THE POMODORO SYSTEM FOR PRODUCTIVITY

A great way to boost your productivity for short periods of time is by using a **Pomodoro timer**.

It's a great way to get focused on only what's in front of you. In your case, it should be your DAW with a song ready for mixing.

Think of the Pomodoro system similar to a high intensity workout. One of the most popular high intensity workouts is the 7-minute workout. It's broken down into a series of bodyweight exercises. Each set is 20 seconds long with a 10-second break. The 20-second intervals can wear you out but the 10-second break in between is just enough for you to recharge and get ready for the next one.

The same thing is true with the Pomodoro System.

YOU CAN EXHAUST YOURSELF BY FOCUSING ON ONE TASK FOR 25 MINUTES BECAUSE YOU KNOW YOU'LL GET A BREAK AFTERWARDS.

25 minutes is not a very long time, so it's actually helpful to use it in a structured way for mixing. Say you have two hours to mix a song. You can use four Pomodoro sessions and have a great rough mix at the end of it.

If you break each 25-minute session into a workflow, like the one I detail at the end of the book, you'll have accomplished 80% of the things you need to do in a mix in only 2 hours. Compare that to an unstructured way of working where you endlessly tweak the bass guitar, waste precious time compressing the snare drum (everybody's always compressing the snare drum), or use up all your afternoon finding the right reverb. That last one is a bit of an overstatement, but you get my point. If there's no structure to the work, you have no way of knowing where you are in the workflow process.

So, let's do a hypothetical Pomodoro session that breaks down like this:

FIRST 25 MINUTES – ORGANIZATION, LEVELS AND PANS

If you've already created your mixing template the organization, subgrouping, and routing should take very little time. After that, the best place to start a mix is in the chorus, or the busiest part of the song. If you find the hardest spot to mix where all the instruments are clashing, it'll force you to deal with everything at once.

It's better to start there instead of the quiet verse. Sure, you'll get a nice balance faster, but you'll have to deal with the instruments in the chorus anyway so you might as well start there. It's more likely that you'll need less tweaking in the quieter parts.

From the busy final chorus you should get to work and try to think quickly. Don't solo anything, but rather try to get everything sounding good together. You won't get the mix sounding amazing after your first pass, but that's not the point anyway. The goal is to mix fast, so forget about starting with the foundation. Start with all faders up and massage them in place until you get a good balance.

While you move the faders, use this opportunity to pan the tracks around. Stick to these general panning guidelines:

- ***Anchor the kick, snare, vocals, and bass to the center.***
- ***Spread the toms from right to left.***
- ***If you have two rhythm instruments, pan them to each side so that they each have space to breathe. If you have multiple rhythm instruments make sure you keep each side of the mix the same volume. You don't want everything to sit on the left and make a lopsided mix.***
- ***Spread the backing vocals around the center.***
- ***Keep stereo pads in the center since they're technically panned hard left and right.***
- ***Pan lead instruments slightly off center.***

Depending on the complexity of the tracks, you might have some time to spare before your 25 minutes are up. If that's the case, listen to the rest of the song and see if the balance translates from one part of the song to another. If it doesn't, you can use automation to tweak the volume into place. You can also take the time to check your mix on headphones and a second set of monitors if you have them.

In your 5-minute Pomodoro break bounce your rough mix for future reference. You won't need to go back to this mix or anything like that. You'll be pleasantly surprised once you compare it to the finished 2-hour mix and hear how much you can accomplish in that time.

SECOND 25 MINUTES – EQ AND COMPRESSION

Let's start the real mixing by using the two most important processors you have available.

If you've already created your mixing template your tracks should have the EQs and compressors you like the most so you won't be wasting any time scrolling through your plug-in list.

Start by using this EQ to cut out any unwanted frequencies.

Filtering:

1. *Filter the bass and kick drum to around 32 Hz.*
2. *Everything else can usually be filtered up to 100 Hz.*
3. *Get rid of the high-end. Eliminate the high frequencies from the kick drum to reduce bleed, and take out all the highs that the bass doesn't need. If you have distorted electric guitars, low-pass filters can also clean them up.*
4. *Use low-pass filters on doubled vocals and backing vocals to make them blend in.*

Subtractive EQ:

1. *Cut drums in the 400 Hz range to reduce boxiness.*
2. *To make any rhythm instrument sit better with the vocals, try a shallow but wide cut from 900 Hz - 3 kHz.*
3. *To reduce boominess in the bass, or any other instrument, cut from 140 - 250 Hz.*
4. *If the vocals sound too nasally, cut around 1 kHz.*

For other problem areas, try the old trick of scanning around the frequency spectrum with a narrow boost to make ugly frequencies pop out. It's even easier if you use an EQ like the Fabfilter Pro-Q2 that can solo the boost so you can zero in on the problem.

Compression

Because we're trying to mix fast, presets are encouraged. However, presets are just a starting point, especially when it comes to compression. If you find a good preset for your track, make sure that the ratio and threshold are actually doing something. The biggest mistake is not tweaking the threshold to the signal. If the signal isn't hitting the threshold, nothing is being compressed.

Presets like “Rhythm Acoustic” or “Pop Vocal” are great as long as you tweak the threshold and ratio to your liking and listen to how the compressor is shaping the sound.

EQ Enhancement

After less than an hour of work, and if you’ve been fully focused on working fast, your mix should be starting to sound pretty good. That’s how much balance, EQ, and compression can do. If your compressor has squeezed some of the frequencies in your track you might want to add some extra EQ, if you have time.

For instance:

1. *Boost the low-mid punchiness of the guitars, especially if the compressor has been hitting the guitars too hard.*
2. *Add some presence back to the vocals.*
3. *Add some air back into the drums.*
4. *Boost the body of the drums, like the snare at 500 Hz or the thickness of the kick drum in the lows. Alternatively, bring out the attack of both at 3 kHz.*

YOU DON’T NEED TO GO OVERBOARD IN BOOSTING THE SAME FREQUENCY IN SEVERAL INSTRUMENTS. MAKE EACH INSTRUMENT HAVE ITS OWN RESPECTIVE BOOST, IN ITS OWN AREA. OTHERWISE THE INSTRUMENTS MIGHT CLASH AND YOU COULD BE GOING BACKWARDS WITH YOUR MIX.

Once your second 25-minute session is done, bounce your mix real quick. Stand up, stretch, and hydrate! Or do whatever it is you need to do during these five minutes. If you have time, you can even compare the difference between your rough mix from half an hour ago to this balanced and compressed mix that you’ve made in only an hour. I’m sure you’ll be surprised with your results.

YOUR THIRD 25-MINUTE SESSION – EFFECTS

Now that you've done all the boring necessary stuff of balance, EQ, and compression you can start having fun with effects.

Of course, there's no way for me to tell you exactly what effects you should use because every song and approach to the effects in that song is so different.

However, if you want to save time I recommend looking at the effects like a live sound engineer.

Live engineers sometimes have very limited resources, but they can make just a few processors go far.

1. *Use three effects sends. One is for drums, one is for instruments, and one is for vocals.*
2. *Use a gated reverb, a warm chamber, or a diffused hall for the drums. If the reverb is too reflective it'll muddy up the mix. Usually a drum room preset will get you in the ballpark.*
3. *Use a medium-sized room for the instruments. Then, make sure your reverb return fader (the effects bus fader) is all the way up. If you keep the level of the reverb loud you can send differing amounts from the instruments themselves. That way you can make some instruments sound more "reverby" and farther away, creating a depth of field with only one reverb.*
4. *Since we have the whole 25 minutes to spare we can spend some of that time on getting the right vocal effects sound. You can certainly add the vocal into the instrument reverb, but if you also want to add a delay or a separate vocal sound that distinguishes itself from the instruments, you'll need a separate effects track. If you want, you can add reverb after the delay, essentially making your delay work as a pre-delay for the reverb, or even send the vocal effects track to the instrument reverb to create a third sound. This is a trick I use often when I record bands live on the radio as we don't have a lot of effects choices and we have to work fast!*

If you're doing instrument-driven music played by a band you'll usually find that these three effects should be enough. Sometimes, less is more effective, and it's certainly faster. If you had time you could also add one more effect track for parallel overdrive or other crazy effects if the song calls for it.

At this point, your timer should ring and you'll have five minutes to bounce your mix. Spend the five minutes of "rest" comparing your current mix to your initial balance to make you feel good, and then spend the rest of the time thinking about what needs to be tweaked for the final version.

YOUR FINAL 25-MINUTE SESSION

Use the last 25 minutes to rebalance your tracks, automate, and listen to your mix on different speakers.

Your original balance might be off after adding EQ, compression, and effects in such a hurry so you'll need to tweak the faders and dial in the plug-in settings to get the mix to where you want it.

If you bounced your Effects Mix straight to Dropbox or another cloud service you might go around your house and check it on other speaker systems, either by connecting your phone via an aux cord, or by Bluetooth. You might even want to hear how it sounds straight through the crappy smartphone speaker just to get an extreme comparison to your studio monitors.

Once you've listened to your mix like that, done the final tweaks to your plug-ins, and added some automation for interest then you're ready to bounce your final mix.

Take a listen to your final mix and compare it to the initial balance you created. I'm confident that you'll be surprised with the amount of work you achieved in such a limited time. The goal here wasn't to get a perfect mix that wins you a Grammy for Best Engineering. The purpose was to give you a simple workflow to get to the finish line faster.

So how'd you do? Was it possible? If you consider the fact that a mixing engineer at a live venue should get a workable sound from the band's first song, I'm positive that you can do it in two hours.

The Pomodoro System Makes You a Winner

The thing about using the Pomodoro system is that you can use it to trick yourself into working. If you think, "I have half an hour, I might as well start the mix," then you've made a greater step towards improvement than the person who thinks 30 minutes isn't enough so they'll waste their time on social media instead. Repeat that cycle often enough and you'll be leagues ahead of the procrastinators.