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Task-Based Music Production – Overcome Creative Blocks, Push Through Boundaries, and Get Stuff Done

Sam Matla / 12.2013 /

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Some say that art should flow, that it shouldn't be forced, but rather, freely release itself from the mind and soul.

This is all well and good, yes, but what about when it doesn't? Do we wait? Wait months on end? Surely there's an alternative?

I think there is. It's what I like to call 'task-based' music production.

Sounds horrendously boring, right? I know what you're thinking, "I produce music as a hobby! I don't want to make it a *task*."

And that's completely understandable, but a hobby is no fun when frustration lingers around for weeks on end, and you just can't seem to finish that song you started producing for your pet who recently passed away. Us producers ~~like~~ love to finish tracks... there's no doubt about it.

So what is task-based production? What does it entail?

A Quick Overview

Task-based production is the art (art?) of breaking up the typical processes in production of a song and organizing them into individual tasks.

"Write Chord Progression" could be an example of a task, as could *"Design sound for bassline."*

The main benefit of producing in this manner is that it strongly suppresses the desire for procrastination. Having everything logically laid out allows us to move forward, and not just muck around.

A Step-by-Step Approach to Task-Based Production

Task-based production is simple in theory but it helps to really put effort into the planning process in order to get the most out of it.

I'll be running through how I personally use this method when producing my own tracks. The way I do it may not work for you, so feel free to adjust it as needed.

What You'll Need

- A task manager of some sort (I'm using [Asana \(http://asana.com/\)](http://asana.com/) which I'll be

constantly referring to throughout the post. It's completely free)

- A timer (I'm using [E.ggtimer \(http://e.ggtimer.com/\)](http://e.ggtimer.com/))
- Patience

Why a timer?

Our goal is to fight creative blocks and get stuff done. Timing tasks is a great way to overcome this as it introduces a sense of urgency. Typically when producing a track, there's no deadline (unless you're doing remix work for a label). You've got all the free time in the world, and therefore spending 5 hours EQing a snare isn't a problem, even though in reality it's a huge waste of time. By using a timer we can combat this.

Step 1 – Creating a Song Map

It's crucial to have an already existing idea for a track before setting tasks. It gives us something to work from, rather than staring blankly at the piano roll in front of us, and it also allows us to set more specific tasks.

A song map can really be anything you want, but here's how I like to do it:

Gather Inspiration

Yeah it sounds cheesy, but that's where music starts. Inspiration is essential to creation.

Inspiration can be anything from thoughts, to images, videos, words; you name it!

Doing this isn't necessary, in fact you could say that I'm venturing too far into the whole creative process, but it helps me, and it might help you.

Note: I recommend writing this down in a note or document. Whichever's easier.

Identify Themes

I first picked up this technique from the [Jaytech Elite Session on Pyramid \(http://www.pyramind.com/training/2013/03/23/elite-session-with-jaytech-anjunabeats-video-recap/\)](http://www.pyramind.com/training/2013/03/23/elite-session-with-jaytech-anjunabeats-video-recap/). Basically the idea is to choose a few musical themes. I like to include non-musical themes also, for example:

Musical Themes

- Driving
- Euphoric, happy
- Atmospheric and spacey

Non-musical Themes

- Galaxy
- Northern Lights
- Midnight

Asking the Important Questions

Once all that's done you're pretty much there. You'll probably feel tempted to skip this whole part, but I urge you to try it out at least once or twice.

The final thing to do is really tap into the track you're about to produce. Ask questions such as:

- 10 • What do I want this track to depict? (People going wild at a festival? Someone
6 crying in their room?)
- Who's it being produced for? (Drunk people at a club? Girlfriend?)
- 4 • What do I want it to sound like? (Energetic and upbeat? Slow and smooth?)

Take a break, go grab a coffee, and get ready for the next part.

Step 2 – Input Fundamental Tasks

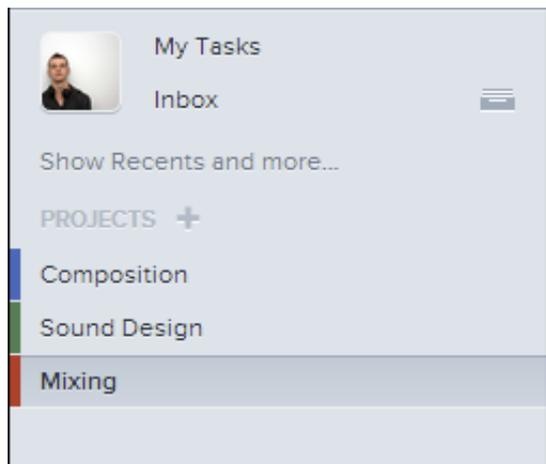
Know what you're thinking – "How can I possibly create tasks for everything in a song? What about those random things that happen spur of the moment?"

It would be naive to attempt creating tasks for every single thing in production. Common sense is paramount when doing this. It's definitely not a wise idea to have a task that reads "*Adjust voices on oscillator for bass sound*", as that's something you fix at the time.

Here's how I'd set up tasks in Asana.



Creating Sections



<http://edmprod.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Sections.png>The first thing I'd do is create three main sections for my tasks, namely: **composition, sound design, and mixing.**

Note: you can do this under the *Projects* section in Asana.

In my opinion, these are the three main elements that make up production. Of course, you could divide them up even further, for example dividing composition into arrangement and programming – but I like to keep things simple.

Creating Base Tasks

Next thing I'd do is create simple tasks that are most likely going to have to be done. You should already have an idea for your song at this point meaning you can include track-specific tasks. You might include a task that reads "*Create piano melody*", because you've already planned to have a piano in your song.

Try not to go overboard on this. It doesn't matter if you miss a task out, and you don't need to include every single task.

Simple Compositional Tasks

1	 Create main chord progression
2	 Create melody
3	 Create counter-melody
4	 Choose 'hook' sample (or create)
5	 Program drums
6	 Layout track sections (arrangement)
7	 Add placeholder FX
	<input type="checkbox"/>  Add micro-tension ←
9	

<http://edmprod.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Composition-tasks.png> As you can see, these are pretty straightforward.

I didn't include the bassline as I like to design the bass sound before really working on my bassline. Also due to the fact that it isn't difficult to draw out a bassline from an already existing chord progression/melody. The crossover between sound design and composition can prove difficult when working like this, but it's really just about finding out what works and what doesn't.

I'll add the next set of tasks under the *Sound Design* section.

Simple Sound Design Tasks

<http://edmprod.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Sound-Design-tasks.png> Again, nothing too complicated – just logical and concise. There’s no need to insert more tasks than necessary.

Make sure to assign each task to yourself. This is important for later.

I’m going to leave the mixing tasks alone for now, as I prefer to leave the mix until the end. Because mixing is so track-dependent I’m not going to create base tasks for it at the moment. If you wanted to, you could input basic tasks such as “*Highpass channels*” or “*Add compression to drums.*” I’d rather not do this due to various reasons, but it’s up to you.

Step 3 – Organize Tasks

The final step here is to organize the tasks in the order you'd 'ideally' like to complete them in.

If using Asana, click on *My Tasks* and you'll see all the tasks from Composition and Sound Design in front of you (and mixing if you added tasks to it).

Note: the tasks will only show if you've assigned them to yourself. You can do this by clicking the face icon next to a task then choosing "Assign to Me."

<http://edmprod.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Task-overview.png>

BEFORE ORGANIZATION

<http://edmprod.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Task-Organized.png>

Step 4 – Allocate Time

The final step is to allocate time to each one. Be strict on yourself. Like I said earlier, the aim is to move forward. As soon as the timer's up, you move onto the next task. It's as simple as that (of course you can come back and fix it later).

You can either do this per task basis or rename each task with a time. I prefer to do the latter.

After doing this, it's time to produce!

Multi-Project Management Tip

Though not quite task-based, I have another solution for those reading who handle multiple projects at once. Maybe you're a freelancer, contracted producer, or just a standard guy like me who happens to work on a lot of different projects at once.

I have 4 'sections' in Asana: *Idea Incubation*, *Arrangement*, and *Mixing*. From there I move around different projects as they reach different stages.

This is simplicity at its finest, and allows you to visually keep track of what's going on.

<http://edmprod.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Multi-Project.png>

A Final Note

I understand that this is not for everyone. But, if you struggle with procrastination, find it hard to get production work done, and you're sick and tired of not finishing anything – then this may be a helpful technique to implement.

If you do try this out, I'd love to know! Tell me what you tried differently, what worked and what didn't, etc. I might just update this article with some of your ideas.

Right, get back to producing!

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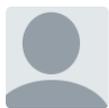
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Drum Logik · 7 months ago

Great tips! Just one question: what are 'placeholder FX'?

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



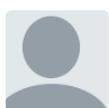
Sam Matla → Drum Logik · 7 months ago

Good question, I was a bit vague. When I talk about placeholders in any circumstance, I basically mean either a blank MIDI clip or generic sample used as a placeholder for what I'll add later.

In this case, I'll add placeholder FX which might be just one crash cymbal in the places where I want to add them. Later on I can spend more time trawling through my sample library in search for a better fitting sample, but when I'm arranging or writing I don't want to waste too much time on sample selection, so I'll use placeholders instead.

I hope that makes sense!

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



Eric Hulburd · 8 months ago

Thanks this was super helpful. I combined this with another tip of loading a song I want the feel of into ableton. Cut the audio into sections and create tracks for the

sounds. Then, having a list of sounds and sections as a skeleton, I could come up with the tasks more easily. Overall, definitely made things go much more smoothly. I'd say I deleted a lot less material and pretty pleased with end product (I'm still a beginner with ableton). You can check out my track at: <https://soundcloud.com/picosco...> I used Timbaland - They Ain't Ready to come up with my sound and section skeleton.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam Matla → Eric Hulburd · 7 months ago

Great idea Eric! Thanks for that.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Billy · a year ago

Thanks alot! how long do you set the timer for each part? great post dude

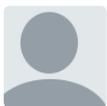
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Sam Matla → Billy · a year ago

Completely up to you, just don't make it too long!

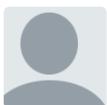
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Arkady · 2 years ago

Thank u very much for multiple interesting and important articles !! ur doing an amazing job keep up with the excellent stuff

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Ravelove · 2 years ago

Wow haha! Used to take me upwards of a month to finish a track, just tried this out 2 days ago and I'm almost done my best track to date!

Thanks I guess a little structure is just what I needed.

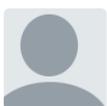
^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam Matla → Ravelove · 2 years ago

That's so cool to hear! Keep it up.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Onglamesh · 2 years ago

This could be a godsend for me... I have trouble balancing school work, time with my daughter, and production time. By the time I get around to producing, it's often chaotic and sometimes takes months for me to finish a song. I think the end result is starting to sound pretty good, but it's taking way too long to make it happen.

I'll definitely give this a try, thanks for another excellent tip!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam Matla → Onglamesh · 2 years ago

Understand completely. It can be difficult indeed! I hope it helps dude, let me know.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



john sedano · 2 years ago

amazing as always buddy, trying this out right now for my daily exercises! :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam Matla → john sedano · 2 years ago

Appreciate the comment, John! Let me know how it goes :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam · 2 years ago

Hey

I have been struggling to seek inspiration but but this has really helped me thanks man really glad I subscribed to the email thing haha c:

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam Matla → Sam · 2 years ago

Hey Sam!

It's something we all struggle with. Glad it helped. Good luck!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Benjamin Burnes · 2 years ago

Interesting! I'm going to have to check out Asana. Having some kind of personal task manager seems like a real help with both the micro management of making a song and the macro management of releasing an album and making sure nothing slips through the cracks. Thanks for this!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sam Matla → Benjamin Burnes · 2 years ago

No worries man! Let me know how it goes.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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29 comments · 4 months ago



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