

zencha*music*

“I really like it.” - Rob

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How to Arrange Electronic Music

This book is dedicated to all my friends and mentors from Pyramind Training. You guys push and pulled and inspired my growth beyond anything I could've done alone. Without you guys, I'd have no idea what I'm talking about.

Thank you.

Introduction

Arrangement is an interesting topic. It's also one of my favorites.

It's importance is often overlooked and misunderstood. I find that many electronic producers don't put enough focus into it. It's skipped over in favor of "how to make that wobble bass" or "how to make an alien-lead."

This is saddening.

Arrangement is how you tell your story — and this is true in all art.

Imagine if Voldemort was slain in the first Harry Potter book. That'd be boring.

What if Darth Vader was revealed to us in the first movie? That'd kill a lot of the mystery and suspense.

Done well, as those stories are, a good arrangement speaks nothing to the listener. A good arrangement is the invisible glue holding your project together — without it, everything falls apart.

Arrangement is how you flow from one moment to the next, from one idea to the next. It's **how** and **where** you take your

listeners.

How you take them describes the literal arrangement you've decided on — sectional organization (verse, chorus, etc.). It also describes the literal changes you make between sections and the transitions used.

Where you take them describes the abstract journey. It's the arc of emotion and change that you've created, the flow of mood and tone. The shift and change in energy.

Now, it's important to note that I don't think arrangements are good or bad. I'm not trying to teach you how to make a "good" arrangement, as opposed to a "bad" one.

Rather, I like to think of arrangements in degrees of effectiveness. Any piece of music has a story it's telling, but your skill with arrangement changes how effective that story is told and how much impact the emotional journey has.

The goal of this book is to make your arrangements more effective through a basic lens of understanding. This book is written for someone who's barely skimmed the surface of arrangement to someone who find themselves familiar with common arrangement knowledge.

If you tend to "feel your way" through a track, this book will give you a map.

If you get stuck often, unable to escape an 8-bar loop, this book will help break the curse.

If you find your music is missing an emotional edge, this book will amp it up.

If you've never considered arrangement, or never focused on it, this book is a great starting point.

If you do understand arrangement, I think you'll find the perspective in here refreshing and unlike what you're familiar with (the trinity, primarily).

The most common piece of arrangement advice given is to bring a track of an artist you like into your production software and mimic the arrangement.

While this is a useful exercise, it doesn't help you beyond a few attempts. This exercise shows you the what — and with proper examination, the how.

What it's missing is the "why?" I hope to share that with you.

Struggles

Arrangement wasn't something that came easy to me. I've spent a lot of time banging my head against the wall trying to arrange things in my sequencer as perfectly as possible.

I spent way too much time nit-picking over the small details of my transitions and whether or not things flowed flawlessly from one thing to another.

Deadmau5 was my target. I wanted to be the next Deadmau5. I wanted to be as good as Deadmau5.

Basically, I wanted to **be** Deadmau5.

Now, there's nothing wrong with an ambitious goal, but there is something wrong with trying to be someone you're not.

I am not Deadmau5.

This may be an obvious statement, but it sure as hell eluded me for quite some time. When all your efforts are being pushed towards a certain direction, it's hard to question whether you're going the right way in the first place.

I realized that by trying to be someone else, I was resisting myself. I was resisting my artistic potential by throttling it through

this bottleneck of progressive-house land. I spent nearly three years trying to be someone I was not.

I was holding myself back.

Shortly after this realization I began producing songs that were not progressive house. These songs were electronic but strongly influenced by hip-hop. [Microfracture](#) is one.

I dropped all notions of how strict arrangement had to be. I dropped all notions that things had to be perfect. I embraced the error and human nature of writing music.

What was wrong now appeared tasteful. What was imperfect now appeared to be unique and interesting.

Essentially, I unlearned what I once thought — and striped away the make-up and the idealism.

This book on arrangement is my perspective on arrangement after all of this transpired. You'll find that the discussion in this book is mostly high-level (in a fundamental sense) with some grit.

Furthermore, I've tried my best to write this content in a way to not influence your creative direction. As previously noted in my story, being someone you're not is a frustrating process. This book is crafted to provide insight into arrangement but not to push you into any nook or cranny creatively.

I want you to simply be you.

Taste and Mindset

Being an abstract concept, arrangement is one of the harder things to teach in music. I can lay out the pieces of the puzzle for you, but the puzzle is morphing and changing — there's an infinite number of arrangement possibilities for any given song.

Your ability to succeed with arrangement relies on a short list of three factors.

Factor One: Your Taste

Here's a quote by Ira Glass that gets circulated often (and for good reason). Take a moment to read this:

"Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste.

But there is this gap.

For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase, they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have.

We all go through this.

And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know its normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story.

It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met.

It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through."

-Ira Glass

If your taste in music is not better than your audiences taste, how will you impress them? You have to know what a good story is before you can tell one.

Taste is a complicated topic. It's, in my opinion, the secret sauce behind most successes. Think Deadmau5. Think Skrillex. Think Daft Punk. Think whichever artist you aspire to be. You want to be them because their taste is, presumably, better than yours.

In order to broaden your taste and improve it, I recommend listening to things outside your normal listening realm. If you've spent the last year listening to Dubstep, go find some Classical music or Jazz and listen for a bit. Look up some local artists that

are doing a different sound. It's important to widen your taste not only for arrangement, but for all aspects of your art.

After that, look up what's the current trending music.

You might think Pop music is trash. If you have that thought, I need you to release your judgements for the sake of acquiring better taste. Most of the people I know who kill at music production really enjoy Pop music... and I don't think that's a coincidence. Take a moment to listen to the latest Pop and digest it.

You remember [Gangnam Style](#)? Yes, the video is hilarious and the primary reason he blew up, but the song is good. Objectively, good. It's catchy. The arrangement is textbook pop but it nails it. *Billions of people listen to it.* He's doing something right.

And the important part is that you learn to *enjoy* this new music. It doesn't have to be something you listen to on the regular, but when you legitimately enjoy a well rounded amount of music, you will, without fail, acquire well-rounded taste.

I think taste, like arrangement, is an often overlooked component to becoming a great artist. Someone with poor taste will produce pieces of poor value.

Consider your taste a creative inkwell. The better your taste, the larger the well. Excellent taste means that you have a large variety of influences and inspirations to pull from, and as a result,

your output will be an awesome synthesis of these sources.

Improved taste increases originality, creativity, and emotional impact — including how you arrange.

Factor Two: An Abundance Mentality **(Un-attachment and a willingness to let go).**

“You can’t predict, you can prepare. Experience the power of making decisions based on security instead of worry, readiness instead of reluctance, abundance instead of lack.”

~ Kathy Gates

An abundance mentality is a perspective where you believe — simply put — that things are in abundance. There’s no shortage or drought.

You **have** to have this perspective towards your art. You need to understand that creativity is infinite. Your creativity is infinite. You will never, ever, run out of the ability to create.

Yes, you reading this right now. You have infinite creative potential. Until the day you die, you’ll be able to put forth creativity into this world. Don’t doubt that for a second.

And yes, I’m aware some days it’ll feel otherwise — but that’s a result of a creative block, not a creative absence.

This is important, because you need to be able to let go of your work. You have to be brutal and nearly reckless when editing sections and cutting. As I mentioned earlier, there's an infinite number of arrangements possible for your song — so if you've only attempted *one*, then you have some serious limitations on your perspective.

An abundance mentality allows you to do this with ease. It frees you from creative chains.

There's been countless times where I've written a section and had to scrap it completely because it was either bad or unnecessary. Mind you, these sections range from things that took ten minutes to five days to write. You have to be un-attached enough, uninvested enough, to be brutal with editing and iterating.

I recently worked on a Kickstarter project with my friend Elie, who did the cover art. For the limited edition version, we spent about two weeks struggling with iterating and editing this concept he had drawn up.

He realized though, that it wasn't working at all and the best solution would be to redo the main character in the image from scratch.

The next day he had a new album cover for me and I was sold.

Moral: scrapping two weeks of work is not an easy thing to do

mentally. Your brain understands investment and effort, but with an abundant mentality Elie was able to overcome this and start from scratch.

Acquire this ability when writing music. If something isn't working, do not be afraid to take the metaphorical chain saw to it — even if that means tossing it completely.

Factor Three: Minimalism

“Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” - Antoine de Saint-Exupery

This is a personal philosophy of mine and it's aptly tied to arrangement.

What is the minimum amount of things I can do for maximum effect?

Anything more is fluff.

I see tons of artists who overestimate the content their song needs. When I listen to things my friends send me, nine-out-of-ten times I'll tell them it's great but they could remove sections entirely or cut sections in half.

Imagine if someone was describing a beautiful landscape for you. They'd begin by describing the rolling hills, lively green

grass, and the incredible blue sky. They may further explain some animals or unique features of the landscape or even the weather.

Fortunately, when describing physical things, there's an obvious limitation on the things you can discuss. You wouldn't describe the grass three times (except for emphasis).

Unfortunately, I find that many musicians do this. They describe something too many times or too often. It's as if they are saying the same thing over and over.

I propose that there's a most-effective dose of anything in a song and anything more than that is overkill while anything less will seem incomplete. The important part is that you play with it until you find what works.

Do note that minimalism is not an excuse to be lazy. It **is** a reason to discern and eliminate the unnecessary.

The Trinity

Behind all the chords, harmonies, melodies, sweeps, bass-lines, and roaring synths lie the fundamental trinity of Arrangement — tension, energy, and emotion.

In fact, everything that goes into constructing a song is basically a vessel to communicate this trinity.

An artist who weaves these three things in an expertly manner has the ability to take their listener through a wonderful journey.

Let's look over them.

Tension

Tension is emotional pressure and suspense. It's a set-up. It's a mystery — a question being asked. The listener must know the answer. They must.

It is your job to deliver on it or not. There's an artist you might know called Justice. Listen to the song "[Stress](#)." In it's entirety, they never relieve tension. Throughout the whole song you're waiting for something — fists and teeth clenched, aching for release. It never comes.

Furthermore, tension and emotion are intimately intertwined. The degree of tension directly effects the intensity and impact of the emotional message.

In most dance music, we go to extraneous efforts to build up tension before it drops. This absolutely riles up a dance floor. There's a fine line, though, between increasing tension and stalling. As with most things, there's a most-effective dose.

Tension is built in a variety of ways.

The most obvious examples are pitch-raises and sirens — both of which I absolutely hate, but are so commonplace that I've come to terms with them. Simply start raising the pitch of your instruments. This has a very literal and obvious effect. Sirens are

self-explanatory. When you hear a siren, there's a 99% chance that you'll be more tense than you previously were.

Snare rolls and increased percussion speed are also good example that I find less cheesy. The drums are announcing that we're headed somewhere — giving the listener an expectation that something is coming.

Other examples include reversed audio (usually cymbals) and noise sweeps. The increased volume and intensity of the audio overtime increases the amount of tension in the same way snare rolls do — it gives us the immediate expectation of something to come.

In the Progressive House world, it's very common to modulate the filter cut-offs on your synths, to either make them brighter and sharper or to make them duller and contained.

Silence is my go-to, as well. I like to entirely remove the sound before the drop occurs. This juxtaposition is a great tool for increasing the impact of your drop and is akin to putting a cherry-on-top of the rising tension.

Moreover, in music theory, it's understood that the five chord in any key is the most tense. It is the chord that most wants to go back to your home, your root chord (the one). For instance, if you're in the key of C (all white keys on the keyboard), it's wise to introduce the G Major chord (G, B, D) where you want the most tension.

Diminished chords and leading tones are also great ways to create tension.

Every key has one diminished chord. In C Major, this is B-diminished (B, D, F).

It just so happens that B is also the leading tone to C. The leading tone is simply the key directly to the left of the root on a standard keyboard. So if you're in C, this is B. If you're in G, this is the black key to the left — F#.

Leading tones are phenomenal at creating tension, because they have such an intense desire to return to home your root note.

This isn't an all-encompassing list, but the main idea is that tension is created by introducing (or removing) elements that imply instability or provoke expectations.

Energy

Energy is the lifeblood of your song. It's the pacing, the speed, the intensity, and the pulse.

Just as blood is always flowing, so should the energy in your music.

To wrap up this metaphor, flowing things move *over time*. Flowing water does not instantly get from point A to B — it must travel a distance to reach its destination. It's not still. Music is a moving river of emotion — not a lake.

There's no better example of energy flow than in [“I Remember” by Deadmau5 and Kaskade](#). That song has the same chord progression playing throughout the entire track. A very minimal amount of elements are introduced and removed. The primary factor of engagement and interest in this piece is that the flow of energy is so expertly painted.

Energy can be shifted in a near-infinite variety of ways depending on the elements in your song. Let's look at some concepts.

First and foremost, it's important to make sure changes are happening over time.

For example, over 16 bars you might slowly open the cutoff filter of a synth and very slightly raise it's pitch by a few cents.

Modulating and altering existing parts of the song over time is the most straight-forward method to increase or decrease energy.

It's the combination of many subtle variations over time that lead to huge changes in story. It makes the listener wonder "how did we get here?" without providing a direct answer.

Furthermore, you can have **chunked** energy changes. A chunked change is a temporary boost or reduction in energy at a specific moment.

Chunked changes in energy are obvious and apparent, whereas sustained changes over time are experienced, rather than noticed.

An example of a chunked change is to introduce a hi-hat rhythm that picks up the pace. Another is to drastically open up the cut-off filter on a synth while adding some layers or reverb to your snares and claps.

Moreover, energy follows an arc throughout your song.

Imagine a two-foot long string on your desk. You shape the string in a series of curves to visually represent the highs and the lows — the flow — of energy in your song.

Now imagine you decide to change the energy at a certain point. What happens? The whole string has to re-adjust itself.

The energy in your track should behave like this string. If you construct a track and then alter the energy at a specific place, you must re-evaluate the energy around it — you must manually readjust the string, otherwise it'll feel disjointed and misdirected.

In the past, I have changed the climax energy of my eight minute house tracks and had to alter the energy curve entirely from the beginning up to that point. All energy alterations should be considered in context.

Transitions

Transitions, while not part of the “Trinity,” deserves its own section.

Transitions are a tool for manipulating tension and energy. There’s two kinds of transitions — micro-sections and transitional elements.

Micro-sections are short phrases, rarely more than four bars, that ease two sections together.

Transitional elements are things you place at the end of or beginning of sections in order to easily shift between the two.

Transitions main goal is to make sure that the string of energy remains fluid between sections. Transitions are basically energy hacks — cheat codes that you can use to drastically raise or lower energy levels over a very short period of time.

The most obvious example of transitional elements is cymbals. Reverse cymbals are a very popular tactic in electronic music. Crash cymbals on the first hit of a new section are also very common — because it’s very effective.

Noise sweeps are also a popular tactic — either by opening up the cut-off filter or simply increasing and decreasing the volume

over time.

Everything that can be shifted can be used as a transitional element — but it has to be done over a much shorter period of time (usually less than a bar) and it has to be noticeable enough to make a difference.

For instance, you can drastically open or close the filter cut-off on your main synth over a bar to indicate a gain or reduction in energy, respectively.

There's a list later, in the Long Form section, of automate-able parameters. Any of those can be used as a transitional element. I'll remind you when we get there.

Emotion

Emotion is the mood and tone of a song **as interpreted by the listener**.

I bolded that to bring up a point — while you can heavily direct the **emotional intent** of a song, you can by no means dictate how the listener responds to it.

Emotion is a product of music. It's an abstract output created in people — in human beings, in response to emotional stimulus. Emotion is the bridge between the music and the listener. Without it, your listener will not care.

When we write music, we heavily suggest, imply, and dictate the emotion that someone should feel.

The most obvious tool to dictate emotion are notes — the mode you're in, the harmony you use, and the melody you choose.

Modes are a pre-determined series of notes that have been historically acknowledged to imply emotional territory. It's essentially a musical scale, but the understanding is larger than simply major and minor.

Imagine Modes as “worlds” where-in a leaning towards certain

emotions are stronger than in others.

There are seven Modes, although one of them, Locrian, is mostly unusable. I'm going to pass on explaining why Locrain is unstable in this book, because it's music-theory heavy, [but here's a good link if you're interested.](#)

We can categorize the other 6 modes by Major or Minor.

Major modes: Ionian, Lydian, and Mixolydian.

Minor modes: Dorian, Aeolian, and Phrygian.

Simply put, the Major modes are “happier” while the Minor modes are “darker.” This is an incredibly bastardized explanation, but it's good enough for now.

The point here is that knowing these modes will assist in dictating your emotional intent. I'll go over the Modes in more depth later on, in the Music Theory section.

If modes are the “worlds” of emotion, then **harmony** is the “environment” — the implied emotional territory. Every moment of a song lives within some harmonic environment dictated by the chords or implied by the bass, or even the melody.

Every note in a mode has an associated chord. I go into this further in the music theory appendix, but the idea is that certain chords provoke certain emotions more-so than others. Chords

are emotional degrees, tightly knit with tension. All chords can be categorized by degrees of tension and emotion.

Moreover, if harmony is the “environment”, then **melody** is “life.”

Melody is the creatures — the inhabitants — and the soul of your emotion. It is the living, breathing, and moving emotional statements that lock the listener in.

Melody is the movement of notes over time. You can think of melody as your music talking — speaking to us, inviting us to experience. Inviting us to feel.

Most of the time, a vocal is the melody. It is the most obvious form of melody — literally speaking. The lyrics, crafted with intent, provide meaning and that meaning in turn provokes an emotional response.

Melody without words can achieve the same effect but the amount of interpretive variation is much wider.

Overall, emotion is the message of your track. It’s how you intend your listener to feel.

Pop Form

Pop form is what most of us are familiar with when discussing music. This is where the terms Verse, Chorus, and Bridge live. We will also be discussing the Intro, Outro, and Pre-Chorus.

Note that, even though it's called Pop form, it is not reserved for Pop music. This format is used in almost every genre because of how effective it is.

A standard outline for a Pop song is as follows:

Intro - Verse 1 - Chorus 1 - Verse 2 - Chorus 2 - Bridge - Chorus 3 - Outro.

An example of a much longer arrangement is as follows:

Intro - Verse 1 - Verse 2 - Pre-Chorus - Chorus 1 - Verse 3 - Verse 4 - Pre-Chorus - Chorus 2 - Bridge - Chorus 3 - Chorus 4 - Outro.

Let's talk about the individual sections.

Intro

The intro is an immensely useful and underused tool. The intro

is used to establish a feel, tone, mood, hook, contrast, and/or theme for the rest of the song. It's the setting to our story.

A great example of a hook intro is the song "[Moves Like Jagger](#)" by [Maroon 5](#). The whistle is iconic, immediately recognizable, and absolutely sets the stage for how the rest of the song behaves. It's playful, energetic, and engaging — as is the song. It's literally the melody that is sung in the chorus, as well.

On other occasions, the intro is used to set contrast. "[Make a Move](#)", off my album "Ceremony of Leaves," is a good example. The song starts with a happy-go-lucky drum beat. Synthesized birds chirp along until an explosion occurs — an odd sonic assortment, which leads us into the much more serious and determined dance section.

With all this said, introductions can simply be a lead-in with nothing particular stage-setting about them.

Another style of intro is where you blast off with the Chorus from the start, or a slightly altered version of it. "[Room For Happiness](#)" by [Kaskadee feat. Skylar Grey](#) is a great example here. The intro is the Chorus minus vocals.

Verse

The verse is the lean meat of the song. Without it, we'd have none of the delicious fat. Sometimes it's even better than the fatty

parts — but the main distinction here is that, without the verse, we don't have the chorus.

The verse is where you are often building tension and setting up suspense. You ask questions here. You engage the listener. Wet their lips. Make them want the chorus — ache for it.

Skrillex does an excellent job here with most of his arrangements. His verse's tend to be melodic and catchy. They engage you — but subtly hint at the depths to come. I recommend listening to "[Bangarang](#)" to get a feel of how he does this.

Pre-Chorus

The pre-chorus is a section of a song that leads into the chorus.

The main purpose of a pre-chorus is to transition into a chorus section — usually by creating a peak amount of tension, suspense, and mystery. This can be done by shifting the energy up towards the chorus; This can be done by shifting the energy away, in order to increase contrast with the upcoming chorus.

Ultimately, though, make sure that some sort of shift is being made from the previous section to the chorus.

"[Greater Purpose](#)" by Marcus D feat. Cyse Star is an awesome

example.

Chorus

The chorus is most often a release of tension. It is the ecstasy — the orgasm. It's the moment of your song where the crowd goes wild. It's the answers to all the questions; It's the solution to the mystery.

We often call this the “drop” in electronic music. This is the moment where your audience will go nuts. The dance floor rages. In Bangarang, the roaring bass parts are the Chorus.

What's interesting is that the chorus usually contains the highest points of energy in your song (sometimes a bridge can push beyond). The take-away here is that you'll most likely be going from a Chorus to a lower-energy section. The job of a chorus shouldn't be to build tension, but rather to give us the release and then bring us back down.

Bridge

The Bridge is the breakdown — it's where we take a breather or a detour. The chords usually change — the sounds can change — and the mood can drastically change.

The Bridge is my favorite section.

It's here that you can take the reigns off and really side-track from your story. It's the part where your hero finds a magical stone that turns him into some ravenous rabbit and you go down some side-plot slightly relevant to the entire story arc. It's where you change up your key, change the mode, throw some new chords and take the listener away. This section can be surreal.

This is great time to deconstruct your song — to break it down. Take some parts out and filter some things. Have the drums play alone for a bit with a simpler version of your bass line. Have a whispered vocal come in. Have just your kick, low-passed with a slithering synth bass-line — but nothing more.

Normally, the Bridge shifts itself back into the song. More often than not, it brings us back into a Chorus — back to the main story-line of our piece.

The breakdown in my song "[OceanSkys](#)" does this in the second half of the track. The song is a take on the juxtaposition of life and death with the Bridge being the "death" section. It's spacious, empty, and it crawls along. At the end, though, the lead sound from the Chorus sneaks in, eventually taking us back into a roaring and final Chorus.

Sometimes, though, the bridge is super short and is simply meant to be a quick breathe. [Kelly Clarkson's "Stronger"](#) is a good example of this. It brings the energy of the song to its apex and the shatters it quickly into the final Chorus.

Outro

The Outro is the exit.

I personally love to experiment in the Outro. Similar to the Bridge, you can get weird here. If you brought a listener far enough along to the Outro, they will most likely sit through your ending.

There's a handful of ways to end your track.

Fade-outs are interesting, because it implies the story is still continuing even after the song is over. It leaves us with a sense of “more” without actually providing it.

You can even be incredibly abrupt, as if making a statement.

Think about how you want your story to end.

An interesting tactic is to think about punctuation. Consider the different types of punctuation I've listed below:

[Release and Settle. Microfracture.](#)

[Abrupt! Progressive Rebellion.](#)

[Cliff-Hanger? Tokyo Rails.](#)

[Stage-Setting — Make a Move](#)

[Fade Out... OceanSkys](#)

Each one is a way to end a sentence. You can also extrapolate that to an Outro in music. Click on any of those to check out a track of mine that ends with that particular type of punctuation.

Energy in Pop Form

It's important to note that while these sections seem to have distinct levels of energy, you can and should shift energy within sections and throughout the entire song. Your Verses don't have to be carbon copies of each-other. Your Choruses can become progressively more explosive and intense.

For instance, your Choruses can actually have less energy than your Verses. What matters is that your Choruses have a release of tension.

A trick, or rule of thumb that a lot of current Pop music does is every 15 seconds something occurs — usually a change of energy.

Listen to [LMFAO's "Sexy and I Know It."](#) Every 15 seconds, on the dime, something is introduced or taken away. As a result, you're enraptured (it's those cheetah print speedo's, man).

Long Form

Long Form has a different focus than Pop Form.

In Long Form, energy shifts are done over a longer period of time. The key here is evolving parts. Getting from point X to Y smoothly.

An example arrangement for a Long Form song is as follows:

Intro - Breakdown 1 - Build-Up 1 - Drop 1 - Beat 1 - Beat 2 - Breakdown 2 - Build-Up 2 - Drop 2 - Beat 3 - Beat 4 - Outro

Let's talk about these sections.

Intro

More often than not, with a dance tune, the Intro is going to be entirely composed of drums which allows DJ's to mix into the song from a previous track.

A popular trick is to have your kick drum high-passed for the Intro section. [My Chrono Trigger remix which does this.](#) This allows the previous songs kick drum to not interfere with yours.

Intros in Long Form tend to be pretty long. The drum-only

section can last up to thirty seconds. After that, it's common to bring in a couple elements, some chords perhaps, and to hint at what's to come. It's important that the Intro is a teaser — you want to reserve intensity for later on in the journey. Ease your listeners in.

Other times, the Introduction is the same as discussed earlier in Pop Form.

Breakdown

The Breakdown is usually, but not always, a less percussive section. It is almost always true that the kick drum is absent, or at least filtered (high or low), to indicate a reduction in energy. The bass is most likely removed as well.

The Breakdown is where you tear parts away and leave your song barren in all of its naked emotional glory. Let your song weep here -- let it move you. This is often where the more melodic and harmonic sections of the track lie. This is your opportunity to get deep and touch the listeners soul.

Build-Up

The Build-Up can also be referred to as the second half of the breakdown. This is when you start introducing elements and changes to build tension and increase the energy towards a Drop.

Bring in the vocal hooks that repeat over and over. Blow the sirens. Raise the pitches. Open the cut-off filter. Increase and enhance. Engage. Create tension. Make the crowd ache for...

The Drop

This is less of a section and more of a moment. This is the moment where you release the tension from the Build-Up. A climactic release of energy that sends us raging. Now you bring back the dance elements — now you release.

This transition, done tastefully and effectively, will erupt a dance floor — but there's nothing like an anti-climactic Drop to ruin the mood (unless you're doing that intentionally!).

The Beat

The Beat is what I refer to as any section that has the driving dance-beat or rhythm.

This section is where most of your percussive elements will shine, as well as your bass. Another way to look at this section is by calling it the “Groove.”

If you're making a dance track, then make sure this part truly grooves. The bass and kick should be flirting with each other, pulling and playing in a fashion that makes the listeners knees want to shake and shift.

Side-chaining is currently a very popular technique used to create a pulsing groove. Don't overdo it, though. I've had songs sent to me with such intense Side-Chaining that... I don't even have a metaphor for it. It sounds like crap. Remember minimalism here — you want your track “breathing” — not gasping for air.

Energy in Long Form

When dealing with Energy in Long Form, it's all about context.

If your Drop is not hitting as hard as you want, stop giving it so much attention. Stop throwing crashes and explosions on it. Rather, strip away from the previous Build-Up and maximize the amount of tension you're creating.

The Drop means nothing without context so make sure that the Build-Up prior to it is as effective as possible. Make the drop feel stronger through context. This may require a complete re-skinning of the energy during the entire song.

Note that this is often why tracks will go completely silent immediately before a Drop hits. It creates an ultimate contrast and instigates an incredible explosion when you bring everything back. Silence is a great tool here.

Moreover, within Long Form, most energy shifts are done over time by automating pre-existing parameters.

The parameters you have will change depending on the effects you're using and the instruments. As a result, this is not a comprehensive list by any means, but it's something you can refer back to if you get stuck.

(Remember earlier when I said there was a long list of things you could use as transitional elements? This is it).

- Filter cutoff on synths
- Amp Envelope Decay on synths
- Amp envelope attack on synths
- Filter Envelope decay on synths
- Filter envelope attack on synths
- Filter overdrive
- Filter resonance
- Phase Modulation on synths
- Frequency Modulation on synths
- Pulse-width on synths
- Feedback on delay units
- Overdrive on delay units
- LFO rates on any unit
- Distortion parameters on any unit
- Chorus Feedback
- Chorus Delay
- Chorus Wet/dry
- Unison wet/dry
- Unison detune
- Pitch

- Volume
- Reverb decay
- Reverb wet amount
- Reverb damp
- EQ high or low pass
- Threshold on side-chain compression
- Attack on side-chain compression
- Release on side-chain compression

You get the idea.

Automation

Do you find yourself drawing a single straight line over 16 or 32 bars to automate a parameter?

If that's you, stop. That's lazy and ineffective.

This is a detail that most people seem to gloss over. **You need to sculpt every automation parameter of growth for every track you do.** This might sound tedious or boring, but trust me — it's noticeable.

There's two ways I recommend going about doing automation.

The first is to play it. This requires a fader/knob/mod wheel as well as some inherent musical ability and talent. This isn't for everyone, but it does provide a very natural feel and flow. You

may or may not clean it up after you record it — up to you.

The second is to listen through your sections and add break points at much smaller intervals. Start at the beginning and every time you feel that the cutoff should open more, create a break point and set it to that value. Re-listen and adjust these until it feels right. If you can't feel it, make a break point at every bar or two and adjust each accordingly.

The Rectangle Illusion

Unfortunately, producing music inside a piece of software requires a lot of visual attention. This can be counter-productive because music is entirely digested by our ears — and therefore, our eyes can lie.

There's an issue that I've had in the past with the visual representation of things in DAWs...

... It's those damn rectangles.

Everything in a DAW is represented by a rectangle in the sequencer. This midi part, that audio part, the automation, etc.

Simply removing or adding a bunch of rectangles does not guarantee that you've made a significant change in energy. Perhaps you delete 5 rectangles, but those were subtle and almost unnoticeable to the listener.

What's happening is that we are taking the change in visual cues to mean a change in auditory cues.

Don't do this. Ever.

Remember, we're making music. We use our ears for this. It's important to listen to your track once in awhile without watching your sequencer. Close your eyes to critically listen and then make adjustments.

Form Recap

To summarize, the energy in Long Form is very much like a Sine wave. It ebbs and flows slowly over time (with moments of climax or release).

It's an art of taking the listener from point A to point B over a period of time effortlessly and effectively.

It's the art of building and deconstructing energy in order to bring your listener on a roller coaster that blurs the lines between sections, tension and release.

There is a seamless thread that connects the entirety of a piece in Long Form. This explains why we rarely see a standard "Bridge" section in Long-Form — it breaks the blur when you drastically change the experience. As a result, we mostly see over-time changes in Long Form, with chunked changes thrown in to add to the overall journey. Because of this, it's easy for a listener to lose themselves in your music.

Pop form is akin to a novel with chapters. We're taken from Chapter 1 which lays part of a story in front of us, and then can easily bring us to another perspective in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, they might give us a flashback and in Chapter 4 we might be twenty-years into the future. It's still done tastefully, arranged in a fashion to keep you on your toes and enticed the whole time.

As a result, we mostly see chunked changes in Pop Form — but this isn't an excuse to not have the energy shifting within sections. There's still an over-arching energy curve throughout a Pop Song, but it's secondary and less of a blur.

Neither of these is inherently better than the other. Different stories require different methods to be most effective.

The important part is that you do, in fact, tell a good story.

Music Theory

Primer

Music theory is a super useful tool in order to deliver emotion to your listener as well as manipulate varying levels of tension.

Now, many of you may think “I don’t want to learn music theory, this will ruin my creativity.”

It doesn’t. What music theory does is enable you to make **intentional decisions** — and these decisions are a result of your creativity. It gives you a map of creative choices that you can make.

Furthermore, I’m not going to be giving you an all-encompassing explanation here. Music theory can be an in-depth topic with varying levels of difficulty and complexity.

Consider this a music theory primer for tension and emotion.

Melody

Melody is closely related with a vocal. Because of this, melodies can provoke certain feelings based on the kind of

speech it mimics.

Melodies that make large jumps in pitch feel happier, lighter, and more excited. Imagine an excited friend telling you some fantastic news — maybe it’s a new romantic partner. He or she is probably ecstatic and their tone is all over the place.

Opposite of that, a melody that remains around the same few pitches will be more subdued, down, mellow, and sadder. Imagine a friend grieving the death of his childhood puppy (grim, I know). His tone will be nearly monotone, distraught and maintained.

This understanding extends further to pacing, note length, and all other choices regarding melody. Figure out what message you want to convey and then think about how someone would speak it to you. Using that exercise, you can craft your melody more effectively.

Modes

I discussed modes earlier. They are emotional “worlds.” Let’s dig a bit deeper here.

Modes are the world in which our story lives. Each mode a select series of seven notes that provoke certain kinds of emotions.

The way modes are laid out is by the **distances between**

notes in the mode.

There are two distances that we care about — the **half-step** and the **whole-step**.

Place a finger on a keyboard on C (open up your DAW's built in Keyboard if need be). Now, move your finger **one** key to the right. It should be on C#, the black key. That's a half-step.

A whole-step is when you move a distance of **two** keys. So from C, to the right, we land on D — the next white key.

Knowing this, we can lay out the modes by their half-step and whole-step relationships between notes.

For example, Ionian is the happiest mode. It's synonymous with major — I.E. When people talk about C Major as a key, you could very well say C Ionian instead.

C Ionian is as follows: C, D, E, F, G, A, B.

All the white keys, starting with C.

If we lay this out with the step relationships, it would be W, W, H, W, W, W, H. (W = whole-step. H = half-step).

What this means is that you can pick literally any note on the keyboard and follow that step relationship to the right and you'll be in the Ionian mode.

Here's a chart showing the half and whole-step relationships in each mode.

Mode	Step-Relationship
Ionian	W W H W W W H
Lydian	W W W H W W H
Mixolydian	W W H W W H W
Dorian	W H W W W H W
Aeolian	W H W W H W W
Phrygian	H W W W H W W

The note you pick to start on is your **root note**. This is the tone that will feel most grounded — it's where the listener will feel most at home and most relaxed. It's the note with the least amount of tension.

Furthermore, the chord that is related to the root note is also the **least tense**.

The **most tense** chord in any mode is the five chord. In C, our fifth note is G (look at the mode layout a few paragraphs above), so the related G chord is the most tense. It's common to go to the five chord before coming back home to your root chord.

Remember how I said chords are like the emotional environment? Well, every time you change the chord that's

currently playing then the harmonic environment shifts. Each mode [read: world] is home to seven basic chords [read: environments]. Within each chord lives an infinite number of melodies [read: life] that you can create.

That's the fundamental reasoning behind the different modes. I'd like to lay them out for you individually though, as a quicker reference. This is something I wish I had when I was beginning to mess with them — it helps you get familiar with the modes a lot faster and allows you to work faster without breaking your creative flow.

	A	B	C	D
Ionian	A B C# D E F# G#	B C# D# E F# G# A#	C D E F G A B	D E F# G A B C#
Lydian	A B C# D# E F# G#	B C# D# E# F# G# A#	C D E F# G A B	D E F# G# A B C#
Mixolydian	A B C# D E F# G	B C# D# E F# G# A	C D E F G A Bb	D E F# G A B C
Dorian	A B C D E F# G	B C# D E F# G# A	C D Eb F G A Bb	D E F G A B C
Aeolian	A B C D E F G	B C# D E F# G A	C D Eb F G Ab Bb	D E F G A Bb C
Phrygian	A Bb C D E F G	B C D E F# G A	C Db Eb F G Ab Bb	D Eb F G A Bb C
	E	F	G	
Ionian	E F# G# A B C# D#	F G A Bb C D E	G A B C D E F#	
Lydian	E F# G# A# B C# D#	F G A B C D E	G A B C# D E F#	
Mixolydian	E F# G# A B C# D	F G A Bb C D Eb	G A B C D E F	
Dorian	E F# G A B C# D	F G Ab Bb C D Eb	G A Bb C D E F	
Aeolian	E F# G A B C D	F G Ab Bb C Db Eb	G A Bb C D Eb F	
Phrygian	E F G A B C D	F Gb Ab Bb C Db Eb	G Ab Bb C D Eb F	

As an exercise, I recommend picking a mode and writing a song with only those notes. Export the song (C Ionian, for example).

Then, take the exact same song and move the notes around so they fit into a different mode. Export this version too (C Aeolian, for example).

Notice how the two versions sound. Note that this isn't a perfect exercise, but it's a quick way to mess around with modes.

Unfortunately, music theory is an effort to logically understand subjective emotional content. The problem with this is that every person will have a different response to the modes, chords, and melodies that you play (as discussed earlier in the Emotion section). Music theory is a set of tools to get you in the ballpark of your intended message, but they are not definitive nor concrete.

As a result, you'll have to play around and get familiar with these yourself. Personally, I've found that I write almost everything in Aeolian — perhaps I relate to the emotion found in that world the most. I barely touch Ionian because I prefer my music to be melodramatic.

So how do you actually apply this knowledge? There's two ways I recommend.

The first is to pick a mode before you even begin writing. By selecting the world you'll be creating in, you give yourself a map to begin with — you give yourself creative limitations. Because of this, you know where to go and what notes and chords are involved. You know the desired emotional intent. You know the

landscape before you've begun the journey.

The second way is to only refer to it if you get lost. If you're composing a song and you get stuck, it's a super-beneficial exercise to take the time to figure out what mode you're in. This allows you to then have the map. This narrows your focus and gives you clear options as to where your journey can go.

That's the key — options. Music theory lays out clear options in front of you unlike the experience of producing on the fly. There's nothing wrong with either approach. Use them in conjunction with one another.

Miscellaneous

In this section we will take a look at various topics related to arrangement.

Genre Expectation

When arranging a piece it's important to acknowledge what expectations exist for the specific genre you find yourself working in.

This is important because *the degree of patience that a listener has is correlated with the genres they listen to.*

I'm an avid progressive house listener and I enjoy minimal music too. Because of my taste, when you produce progressive house or minimal music, you may barely shift and change things overtime and I'm okay with that. As a listener, I have an incredible amount of patience within those genres.

But, if you try to do the same thing within, say, Skrillex-style Dubstep, then I'll most likely stop listening. The expectation here is that I won't be listening to roaring bass-lines for six minutes — that'd be overwhelming (this is why Pop Form works so well with that style of music).

Furthermore, this is why it's difficult to blend multiple genres tastefully. If the listeners expectations of the combined genres are too conflicted, then the listener will be confused and most likely abandon the work.

Trust the Listener

If you've noticed, I barely talked about keeping the listener engaged in this book. I've withheld that for two reasons.

One reason is that a well-arranged song is inherently listener friendly. If you've done the best job you can to arrange your song in an interesting and effective manner **and** the listener is someone who's expectations align with your music, then they will stay with you.

The second reason is that thinking about listener attention is a creative roadblock. I find that it breaks the creative flow of producing.

Furthermore, it makes you question your taste. Let's say, for example, you write thirty-two bars that you really like. Upon listening back a few times, though, you begin to wonder if you've made enough shifts to keep other listeners happy.

The end result of that questioning is that you've usurped your taste — and your taste should be king. The more comfortable you are as an artist, though, the less of an issue this becomes.

Ultimately, a listener doesn't stop listening because you forgot a transition — they stop because they don't vibe with the track; They stop because it's not the style they listen to; They stop because you made a piece of crap.

Poor arrangements are, fortunately, not the end-all be-all for a listener. If they like the genre you're in and they vibe with the piece, they will stick around.

Volume

I find it funny how overlooked volume is as a tool. It's useful in arrangement, in sound design, in composition, and everything else related. It's the common denominator between every single sound.

Volume can be used to effect the triad — tension, energy, and emotion — by simply lowering or raising it.

Tension is about the context of volume — and it's normally created by swinging completely in the opposite direction (I.E. from a loud section to a super soft section, or vice versa).

Energy is directly related to whether or not something is soft or loud. Louder sounds are inherently more energetic. Quieter sounds are inherently less.

Emotion is sort of related, but more vague than Energy. Volume tends to amplify the emotion you're implying, but the loudness is mostly independent. Quiet things can have as similar emotional impact as loud things.

Bass

Bass is ground.

When you use bass, you're providing stability. The low frequencies provide a sonic bed for the rest of your tones to rest on. The listener feels grounded when the bass is present.

Ever notice that the bass is usually absent in breakdowns? This is why. We want the listener to feel uneasy, unsure, and unstable. We'll deliver that stability in drop.

So, when you remove the bass, you've most likely increased tension.

Energy is independent of bass.

Emotion is definitely affected, but it's contextual — similar to volume.

Deception

When you become more comfortable arranging, it's a great

tactic to deceive your listeners.

This is accomplished by setting an expectation and then breaking it.

An example of deception is to have your Pre-Chorus *not* go into the Chorus on, say, the third go-around — have it go into the bridge.

The important part here is that it is an intended deception rather than some random switch-a-roo. It's totally acceptable to have a random switch-a-roo without setting expectations but that doesn't have the same impact as planned deception.

People like to be deceived in music. They like to have their expectations broken and then have something awesome delivered instead.

An example of this is the second drop in [Approaching Nirvana's "The First Time."](#)

Go listen to it before reading the next paragraph.

Did you do it?

Listen to it yet?

You really should, because I'm about to tell you exactly what they do and it'll ruin the surprise.

...

...

You probably noticed this: right before the first drop the song gets very quiet and a sentimental piano plays but you're jerked out of it instantly. Later on, they do this again, but instead, a long piano breakdown is played.

Arrangement

Nirvana

Ultimately, your goal should be to never follow any arrangement rules — to transcend structure and truly tell a story in your own voice, with twists and turns and ups and downs that you've dictated intentionally and smartly.

Getting to this point requires a few things.

The first one is mistakes and failure. You have to write crappy stories. I've written an amazing number of crappy songs in my production career. A very small percentage are available to the public. The point is that I've put in the time and effort and learned how to write a better story.

That's the second part — learning. You can make a thousand crappy songs and never ask yourself “why?” You have to make a dedicated effort towards learning and improving. This isn't an automated process. It's a conscious decision to improve. I imagine if you've read this far, though, you shouldn't have an issue here. You've already shown a willingness to improve and learn simply by reading this book and that's awesome.

Seriously. Pat yourself on the back.

The final point goes back to trusting yourself and your taste, the topic this book started on.

What I find happens with music is that most people throw themselves into production heart-first when they begin. They don't care about writing some expertly arranged or professionally produced piece — the magic of simply creating a concrete and replayable auditory story is appealing and exciting.

Interestingly, your first few productions might still have a place in your heart. Personally, the first song I ever produced is still a favorite of mine. It's an awfully produced song and the structure is crap. I had no idea what I was doing — but the emotion in that song is actually pretty effective. My mom likes to play it often when I visit (thanks mom).

After some time though, we acknowledge our skills aren't up to par. The quality of our music isn't that of professionals. We become ambitious and gain the desire to improve our skills and construct masterpieces. We may even try to be someone we're not...

An unfortunate result of this mindset shift is that we begin to question ourselves. We lose touch — we lose some of the heart. It's impossible not to. Learning requires deconstructing the puzzle — it's a mechanical process.

Eventually, though, you'll come back around. Once your tracks

hit a certain threshold of quality it's much easier to forget the mechanical process of producing and allow your creative heart to come through again.

Once you're comfortable with the knowledge, you can abandon it and trust yourself.

This is true in all things.

-Zencha

I hope this book helps you finish more
songs and reach your goals!

Thanks,

Zencha :)