and tell her what she can do to improve them.

And then it hit me.

The mistakes she was making were the EXACT same mistakes I’ve heard in hundreds of tracks by musicians all over the world – regardless of the style of music or gear they may be using.

Your music may be unique, but the mistakes holding it back, are not.

If you’ve been feeling a little frustrated with your music lately – like you KNOW there’s something not quite right about it, but you can’t put your finger on it, you’re in the right place.

I’m going to be sharing with you the 10 most common mistakes that cause people’s tracks to sound more like amateur demos, than professional sounding commercial tracks.

I’m going to show you how to go from “demo” to “pro”.

Now, your tracks may not sound like amateur demos, they may sound pretty good already, but maybe you’re missing just one or two distinctions that will really make the difference you’ve been looking for.

In this book, we’ll be covering the top 5 MUSICAL mistakes, and then in a future book, we’ll look at the top 5 TECHNICAL mistakes.

The reason I wrote this was to help you become aware of what’s holding your music back.

Once you know this, you can start to purposely improve it, and you’ll find yourself making rapid progress toward that professional sound you’ve been looking for in your music.

DEMO VS PRO

DEMO

A recording made to demonstrate the capabilities of a musical group or performer or as preparation for a full recording.

I use the word ‘demo’ because it has the connotation of an unfinished, non-professional sounding track.

Demo’s don’t always sound bad, but most of the time they sound like ‘rough recordings’ – which is fine if that’s all they’re meant to be.

The original purpose of the demo was to do a rough recording which could then be shopped around to record labels in the hope that one would sign you up.

As we all know, those days are LOOOOOONG gone!

Today, we’ve got more music making capability in our laptops than many million dollar recording studios of years before.

It’s incredible.

We’re no longer producing demos, we’re producing final, commercial tracks that we can send straight into the world for people to enjoy.

Of course, this means that it’s more important than ever that our tracks sound like professional productions, not amateur demos.

PRO

Short for **PRO**fessional – We want our music to SOUND professional – polished, complete, on the level of other commercial records.

Even if someone is just making a ‘demo’ for the fun of it, no one wants their music to SOUND like a demo!

As much as I wish I could say the sound doesn’t matter and it’s just about the music, we both know that isn’t true – SOUND is the vehicle for music.

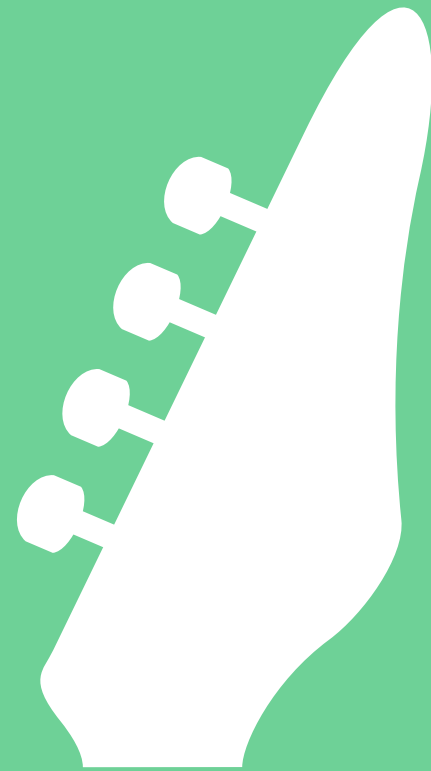
Without sound, we can’t experience the music, because music IS sound.

You want people to be able to listen to your music and just ENJOY the MUSIC – not be distracted by something weird about the sound.

Simply put, a professional sound is essential to your songs reaching their full potential and having the biggest impact possible.

MUSICAL MISTAKE

#5



TUNING



"**Demos**" often have instruments or vocals with tuning issues



"**Pro**" tracks sound on key and on pitch throughout the song

MUSICAL MISTAKE #5

TUNING

I once had a big recording session where we needed to track a live grand piano.

So we booked a top studio and called up a piano tuner to go in the day before to tune the piano.

Long story short... he tuned the piano... but he tuned it to ITSELF instead of standard tuning which all the other instruments used!

Needless to say, it was an expensive lesson and we had to postpone our recording.

Music is about choosing notes and chords that sound harmonious together.

They essentially 'vibrate in harmony' with one another.

When an instrument or vocal is slightly sharp or flat, the vibrations of that sound no longer match the other sounds, so it sounds 'off' – i.e. Not very good to listen to!

You could record the most incredible performance, but if the instrument was out of tune, you generally can't use it.

Guitars are one of the most common culprits for tuning issues.

If you even have one shred of doubt that it *MIGHT* be ever so slightly out of tune – tune again just to be safe.

Make sure the guitar's intonation has been set up correctly otherwise it'll always be slightly out no matter how well you tune it.

If you put on a capo, make sure to tune the guitar AGAIN based on where the capo is.

With vocals, this isn't quite as simple – obviously everyone TRIES their best to sing in tune, but it seems the human voice often has its own ideas...

Fortunately, we've got incredible software these days that can do miracles, and you can tune just about any vocal with pretty much zero side effects.

The most famous (and infamous) tuning software is Antares Autotune, but there's plenty of alternatives these days.

The bottom line is, if we want a professional sound, we've got to make sure there aren't any tuning issues in the tracks we release.

KEY LESSONS

Record enough takes so that you can **comp together the best parts from each take** – it's always better to use a good take than try and fix a bad one

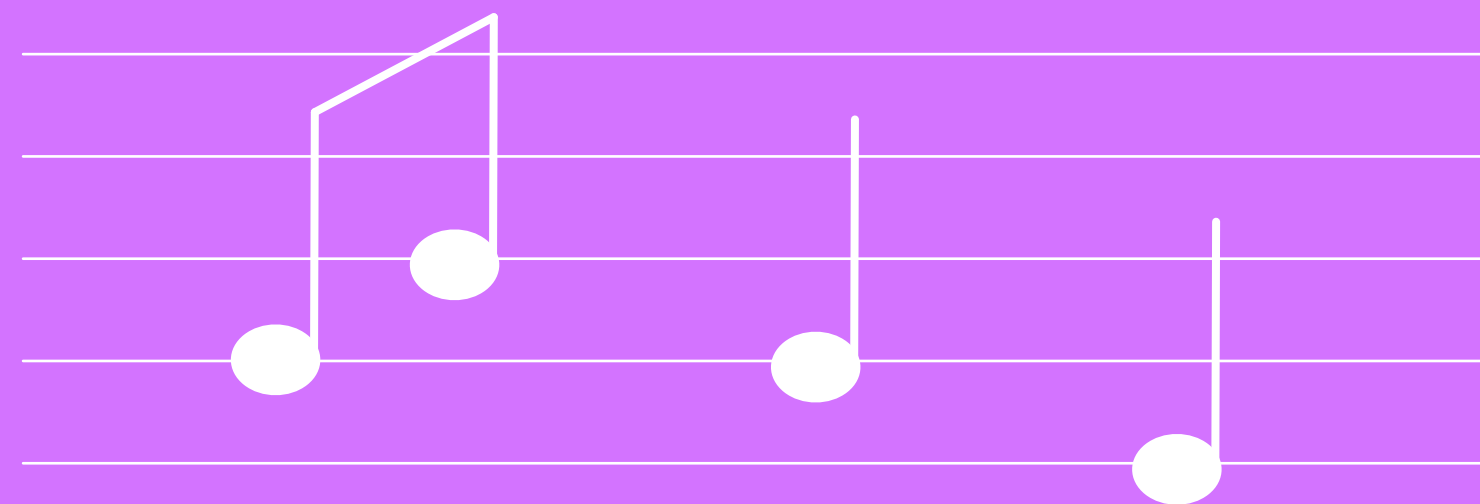
ALWAYS check an instruments tuning immediately before each take

Use autotune if necessary - just make sure to **set it to the key of the song**, or it may pull certain notes even MORE out of tune

Start by putting the autotune on the **fastest setting** to make sure that it's tuning it correctly, and then back it off

MUSICAL MISTAKE

#4



WRONG NOTES / CHORDS



"**Demos**" allow wrong notes or chords to slip through



"**Pro**" tracks don't have mistakes in them

MUSICAL MISTAKE #4

WRONG NOTES / CHORDS

I once saw a video by some top producer who was saying that he often finds the tracks he produces are “too perfect”, so he always makes sure there’s at least one wrong note somewhere in there.

Now that’s what I call a HIGH QUALITY problem!

For the rest of us... we have more than enough problems to make sure that our tracks never sound “TOO perfect” :)

Apart from this guy, there’s simply no place for these types of mistakes in a professional track.

No one intentionally leaves mistakes in, but what can often happen is a wrong note or chord gets buried in a big mix and forgotten about.

You often don’t explicitly hear it, but it makes the whole song sound a bit ‘off’ at that point.

One of the most common problems I come across is mistakes in the bass line.

It can be difficult to distinguish pitch in the lower frequencies, so often small mistakes go unnoticed while tracking bass, but it really throws out the song if it’s not fixed.

If I suspect something is sounding a little ‘off’, but I’m not sure exactly what it is, I’ll start by soloing the core instruments of the song – the drums, bass, lead instrument, etc.

Once I’m sure that those are correct, I’ll keep adding instruments to the mix by soloing them, until I find what’s causing the problem.

KEY LESSONS

If it's a live instrument, you can often fix a wrong note or chord by simply **copying the same part from another section** of the song - this saves having to re-track it

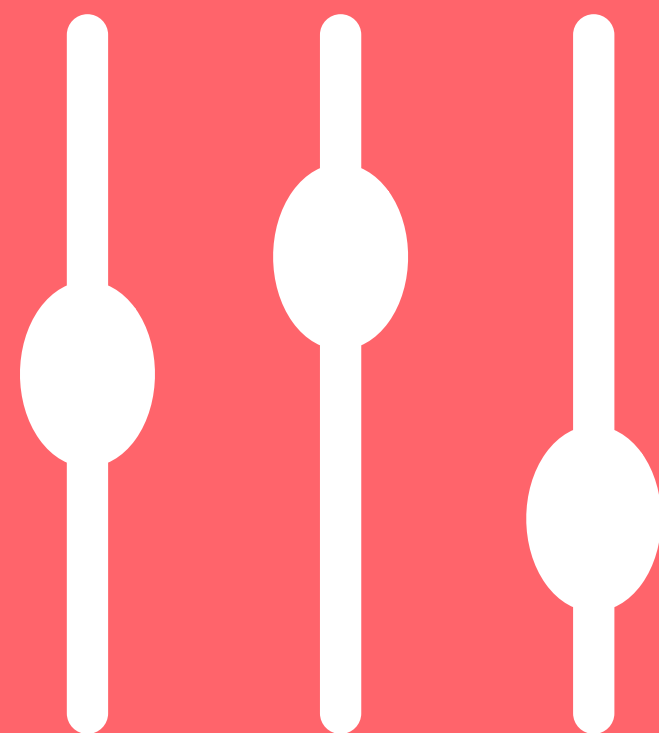
If it's a MIDI track you can simply go in and **move the notes** to the right place

Make sure to **record a couple of takes** so that you have options if you need to replace something

If it can't be fixed, it'll need to be **recorded again**

MUSICAL MISTAKE

#3



BALANCE



"**Demos**" sound out of balance and out of focus, making you strain to hear key elements clearly



"**Pro**" tracks sound well balanced and focus your attention on the most important parts of the song

MUSICAL MISTAKE #3

BALANCE

Back in the day, before multi-track recorders came along, musicians would ‘self balance’ themselves by standing either closer or further from the microphone.

Today, most music is multi-tracked, which means we record all the different instruments and parts in different takes.

This is great for making sure we get the best take possible, but it also means that we have to set the levels of each track manually so that the music makes sense and the listener can best experience the song.

Balance is the very essence of mixing.

We want all the elements that make up a song to be in the right proportions so that it allows someone to best experience the song.

It doesn’t matter how great a part sounds if no one can hear it clearly in the final track!

Balance is NOT about making everything the same level, it's about emphasizing the main elements, and making sure the rest of the instruments support those main elements.

e.g. If the vocals are the main focal point, they should be loud and clear throughout the song.

KEY LESSONS

Make sure that the **MAIN elements are the MAIN elements** (this can change depending on the section of the song)

Use automation if you need to adjust the level throughout the song

4 Tips to help you balance your mixes:

Listen at **different volumes** – Softly most of the time, but loud every now and then

Listen from **different positions** – Try listening from the next room

Listen on **different systems** – Car, boombox, iPod, laptop, home theatre system, etc.

Take regular **breaks** – When you come back you’ll hear things more clearly

MUSICAL MISTAKE

#2



ARRANGEMENT



"**Demos**" often sound too busy and have parts that are incongruent with the feel and energy of the song



"**Pro**" productions have captivating arrangements that enhance the song and focus your attention on the most important elements

MUSICAL MISTAKE #2

ARRANGEMENT

What's the difference between the song and the arrangement?

The 'song' is the melody and the lyrics.

The 'arrangement' is everything else that makes up the song – such as the instruments used, chords, the tempo, and the structure of the song.

I'm sure you've heard a song that's been produced by more than one artist before – they're using the same melody and lyrics, but they're changing the arrangement to make their own unique version of it.

There's a lot that goes into arrangement and we can't get into all that over here (if you have my Ultimate Mixing Formula program see the section on 'what makes a great arrangement') but I'm going to give you the TOP 3 most common arrangement mistakes that I hear again and again.

1. Too busy

The most common mistake I hear is an arrangement that's too busy.

If you have too many parts all competing for the same space, it doesn't matter how much of a mixing genius you are, it won't work.

The reason this happens is because we naturally think that if a part of a song isn't working, it must be missing something, so we keep adding more and more parts.

Often the solution is to REMOVE parts.

2. Incongruence

Incongruent means 'not compatible'. A common mistake is to choose sounds that aren't compatible with the song or style.

As an extreme example, big punchy drums are never going to sound right in a mellow acoustic song.

3. Bad / generic sounds

A song's sound can only be as good as the individual sounds that make it up.

It doesn't matter how much you EQ or compress that Casio keyboard, it's never going to sound like a Steinway!

Whether you have to borrow a friend's guitar, or download a demo of a good virtual instrument, it's worth finding the best sounds possible.

KEY LESSONS

Remove or mute any non essential parts that are just cluttering up the mix and distracting from the main elements

Congruence – Make sure that the sounds you choose match and support the energy and style of the song

A song can only sound as good as it's combined sounds – so find the best sounds you can and try and avoid generic sounding midi instruments

MUSICAL MISTAKE





TIMING



"**Demo**" tracks sound loose, messy, and inconsistent



"**Pro**" tracks sound tight and have a solid rhythm and groove that drives the song

MUSICAL MISTAKE #1

TIMING

Surprisingly, this is the MOST common musical issue I hear when I listen to people's tracks.

It's surprising because it's actually relatively easy to fix most timing issues.

Timing is what creates the rhythm and groove of music – without it, we'd just have an endless drone.

There's that old saying that goes...

"Music isn't about the notes, it's about the spaces in between"

When those spaces are predicable and repetitive, it creates what we call **rhythm**.

If the rhythm is suddenly slightly out of time, it throws you off. It's jarring and it takes you out of the feel of the song.

So we generally want a consistent, solid rhythm to our songs.

The good news is, the modern DAW allows us to edit this stuff afterwards and fix most timing problems.

Here's some tips for the instruments that most commonly have timing issues...

Drums – If you're recording live drums and the drummer wasn't that tight, you're going to have to go in there, chop them up, and shift them in time – it's a lot of work, but it's worth it if it saves the song.

Bass – For most styles of music, the kick and the bass instruments should 'lock together', this is what makes a solid sounding rhythm section. I often put the bass track next to the kick track so that I can zoom into the waveform and see whether they're in time. If not, I may cut and shift some notes around.

Vocals – Singers are often so focussed on singing in tune that they sing out of time – it may be very slight, but it's there.

Acoustic guitars – You would think that strumming an acoustic guitar would be pretty simple for an experienced guitarist, but I've seen this trip up even the best. In big mixes, acoustic guitars often perform more of a percussive role where you mainly hear the rhythm of the strumming. This means that they've got to lock in with the rhythm section otherwise it's just going to sound messy.

Start with the main rhythm section. Solo the drums and bass and make sure they sound locked together and grooving.

If these don't sound tight, everything else you put on top of them is just going to sound messy.

KEY LESSONS

Use a click track while recording (if it suits the style of music)

Make sure your rhythm section is tight and in time
BEFORE recording any parts over it

If you're using midi you can **quantize it** – just make sure that it's not pulling anything more out of time

For **live instruments**, cut out parts / sections and shift them onto the grid

MUSICAL MISTAKES CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to make sure your tracks are free from the top 5 musical mistakes that cause tracks to sound like amateur demos instead of professional commercial quality productions.

#1 TIMING

- ✓ Drums sound tight and any timing issues have been fixed
- ✓ The kick and bass line up and sound tight
- ✓ Any vocal timing issues have been fixed
- ✓ Backing vocals line up with lead vocals
- ✓ Strumming guitars lock in with the rhythm section
- ✓ MIDI tracks have been quantized if necessary
- ✓ Any out of time sections have been shifted into time
- ✓ There's no parts that sound jarring or throw off the rhythm

#3 BALANCE

- ✓ The lead instrument/s are loud and clear and leading the song
- ✓ The vocals and lyrics are clear throughout the song
- ✓ Used automation for any parts that needed balancing throughout the song
- ✓ Checked the balance at different volumes
- ✓ Walked around the room, and just outside the room, to hear if the balance still sounds right
- ✓ Listened to the mix / master on different systems e.g. Car, boombox, iPod, laptop, home theatre system, etc.

#2 ARRANGEMENT

- ✓ Removed / muted any unnecessary parts that aren't adding to the song
- ✓ All the sounds match and support the energy and feel of the song
- ✓ Chosen the best sounds I could find for each instrument

#4 WRONG NOTES / CHORDS

- ✓ Any MIDI mistakes have been moved to the correct notes
- ✓ Any live instrument mistakes have either been swapped out for a good section, or re-recorded
- ✓ Checked instruments in solo to make sure all the notes and chords are correct

#5 TUNING

- ✓ Any parts with tuning issues have been swapped out or re-recorded
- ✓ Comped together the best vocal takes to minimize tuning issues
- ✓ Any out of tune vocals have been tuned
- ✓ If autotune was used, it's set to the key of the song
- ✓ Everything sounds in tune and on pitch when played together



PART 2

THE TOP 5 TECHNICAL MISTAKES

In this book, we looked at the top 5 MUSICAL mistakes that cause people's tracks to sound more like amateur demos than professional commercial tracks.

Make sure to get part 2 in this series, 'The Top 5 Technical Mistakes', where we'll cover the 5 big technical issues that make the difference between 'demo' and 'pro'.

Only available at prosoundformula.com