



RECORDING & RELEASING

RESOURCES

How To Master Your Music (DIY Mastering Guide)

BY TAHLIA-ROSE COLEMAN, AUDIO ENGINEER

How To Master Your Music (DIY Mastering Guide)

RECORDING & RELEASING



This resource explains how to master music, providing a step-by-step guide and practical techniques to help artists prepare polished, release-ready tracks.

Why mastering matters

Mastering is the final stage of the music production process. It helps a song sound polished, cohesive, and ready for release by improving tonal balance, controlling dynamics, enhancing the stereo image where needed, and ensuring the track translates well across different playback systems. A good master creates a competitive track that stands out in an oversaturated market.

Mastering step-by-step

1. Preparing for mastering

- Export your final mix, ensuring there is no distortion in the final mix or any audible clicks or issues.
- Leave headroom. Around -6 dB peak is a safe guide.
- Remove mix bus limiters, clippers, or anything used only for loudness.
- Export in a high-quality format such as:
 - WAV or AIFF
 - 24-bit or 32-bit float
 - Original sample rate of the session
- Clearly label files and versions.

2. Critical listening

Before touching any plug-ins or making any changes, listen all the way through your track.

Ask:

- What is the emotional intention of the song?
- What is already working well?
- What feels off: tonal balance, harshness, low end, punch, width, level, or vocal presence?
- Is there anything that sounds like a mix issue rather than a mastering issue?
- What platforms am I distributing this song on (streaming, CD, vinyl, etc)? How does that change my workflow?

3. Have a reference track

Pick 1–3 reference tracks that make sense for:

- Genre
- Mood
- Mix inspiration
- Vocal style
- Loudness direction

Use references to compare:

- Tonal balance
- Low-end weight
- Vocal placement
- Brightness
- Dynamics
- Stereo width

Note: If you can listen to lossless files (not MP3s or lossy streaming services), you will be able to compare and benchmark your track against a professional standard.

How To Master Your Music (DIY Mastering Guide)

RECORDING & RELEASING

4. Build the master step by step

A helpful way to think about the mastering process is:

LEVEL → BALANCE → TONE → DYNAMICS → CHARACTER → LOUDNESS

This helps ensure each stage of processing is intentional and that later processors are reacting to a well-prepared signal.

a. Gain staging & utility

Before doing any tonal or dynamic processing, make sure the signal is clean (no distortion) and at a reasonable level.

- Adjust input gain so the processing chain has adequate headroom.
- Aim for consistent levels so plug-ins respond predictably.
- Correct any left/right balance issues.
- Use utility tools to trim, gain match, or prepare the signal before further processing.

b. Stereo image

Review width and centre balance early in the chain.

- Avoid widening (stereo width tools) just because you can.
- Keep low frequencies centred and stable.
- Ensure the stereo field feels balanced and intentional.

c. Tonal balance

Start with EQ.

- Address any excessive low-end buildup.
- Add gentle presence, air, or warmth only if needed.
- Small boosts and cuts where necessary, a light hand is best.

d. Dynamics

Use compression carefully.

- Control peaks.
- Improve consistency.
- Support groove and movement.
- Avoid flattening the life out of the mix.
- Ask: Does it still breathe?
- Ask: Does the chorus still lift?
- Ask: Is the punch still there?

e. Harmonic enhancement/saturation

Optional, but useful when needed.

- Add density, glue, warmth, or excitement.
- Be careful not to introduce harshness or distortion.
- Only add if you think it adds to the piece, sometimes it can detract from the mix.

How To Master Your Music (DIY Mastering Guide)

RECORDING & RELEASING

f. Loudness / limiting

Limiter usually comes last.

- Set the final level with intention (around -12 LUFS is often referenced for streaming, though many modern tracks sit closer to -9 to -7 LUFS depending on genre).
- Avoid chasing loudness at the expense of punch, depth, or clarity. Choose a level that suits the song.
- Watch for distortion, crushed transients, or listener fatigue.

5. Translation testing

A master should work everywhere, not just in the studio.

Test on:

- Main monitors
- Headphones
- Small speakers
- Laptop speakers
- Phone speaker
- Car stereo, if possible

Listen for:

- Vocal clarity
- Kick and bass relationship
- Harshness
- Overall balance
- Whether the song has clarity on small speakers

Take notes and revise if needed.

6. Quality control

Before printing (exporting) your final master:

- Listen from start to finish without interruption.
- Check fades, starts, and endings.
- Check for clicks, pops, distortion, or unwanted noise.
- Confirm sample rate and bit depth.
- Confirm correct file naming.
- Compare processed vs unprocessed to ensure you are happy with your work. If you are unsure, it is okay to take a break and come back with fresh ears!

7. Does this master serve the song?

The goal is not to make it brighter, louder, or wider just because you can. The goal is to make the song feel finished, intentional, and ready for release.

Final deliverables may include:

- High-resolution master for distribution.
- 16-bit and 24-bit versions if needed for specific formats (CD and vinyl).
- Instrumental/clean/alternate versions if required.

Looking for more resources?
Find more resources like this
one at musicnsw.com/resources

MusicNSW works, creates and listens on unceded Aboriginal land across the state. We honour elders past and present and acknowledge all First Nations peoples as the original music makers, storytellers and knowledge holders. Always was, always will be.

MusicNSW is supported by Sound NSW. Visit our website at musicnsw.com or find our socials at @musicnsw. Copyright © 2026 MusicNSW. All rights reserved.

Cover photo by cottonbro studio

music **N** **S** **W**