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Giovanni Conti and Daniele Antezza, AKA Dadub, are the founders of **Artefacts Mastering**. I talked to Giovanni via e-mail for a recent feature on Stroboscopic **Artefacts**. Below is the full transcript of the interview.

Luca [Mortellaro] told me that you have a very special sound to your mastering. I was wondering if you could describe what you are trying to going for.

Obviously, every track has different needs, but there are some invariant points in our working procedures, always keeping in mind the context in which the tracks we master will be played: being specialized in techno music, we master songs that won't be played on home hi-fi systems, but on huge and bass strong club soundsystems.

So sometimes we have to go against the standard rules of **mastering**, mainly in the spectral balance and compressor chain settings; your instinct and musical background will tell when you have to break rules, we like to bring the vibe of the track on the edge of exploding, inflate and project the sound into deep space! Let's say we let the bass frequency range be more prominent than most of our colleagues would do, and try to tame the high frequencies content so that the tracks won't hurt the ear of the audience even when played at ridiculous loudness levels in clubs.

So, big subs and loudness as a starting point, and then we search for atoms of "narrative flow" in the mid-high frequencies, trying to bring under the spotlight the hidden gems that lay in the background, like taking the hands of a shy creature and giving it power and beauty. We try to adjust the character of the tracks to give them some pulsating life, enhancing the musical elements that have more expressive potential and bringing on the background the ones that are not working in the right direction, sometimes doing more a work of audio post-production than just **mastering**.

The processing chain we apply to the tracks works as a sort of audio magnifying lens, so we have to choose carefully where we point this lens, what gets magnified and what, in contrast, lose weight, in a game of continuously shifting balances and perspectives. Sometimes we're really "drawing dicks to the mosquitoes" as we say in Italy ahah, but the final result is built by accumulating many subtle and almost imperceptible changes in a causal chain of small alterations to the original sound, that in the end result in a much more powerful and brilliant impression on the listener. Personal taste, technical preparation and acquired experience play a fundamental role into this strategic game, and even though we rely on scientific analysis tool to visualize the properties of the audio signal, in the end it all comes down to creating a magic aura around the music, wrap something around the tracks that can't be described by mathematical functions or fancy visualizations.

Being also producers, we know how much energy and love goes into making music, you work and

twist your mix in every possible direction, observe it from different angles, try to understand what are the strong and weak points, and put all your soul and technical skills into an invisible and ephemeral creature. And when a **mastering** job is not well done, it's really a big disappointment for the artist: you got the test lacquer, put it on, and you see all your expectations flushed down the toilet, and you think "WTF happened to my beloved creature"?

We always give the opportunity of having revisions until the producer is satisfied with the results: I feel much better if I know that my work made someone happy and proud of his efforts, and a big smile spread over his face when he listens to his mastered track. Otherwise, what's the point of all this work?

I also wonder what kind of feedback you have received from your mastering. Have you ever gotten any negative responses? Like "This doesn't sound like normal." or has it been positive? If it has been positive, what have people said?

I have to say I was quite surprised by the reactions of our first clients, being them super positive, also more than I would expect! They gave us the power and self confidence to give our personal touch on the tracks, obviously when the producer wants it; but often we just perform common routine **mastering** tasks, correcting the imperfection and giving loudness, without altering the original track too much. It really depends on the quality of the production, some tracks are so well produced that you don't need to make any big effort to make them shine.

As I said before, we always give the chance of having revisions, so if the producer is not satisfied with the first version, he can suggest the direction for the changes he wish to have. Talking of negative responses, only once we had a problem with an EP of a producer we really appreciate, both on a personal and a musical level, caused by the lack of time to make revisions. We absolutely didn't want to release the track, but the label manager decided they were good enough, even though both the artist and us knew it wasn't a good idea.

You know what happened? The EP got great reviews and sold well, and no one complained about the sound quality, but deep under we know it could have sounded even better, and everytime I think about this thing I feel quite bad... No one except us and the producer knows which possibilities were discarded in the process of assembling the final master, and sometimes I wish I could have more time to really make all the tracks perfect, because when you succeeded doing a good job, the feedback can give you a lot of satisfaction, in the emails we have words like: "perfect", "round and polished", "brilliant", "incredible", "another world", "it will tear down the walls", "PHAAAAAT!!!", and the one I prefer, "love", because it means that the care we've put into the job was 100% transformed in joy for the producer!

You know, we spend our nights turning knobs and listening to loud music almost eight hours a day, and we don't do it for the money, but because we love to spread creative energies around the world and bring more quality into the music.

Where did you learn to master? Are you self-taught?

Daniele attended an electronic music course in a private university in Italy, while I have studied on my own. I started listening to music when I was a child, I remember my older brother playing vinyl of rock and metal bands in our shared bedroom, and since then I never stopped... one necessary skill in the **mastering** job is having a mental reference of how a professionally produced track should sound, to make confrontations and adjustments to the track you're working on until it

doesn't get in the ballpark of this internalized model you have.

It's fascinating how the brain can build stable but continuously mutating models of external perceptions, a mental reference grown through years and years of listening to the more disparate genres of music, that you can recall and compare in real-time to an acoustic stimulus reaching your ears. No plugin or hardware unit, as expensive and accurately designed as they can be, can substitute human taste, and no school can substitute hands on experience in the studio when you want to learn such complete skills.

Have you only done SA releases? If not, who else have you done mastering for?

SA was the first label that pushed us to work hard and build an efficient and creative working methodology, Lucy wanted us to, let's say, co-produce the sound of the label, and we have a strong connection with his aesthetic vision, also reflected in the name we've chosen for our studio. But we work with many other labels based mainly in Germany and Italy, both in the techno and the dub music. To name a few, we enjoy collaborating with Meerestief, Lineal, Parquet Recordings, Caballero Recordings, YoshiToshi, Moonpool, A Quiet Bump.

It seems like dub is a big influence for you. Is this true? If yes, why?

Apart from our personal affection for the overstanding power and genuinity of the dub spirit, in the production of dub music there is a sublimation of the technical tools considered not as accessories but as foundation elements of the sound. The role of the engineer is not limited to recording a realistic performance of the musicians, he also tweaks what he has recorded and brings his point of view in the sound and structure of the tracks. We don't go so far in **mastering**, but in our productions as Dadub it's quite a obvious influence, for the atmospheres, drum programming and melodic flow.

Do you worry that because the mastering is creative that the tracks that you work on will not fit in to current techno? That the mastering will somehow make them unplayable for some people?

Let's say that even though we try to bring something personal to the tracks we master, we don't disrupt the original content, that would be a remix, not a **mastering** job. We just use equalizers, compressors and maximizer, plus some secret weapons, but nothing that could be considered an "effect": we sculpt and slightly colour the sound, but not in a destructive way, apart from some dynamic excursion of the song that has to be in part sacrificed to the god of loudness!

Instead, we are allowed to tweak the tracks more than is usually permitted to a **mastering** engineer because the producers trust in our ability to bring their sound closer to a target format recognized as appropriated for their musical style. We go to clubs often for our personal enjoyment but also to study and understand how the music we master work in its natural context, and then we use the intuitions gained during this experiences to expand and update our aural memories and knowledge base.

Trust me man, some tracks were much more unplayable before we put our hand on it eheh! I'm proud when I read the reviews and I see that we succeeded giving character and magic to the productions we were involved in: when reviewers use superlatives to describe the sound, I know that a part of those adjectives are testimony of my work and trademark of **Artefacts Mastering**.

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