

SCAR ADVANTAGE · ESSAYS

Half a Decibel

Three essays on mastering, listening and the work of advancing the human condition

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At the End of the Chain

Mastering is the last stage of making a record. The mix arrives finished, or finished enough. The mastering engineer works on it after every part has been settled, and prepares it to translate everywhere from a car with the windows down, a phone speaker on a kitchen counter, a club rig at midnight, headphones on a late train.

Very few tools, very small moves, with consequences out of all proportion to their size.

I did that work for 15 years. It felt like something I'd done all my life: deep listening, rabid curiosity and aesthetic judgement I could not explain then, and can only partly explain now. I was good at it because it required exactly what I already was.

Years on, I work in education and at SCAR Advantage, helping leadership teams clear the decisions their organisations defend but no longer choose.

Only recently did I realise that I never stopped mastering.

You arrive last, and work on the whole

By the time a record reaches mastering, everything is committed. The song is written, the performances are captured, the mix is balanced. You cannot go back and change the second verse. Your work happens in the space that decides whether the thing travels well.

I work with organisations the same way. The founder's call years ago, the merger, the departure that ended badly: none is open for revision. The history is committed, and the decision now in front of the organisation is not.

My work begins at the end of the chain, with material already there. The constraint is the craft.

The work is judged in the car

A music master is judged in the car.

You prepare something to survive conditions you will be absent for, on systems you do not control, in the ears of people who will give it no special attention. The test is whether it still holds together beyond the monitors on which it sounded beautiful.

A decision is judged by the supervisor who missed the meetings and still has to run it. Much of what looks like decision failure is translation failure. The thinking held together on the monitors and fell apart in the car.

No system is neutral

Every mastering engineer knows their monitoring system is not neutral. Acoustics, speakers and placement all colour what you hear. So you bring in records you know intimately and identify the bias before you touch anything.

Organisations are not neutral either. Neither are their leaders, neither am I. The discipline is identical: use a known reference and notice what the context adds or subtracts.

Putting the studio back

I am putting mastering back into my life, selectively. I miss the music community, the precision of the studio and the tension of art and science. It is the same combination that draws me to the work of advancing the human condition.

In part two, the ear: what deep listening is, and how you hear a thing that does not exist yet.



What the Ear Is For

A mix arrives. You get one first listen, and you can spend that listen once.

Mastering engineers guard the first pass. Play the thing through. Touch nothing. Write down what you notice before you know why: too bright at the top; vocal behind the guitars in the second chorus; loses energy at 2:40.

The notes are crude, made before adaptation. By the second listen, you are accommodating the record. By the fifth, you have joined its opinion of itself.

I have the same single shot inside an organisation. The first time in is the only time I hear it as an outsider. I feel the climate before I can name it, write down the crude words and keep the page. Once I am absorbed into their explanation, that page becomes the most valuable document in the work.

Listening for intent

A young engineer listens for what they would have done. With time, they listen for what the record wants. Their taste is largely irrelevant.

I ask the same question of a decision calcified inside a business: What was this trying to protect?

Most strange things in an organisation were once sensible answers to real problems under conditions that have since changed. Listening that way changes the conversation: people hear the difference between being audited and being heard.

The ear adapts, and it adapts fast

Hearing recalibrates within minutes. Louder feels better. Twenty minutes in, judgement drifts. The discipline is stopping.

Short passes. Step away. Return in the morning. Three days inside a business, I am adapting to its vocabulary and losing what I heard on the first morning. This is why my loops have gaps, and why I sometimes stop before the schedule says I should.

When the meter and the ear disagree

Meters report level, phase, spectral balance and dynamic range. They are silent on whether any of it matters.

If the analyser says the low end is fine and my ear says it is heavy, either my monitoring is misleading me or the meter measures the wrong quantity. The disagreement is information.

Engagement scores say the team is healthy; the manager says something is wrong. Everyone reaches for whichever instrument they already believed.

The disagreement is the finding. Sit inside it long enough to learn which instrument is lying. The real problem is usually standing directly behind it.

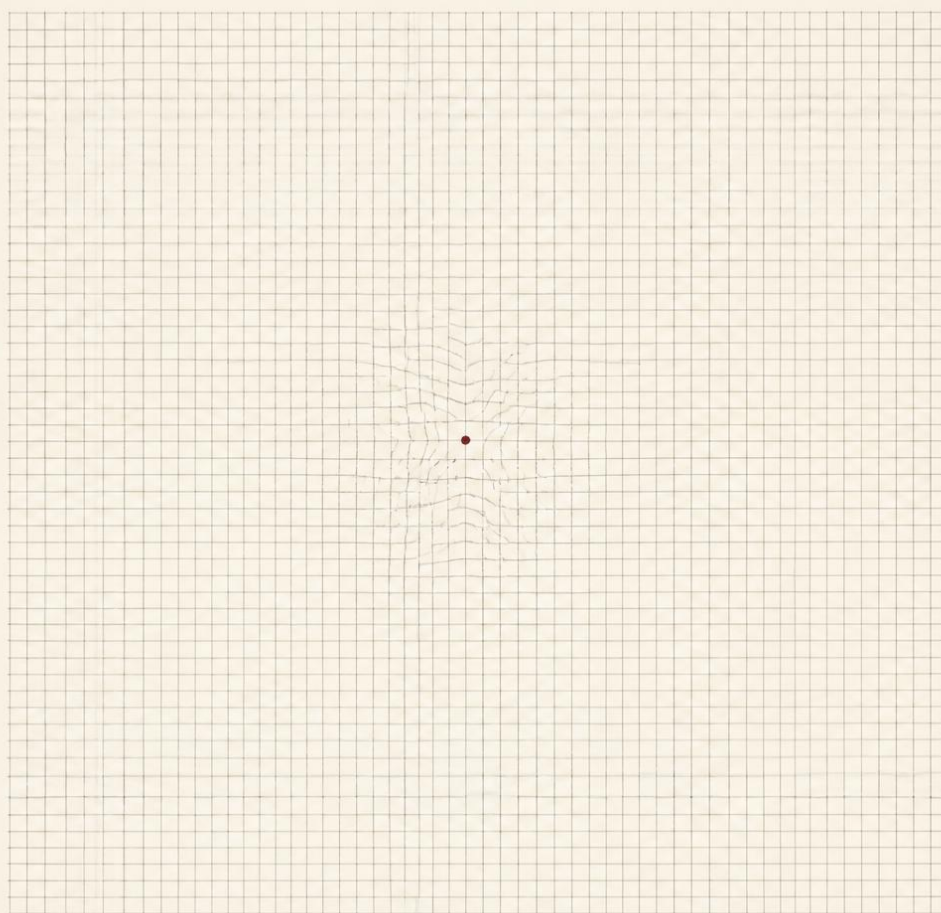
The space between

The last thing you learn to hear is space: where a fade starts, what decays, what gets cut. A record is made of its silences as much as its sounds.

In a business, the silences are the pause before an answer, the item that slips off the agenda again, the name that goes unmentioned in a meeting about that person's own department. None appears in a report. All of it is audible.

Deep listening is called a gift so often that it sounds innate, like good eyesight. It is a decision made repeatedly, at cost, by someone who wants to know.

In part three, the hand: what to do once you can hear it, and the case for doing almost nothing.



The Smallest Move That Works

Half a decibel.

That is the size of many of my best moves. A gentle shelf at 12 kHz. Half a decibel of gain reduction with a slow release. On a good day, leaving something alone takes more nerve than the alternatives.

Mastering equipment can do enormous violence to music. The craft is withholding it.

Headroom

For roughly two decades, records grew louder. A louder master jumped out on radio, on a compilation or in an A&R playback. The digital ceiling was fixed, so the only way up was to squash everything underneath. Records became exhausting inside three minutes. If everything is loud, nothing is loud.

The engineers could hear it, but people optimising for the first ten seconds had set the target outside the music. The work degraded to the target.

Organisations do this to people. Every measurable target rises; the place loses its dynamic range. Without contrast, nothing lands: an ordinary day and a real crisis are treated the same.

Headroom looks like waste on a spreadsheet. It is the mechanism by which anything is able to breathe.

One thing, four consequences

Listen long enough to find which single thing is causing the rest.

What sounds like five problems is often one problem with four consequences. Correct the one and the four go with it. Treat all five and you have a record messed with everywhere, and it sounds like it.

A leader lists eleven things that are wrong; most are downstream of one. My usefulness rests on finding that one and having the restraint to leave its consequences alone.

That is harder than it seems. A long list of interventions looks like effort. One small change can look like I did very little for my fee.

Committing

At some point, the engineer prints the master. Finished is its own standard, and it arrives some distance before perfection.

Perfectionism is a leak. Adjust beyond the point where your ear is reliable and you defend choices made while tired. Commit while you can still hear, then let the thing go into a world where other people's lives will happen over it.

Craft is knowing when to stop. Decide while the judgement is good. Print it. Live with it.

Inaudible work

The finest mastering is undetectable. Nobody listening to a great record thinks about the person who set the final balance. They think the band sounded that way all along.

I want the same invisibility in organisational work. Success looks like a team believing they solved it, because they did. My part is creating the conditions in which what they have can translate.

A person, a team and a piece of music all have their own intent and history. The work is not to remake them in your image. Hear what they are trying to become, make the smallest move that helps them arrive, let them breathe, and know when to take your hands off.

I am putting the studio back into my week. Whatever comes back with me will show up in the other work, half a decibel at a time.