

How-to: Make Trance Music

By

Quasar

Trance music. It means so many different things to different people. For some, it is a path of transcendence. For others, it is obnoxiously repetitive beats without any real musical value. In fact, they are both right.

Bad electronic music sounds like a cat in a blender. So does good noise-core. It is ultimately a matter of taste, but a good trance song can create as much mental visual imagery a classical piece or a jazz tune.

In fact, trance has much in common with jazz and classical, especially if we are talking of “spiritual” trance as opposed to “club” trance. (This is like comparing Miles Davis to elevator music.) For one, all of these genres utilize abstracted sounds as the basis of the music, rather than lyrics. This can create a much more expansive space in the mind of the listener. Lyrics, for all they are worth, tend to “drag down” the music in some way. That is, they create a tunnel in which the music follows, in order to support the words being expressed as ideas. The music itself obviously creates a “tunnel,” yet this is what I mean to say as “more expansive,” since music can talk to a human no matter what language they speak. (This isn’t the complete picture, obviously, because there are vocal styles such as scatting, which focus more on vocalizations. In these cases, the lyrics are usually “nonsense” or improvisational.)

Another way trance is like jazz or classical is in its genesis. These genres were created by “breaking the rules” of their day. For classical, this can be seen in different orchestrations and utilizations of newly invented instruments, such as the bassoon or the timpani. In jazz, this was done by learning, and then disregarding, the rules. Or learning the rules and then applying them in a way unintended by the rule makers. For example, St. John Coltraine liked to take “standards” and other pop songs of his day and rewrite them. He would do this by replacing the normal chord progressions with the modal style, among other of his favorite things.

Trance music breaks the rules by accepting them all. If you like chord progressions, use chord progressions. If you like bluegrass, you can add that element to your song. If you know nothing of western musical theory, it doesn’t matter!

Another way trance breaks the rules is through heavy utilization of effects and production techniques that are usually the domain of the studio engineer. In fact, a certain effect can be the focal point of a section of music, especially if it is used in a way which is novel and original, and therefore, unheard of before.

An artists' musical training and technical training mix together in different ways and thus create a large variation in the sound of a particular artist or song. The real focus is producing a cd-quality master version of the song. It is the sound coming out of the speakers that ultimately matters, no matter who wrote it or how they did it. This differs from many other forms of music, in which the artist is expected to be able to reproduce a certain song in a performance setting. So quality is then defined partially by repeatability, that is, the artists' ability to recreate the experience. While it does take much talent to do such a thing, in the bigger picture of sound, this can become a limiting factor to work with. Trance artists are rarely involved in reproducing a song "live," since much of the work that makes the trance sound comes from hours in a studio creating a perfect take. Most of the techniques used are either hard to implement or simply not possible in a "live" performance setting. This is because the trance artist is usually doing the work of a whole band, plus the studio engineer and the producer and the manager and the agent and the...

So there you have the classic validation of trance as a viable musical genre. But don't take my word for it. Most musical genres in the last century, if successful, seem to get re-interpreted by commercial enterprises with the intention of making large sums of money on the backs of the artists and studio engineers and the like. In other words, if there are enough people listening to it, there must be money to be made off of it.

This has already happened in the trance genre. In the U.S., the majority of trance music being played is of the commercial variety. Furthermore, it is usually heard in large clubs, which are so regulated as to be merely money-making enterprises. Take our example to the world. We have Israel, a country that produces a large percentage of trance worldwide. Like rock'n'roll in the U.S., trance is the "national" music of the country. It can be heard in radio, television, and, tellingly enough, in commercials. It is also utilized by the Israeli military as a moral booster. In fact, there is a complete genre of trance called Victory Trance, which is music to listen to after a successful battle.

These ideas serve as the basis of what comes next. Trance music is fast becoming the most "democratic" form of music. As the big music industry executives wonder where all of their money has gone, thousands upon thousands of people around the world are taking up the task of producing trance music. For themselves. For their friends and family. They don't want to be rock stars, they just want to rock some people out for the night. The goal isn't to be the biggest, just big enough.

Maybe democratic isn't the right word. Let's try "accepting." Trance music doesn't care how fast you can play your scales, unless you do. It doesn't care if you created the sounds by technical skill or beating a log with a stick. You don't even need to know power chords. Of course, knowing of these things gives you more skills to work with in producing better music. But you don't need to be Mozart to

make music that you and your friends can enjoy. In summary, almost anyone can make trance music if they have the inclination. And just the same, it may have musical value only to the person making it. But that's okay!

So maybe now your interest is piqued, or maybe the title of this article caught your eye. So you want to make trance music? Or maybe get a different perspective on the music you make? Well, read on. This series of articles will help you get started or otherwise pick up some new tricks. The articles are divided into two sections: How-to and Review. The How-to articles will give you information on how to create certain aspects of trance music, while the Review articles give you a first hand account of my search for the best free plugins, that is, effects and instruments used on a computer digital audio workstation.

The reviews will be of a slightly different flavor than most. For one, I'm not reviewing a plug-in to see if it is any good or not, only plugs which I consider to be of high quality. The sole exception is the NWEQ equalizer review. I wanted to use an EQ that anyone can access, so we are all looking at the same thing for the How-to: Equalize article. Also, each review is a short manual on how to operate the plug-in. Otherwise, the review would just be, "Yea, this plug-in is cool!"

Each review will be followed by a How-to use the effect or instrument, using the plug-in from the review for demonstration. I feel this will help you get the most out of the articles, as well as the plug-ins.

So sit back and enjoy a cup of whatever pleases you. This isn't a long ride, but it is a fun one, and hopefully a very informative one as well!