Creating Music with Maschine: The Power of Setting Goals

What's your current approach to goal-setting in your music? Do you typically set targets at the start, or do you prefer to see where the music takes you? Well-defined, intentional goals can provide a strong foundation for your music project. What's more, they will help you find focus, direction and motivation, especially when challenges arise. Establishing objectives early guides your decisions and aligns the music with your artistic vision.

In the process of music creation, setting clear goals for each phase of a track helps maintain focus through inevitable moments of doubt. Whether you're aiming to hit a certain mood or mastering a new technique, having a distinct endpoint in mind can be a game-changer.

Think about the last project you worked on—did you set any goals for each phase? How did that impact your focus and progress?

Why Set Goals?

Setting goals at the start keeps you focused, whether you're aiming for a specific sound or mastering a new technique. Tools like Maschine, with multiple workflow options to suit various approaches, become far more effective when paired with goals early on.

Establishing a set of objectives breaks the process into manageable steps, making the journey smoother and motivating you through obstacles. Without a plan in place, it's easy to get lost in the chaos of creativity.

Have you ever felt lost during a project? Would a focused plan have helped?

Think of it like a map for your musical journey. Without a map, you may wander aimlessly. With clear goals, however, you know exactly where you're headed.

What Will You Gain from These Methods?

When was the last time you felt like you had mapped a clear route for your project? How did that influence your creative energy?

Maschine's tools—like group and scene functions—allow you to structure your project in a way that keeps your objectives at the forefront of your work, so every sound modulation and arrangement step is a reflection of your creative vision.

How do you currently track your progress during a project? Do you feel that maintaining a structured approach helps you stay motivated, or do you struggle with feeling stuck?

Applying goal-setting principles gives you clarity, motivation and a structured approach. By breaking your creative vision into actionable steps, you stay productive, energized and aligned with your objectives, maintaining a sense of progress throughout.

> *Maschine Tip: Use Maschine's group and scene features to structure your project in a way that reflects your goals. For example, you can assign different parts of your track (sound design, arrangement, mixing) to separate groups to ensure your goals are met in each phase.*

Laying the Groundwork: Setting Personal Boundaries for Your Music

Before diving into specific goals, start by defining a framework within which your creativity can flourish. Clear boundaries give your project direction and ensure that your work stays aligned with your vision.

What guidelines can you set at the start of a project to ensure that your creativity stays focused? Do you find it difficult to stay within limits once you're deep into a track?

What Do You Want to Achieve?

- Key Outcomes: What specific outcome are you aiming for with your current project? Can you describe the end result you're working toward?

  Identify your desired results. Are you exploring a new genre, mastering a technique, or evoking a specific emotion? Focus comes easier when you zero in on measurable goals. For example, if you're working on lo-fi beats, a key outcome could be: "Create a track with a chill, nostalgic vibe suitable for study music."

- Meaningful Goals: How do you stay motivated when facing creative challenges? Are your goals connected to your personal passions, or do you sometimes feel like you're just following trends?

  Make sure your goals resonate with your personal interests. Intrinsic motivation will help you overcome challenges and achieve more rewarding results. Ask yourself: What excites you about this project?

  > *Maschine Tip: When working on a genre like lo-fi, start by selecting a Maschine kit or instrument that suits the mood: e.g., kits from the Drift Theory, Faded Reels or Byte Riot expansions; instruments like the Super 8, Lo-Fi Glow and Hybrid Keys VSTs. This will help guide your sound choices and reinforce the vibe you want to evoke.*

What Do You Want to Avoid?

- Counterproductive Elements: Once you've clarified what you want to achieve, it's just as important to identify what could derail you along the way. What tends to distract you during the creative process? Are there particular elements or habits that pull you off course and dilute your focus?

  Identify distractions early on. Is there a sound that doesn't fit your vision or a genre that doesn't inspire you? Recognizing these elements allows you to stay focused on what matters.

- Focus Disruptors: Have you ever found yourself stuck in the details of a track, unsure when to move forward?

  Set boundaries on time and energy to prevent burnout. Decide to avoid unnecessary experimentation. For example, over-polishing a track in the early stages can stall progress—knowing when to move on is crucial. How could setting clear boundaries help you avoid this trap?

  > *Maschine Tip: If you find yourself distracted by unnecessary experimentation, make one list of sounds or effects that don't align with your project, and another list of ones that appear useful, but learning or finessing them is too time-consuming for today.*

You can set these in marked folders in the browser on User view. Banishing unnecessary time-sinks keeps your focus sharp.

How Much Flexibility Do You Allow Yourself?

- Process Structure: What kind of workflow feels most natural to you? Are you someone who needs structure, or do you function best when you allow your creativity to flow freely?

  Will you plan everything in advance, or leave room for experimentation? Genres like classical or film scoring benefit from structured plans, while electronic music often thrives with more flexibility.

- Creative Freedom: How do you balance the need for structure with your desire for creative freedom? Do you feel restricted by too much planning—is freedom to experiment essential to your process?

  While most creative projects benefit from a degree of freedom, structure is still important. An experimental track might thrive on spontaneity, with changes made midway that lead to unexpected, exciting results, but without a grounding framework it might just take the long way to nowhere.

  It requires time and reflection to be able to recognize whether this improvisation or that flight of fancy is a path worth taking. Maschine makes it easy to mark where you were when you left the path. Follow your muse without hesitation, but learn to recognize when you're too far off course and need to zip back to reality.

  Maschine Tip: Electronic music in Maschine often thrives on improvisation. Set a goal to design sounds using randomization features in the software—using Variation mode's Random control to "humanize" drum hit velocity, or playing with the Particles engine on the Noire piano to generate extra midi notes—to discover new, unexpected sounds that enhance your track.

When Do You Know You're Done?

- Completion Criteria: How do you define "done" for a project? What signs do you look for to know when it's time to move on from the track?

  Think about when you'll know your track is finished. What will it feel like to hit that finish line? Is there a deadline or specific milestone? Clear criteria help prevent endless tweaking and help you recognize when your creative vision has been realized. That said, remain flexible for final adjustments.

- Project Milestones: What are the key moments in your project that will signal progress? Can you identify clear milestones, like completing the first draft or finalizing the mix, that will give you a sense of accomplishment?

  Set clear endpoints for each phase of your project. For example, completing the first draft or achieving a satisfactory mix are tangible milestones that will provide a sense of accomplishment.

Working within time constraints can also be a good way to push your creativity to new limits. Knowing that you are running up against a specific deadline for this phase of production or that you've allotted two hours for sound design may inspire you to achieve more, in less time.

Maschine Tip: Use Maschine's project snapshots feature to save different versions of your track at regular intervals. Make sure to save a new version before trying something new. This allows you to experiment freely while also knowing you can return to earlier stages when needed.

Also consider setting a milestone for each stage of production (e.g., sound design completed, arrangement finalized). You can use the scene functionality in Maschine to mark each milestone and easily track your progress.

Action Step: Define Your Boundaries

- Write down the key outcomes for your project (e.g., the vibe, genre, or emotion you want to evoke).
- List distractions or focus disruptors you've encountered in the past. Consider what will help you stay on track.
- Set a boundary for time management: Decide how much time you'll spend on each stage of production (e.g., 2 hours on sound design, 1 hour for mixing).

Focusing the Vision: Setting Comprehensive Goals for Your Track

With your boundaries established, it's time to transform your vision into actionable goals. This will ensure every element of your track is cohesive and supports your overarching artistic vision.

What Do You Want the Track to Sound Like?

- Sound Vision: How would you describe the sound of your track in one sentence? This idea will guide every decision, from sound design to arrangement.

  Whether your track is cinematic, lo-fi, or upbeat, your concept directs every choice you make, ensuring consistency in vision. For example, a lo-fi track might call for soft drums and warm synths, while more aggressive sounds could clash with the mood.

  When you think of your ideal track, which specific instruments or sound textures come to mind? How can you use these elements to define the mood or genre of your track?

- Authentic Goals: How do you ensure that your sound choices align with your overall concept? Align your goals with your personal preferences and values.

  This makes the creative process more organic, ensuring the final product reflects your identity rather than just the latest trends.

  Does your vision for the track remain consistent through all the elements, from sound design to arrangement? How can you adjust your creative choices to ensure your track reflects your authentic voice?

  > *Maschine Tip: In Maschine, experiment with layering different sound elements in a dedicated group (e.g., one group for drums, another for bass and one for synths). This allows you to focus on specific sounds that align with your vision without getting distracted by unrelated sounds.*

What Feelings Do You Want to Evoke in the Listener?

- Emotional Direction: What specific emotions do you want your song to inspire? The feelings you aim to evoke will shape your track's identity. Once you have a clear sense of your track's sound, it's essential to understand the emotions you want it to convey, as these will guide your choice of textures, rhythms, and arrangement.

  Whether you want to inspire excitement, nostalgia, or calm, defining emotional focus early helps in selecting the right sounds, rhythms and textures. For example, an uplifting track for a workout playlist might feature upbeat tempos and punchy drums, while a nostalgic track could include vintage sounds and slower tempos.

  Are you aiming for excitement, nostalgia, calm, or another feeling? Simply choosing a genre—jazz, downtempo, indie—can set a listener's expectations for mood and feeling. How can your choice of sounds, rhythms and textures contribute to the emotional tone you want your track to evoke?

- Purposeful Intent: Why do you want to evoke these particular emotions? Without a clear purpose, emotional content often rings hollow.

Seeking the roots of your emotional impulse will make your track more engaging for your audience. Is this track for a personal project, or is it for a commercial purpose like film, advertising or a playlist? How does this shape your choices? Understanding why you want to move your listener clarifies your intent.

How does this deeper purpose influence the decisions you make while producing the track? What tools or techniques can you incorporate to enhance the emotional qualities of your track?

Maschine Tip: If you want to evoke nostalgia, consider using vintage-style drum kits or effects like vinyl noise (e.g., expansions like True School, Faded Reels, Vintage Heat or Aquarius Earth; instruments like the UNITY Nostalgia Engine or Vintage Organs VSTs) to give your track a warm, retro feel. Maschine's intuitive browser can load up these kinds of sounds quickly to test how they fit.

What Instruments Will Drive the Piece?

- Instrumental Focus: Which instruments will be the cornerstone of your track? Early decisions about your primary instruments help create a consistent sound palette.

  Key instruments define the tone and atmosphere of the piece. For example, a minimalist ambient track might rely on pads and field recordings, while a dance track might feature punchy drums and basslines.

  Are you clear on the role each instrument will play in your track? For example, will your track rely heavily on bass, drums, or pads to create its primary sound?

- Measurable Goals: How can you measure progress with your instrumentation? Setting specific targets will help you track your development.

  Timing, mood and sound space are crucial to effective instrumentation. Your goals might be to layer three distinct pads before the chorus, to design a vibrant polysynth lead with three distinct layers, or to achieve a balance where the bass and drums are equally prominent in the mix.

  Consider timings not just within the track, but in your daily workflow as well: try to spend the first hour on bass sound design, then move to layering synths and developing the arrangement. How can you stay organized while keeping your instrumentation focused and aligned with your vision?

  Maschine Tip: Decide on the core instruments (e.g., a primary synth or drum kit) and stick with them as a base. Use Maschine's Group objects to keep track of all the instruments that contribute to your sound vision. You can rename any of the sixteen sound slots in your current group to better organize your instruments. If you need more instruments, just add another group.

How Will the Song Be Structured?

- Structural Approach: Will your track evolve organically or will you outline the whole song? Choose an overall method for structuring your song.

  Methodical formats like verse-chorus-verse work for pop, while more experimental genres benefit from flexible structures. Maschine offers several different workflow options to

accommodate your structural approach, including the Pattern Editor, the Arrange Grid and the step sequencer mode on the Maschine hardware itself.

How will your song evolve over time? Are there specific parts of your track that will have more room for improvisation or change?

- Creative Framework: How can you ensure that the structure supports your creative vision without stifling innovation? Balance structure and freedom.

  A creative framework ensures cohesion while leaving room for innovation. For instance, an electronic track might plan a consistent intro, build-up and drop but leave room for exploration in the transitions.

  What role will the build-up, drop, or other key moments play in your track? Are you visualizing the transitions between sections, or are you leaving them open for spontaneous development?

  Maschine Tip: You can create a basic structure for your track using Maschine's scenes and patterns, giving you a visual representation of how your track will evolve. This also helps you stay focused on your goals for each section.

Action Step: Set Concrete Goals for Your Track

- Write down your sound vision for the track (e.g., lo-fi, cinematic, etc.) and list the specific elements that will support it.
- List the emotions you want to evoke in the listener, and ensure your sound design and arrangement align with these emotions.
- Decide on the key instruments for your track and set measurable targets (e.g., layer three synths, balance drums and bass).
- Outline your song structure based on the genre or style, and decide where you'll allow flexibility.
- Using Maschine's group and scene functionality, create a template for your track. Label each scene with the key phase (e.g., Sound Design, Arrangement, Mixing). In each group, assign one specific goal—such as 'finalize bass design' or 'choose primary synth.' This will make it clear where to focus your time.

Shaping the Process: Using Frameworks to Direct Your Music

Once your vision and goals are clear, break them down into actionable steps using frameworks that ensure steady progress.

SMART Goals for Music Creation

SMART goals help turn your vision into Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound actions. Here's how to apply them:

- Specific Focus: Be clear about what you want to achieve. For instance, instead of "improve sound design," a goal like "Master layering sounds for depth" gives you a clearer target.

  Can you define a specific aspect of your track that you want to focus on this week? How can you break it down into clear steps that will move you toward your overall vision?

- Measurable Milestones: Set progress points, like finishing the first draft by week 3 or completing mixing by week 6. Divide a complex goal like mixing into several steps: balancing volume; applying compression; EQing; panning, setting reverb and delay; automating volume; applying effects. Pinpoint when you want to complete each step to meet your overall mark.

  What measurable milestones can you set for your project to ensure you're making progress? Can you identify tangible goals for each phase of production?

- Achievable Challenges: Stretch your abilities, but don't overwhelm yourself. Say you want to learn a new production technique like sidechain compression. Start by watching a tutorial, then practice on a few tracks. Set a goal to apply it to your current project by the end of the week.

  What's one production technique or tool you'd like to learn or master? How can you break this down into achievable, manageable steps?

- Relevant Aims: Make sure every goal is aligned with your project's style and vision. Ensure that your goals stay aligned with your artistic identity and genre. If your project is a lo-fi track, a goal like 'Achieve professional-quality sound' may be less relevant than 'Maintain warmth and imperfections to retain the lo-fi aesthetic.'

  Are the goals you've set for this project aligned with the genre and mood you're going for?

- Time-bound Targets: Set deadlines to keep yourself moving forward and avoid getting stuck in perfectionism. Since you've gone through the process of establishing realistic goals, you won't miss your target. Every deadline met serves as motivation to hit your next mark.

  What's one deadline you can set today for your current project? How will you hold yourself accountable to meet it?

OKRs (Objectives and Key Results)

OKRs align your vision by refining and building on SMART goals, focusing on the overarching Objective and breaking it down into Key Results.

- Objective: A broad, qualitative goal (e.g., "Capture a nostalgic vibe in the track").
- Key Results: Specific actions (e.g., "Use vintage synths" or "Achieve a balance between warmth and clarity in the mix").

What is the overarching objective for your current track? Can you list a few specific key results that will help you achieve that objective?

Pomodoro Technique

By working in short bursts you can boost productivity, marshaling time and energy for the tasks you set to achieve your key results.

- Work for 25 minutes, then take a five-minute break. Set an alarm or use a timer on your phone to keep on track.
- After four intervals, take a longer break (15-30 minutes). If at first you find the rotation too heavy, try taking your longer breaks after just two or three intervals to ease into the cycle.

  Do you struggle with staying focused during long sessions? How might you incorporate the Pomodoro technique to break up your work into more manageable intervals?

Breathtaking Ambitions

Audacious goals like releasing an album or exploring a new genre can inspire creativity. However, balance these big ambitions with smaller, achievable steps to maintain momentum and avoid burnout. If you are aiming to release an album, break it down into creating one song per month or finishing sound design for one track each week.

Action Step: Direct Your Music Using Frameworks

- Define one SMART goal for each stage of your track (e.g., sound design, arrangement, mixing). Set deadlines for achieving each goal. Break them down further if needed. Remember to keep them specific. For instance, instead of simply saying “Improve mixing,” set a goal like “Complete a full mix with balanced EQ on all tracks by the end of the week.”
- Write an Objective that represents the track’s essence (e.g., emotional tone or genre focus).
- List Key Results that will help you achieve that objective (e.g., specific instruments or techniques).
- Set a timer for 25-minute intervals and focus on one specific task per interval (e.g., sound design, arrangement). Take breaks after each session and review your progress after every four intervals.

Adjusting the Course: Evolving and Refining Your Goals

Goal-setting isn't a one-time task. As you progress, revisit and refine your goals to stay adaptable and aligned with your evolving vision.

Set Clear and Well-Defined Goals

- Goal Clarity: Do you feel like your goals are clear enough to guide your creative process? SMART goals are typically specific and immediate. Refine them to ensure they're realistic and actionable.

  Avoid vague goals. Instead, identify your broad goal (e.g., "Improve sound design"). Break it down into smaller, concrete tasks (e.g., "Watch a tutorial on reverb techniques" or "Design a kick drum sound"). Set a clear deadline for each task (e.g., "Finish the reverb tutorial by Friday").

  After refining your goals, use the SMART criteria to ensure they are specific and measurable. How can you refine your goals to make them more actionable?

- Clear Refinement: Have you ever set goals that felt overwhelming? Adjust goals that feel too ambitious or unclear.

  What would it look like to adjust an overwhelming or vague goal? Let's say your goal is to "perfect the mix." Break it down into smaller, more actionable tasks: "Focus on getting the drum mix balanced by Thursday" or "Spend 30 minutes EQing vocals."

  Keep your focus sharp to avoid burnout. What goals could you simplify or break down into smaller tasks to stay focused and motivated?

Identify Key Objectives

- Goal Hierarchy: How can you allocate your time effectively to ensure that the most important tasks receive the attention they need? OKRs focus on broad, long-term outcomes. Prioritize your goals based on the most critical aspects of the project.

  Balancing your priorities without neglecting any important part of the process involves assessing your strengths and devoting more time where you need more work. Above all, prioritize the most critical aspects of your project.

  Review your OKRs to make sure the key results still align with your overall project vision. Are there areas of the project that might need more or less focus based on your goals?

- Focused Priorities: What are the key objectives that will drive your project to completion? Stay focused on the most important objectives to avoid "goal dilution."

  Smaller, less critical goals could distract you from achieving these bigger objectives. Identify one or two core priorities for your track right now. For example, instead of tweaking EQ levels one by one on each instrument in your brass section, work first on optimizing volume levels across the mix.

  Are there strategies you can implement to avoid getting sidetracked by less important details? How will narrowing your focus help you move forward more efficiently?

Balance Your Goals

- Goal Harmony: How do you make sure that your creative exploration doesn't disrupt the consistency or direction of the track? Ensure your goals complement each other.

  For instance, if a track's direction is shifting and the goals are no longer aligned (e.g., you start exploring an entirely different genre), how can you regain focus? Try reframing your goals to reflect the new direction, but set boundaries for experimentation to avoid derailment.

  Are there any goals that might feel like they're pulling you in different directions? How can you refine or adjust them to make sure they support the overall vision of the project?

- Aligned Vision: How do you ensure that adjustments still move the project toward your intended outcome? Make sure your goals support both the project's objectives and your broader artistic vision.

  Refining them to align with your aims ensures consistency and purpose in every decision. Review your goals to make sure they consistently support your overarching vision for the track. Make the necessary adjustments to better align your goals with the sound and emotions you want to create.

  If your track has evolved and the sound design is now taking longer than expected, adjust the sound design milestone deadline while ensuring that other elements, like arrangement or mixing, aren't left behind.

  Are there any goals that feel out of sync with your broader creative aspirations? When refining your goals, do you find yourself compromising on any of your initial ideas?

Action Step: Refine and Reassess Your Goals

- Review your SMART goals and OKRs regularly to ensure they're still aligned with your vision.
- List your top 3 priorities for the track. For example, sound design might take priority over arrangement if you're exploring new techniques.
- Focus your time on these key objectives before moving on to less critical aspects.
- Adjust milestones as your project evolves, ensuring the goals remain realistic, complementary and relevant.

Driving the Muse: Aligning Your Music with Purpose-Driven Goals

Purpose-driven goals connect your creative decisions with a deeper motivation, ensuring every step fuels your creativity and brings you closer to your vision.

Purpose-Driven Goals Ensure a Fulfilling Process

What's the deeper purpose behind your current music project? Are your goals helping you tap into that purpose, or do they feel disconnected from your true motivation? Clear, meaningful and achievable goals aren't just about creating great music—they're also about enjoying the process.

Tie your goals to deeper motivations and create goals that are not just about completing tasks but about fulfilling your artistic desires.

- Emotional Impact: To evoke nostalgia, you might set a goal to "use vintage instruments and analog effects to create a warm, retro sound."
- Technical Mastery: A goal like "perfect the use of reverb on vocals" could be aligned with the purpose of achieving technical excellence in mixing.
- Self-Exploration: If a you are experimenting with a new genre, the purpose might be to "explore uncharted musical territories and express emotions through a different style."

When your goals align with your personal values, every step of the creative journey becomes more rewarding. Whether you're aiming for emotional impact, technical mastery, or self-exploration, purpose-driven goals enhance not just the final product but the entire creative journey.

Take Goal-Setting to Heart

Integrating these goal-setting principles into your creative process will transform how you approach music. Clear, actionable goals provide structure, focus and motivation, ensuring that your work stays on track and feels meaningful.

Purpose-driven goals can evolve throughout the production process, while staying aligned with the broader vision.

- Pre-production: A goal might be "Develop a sound palette that reflects my core artistic values."
- Production: A goal could be "Use my music to convey the emotion of longing or desire."
- Post-production: The purpose might shift to making the track cohesive, ensuring it delivers the intended emotional impact.

In addition to the immediate goals for the project, take a moment to reflect on how this project ties into your larger life goals. For example, is the project meant to serve as a stepping stone for a larger career goal, such as building a fanbase or breaking into a new market? Aligning music projects with life goals can lend them even greater meaning and purpose.

Start defining your goals for your next project: What emotions, sounds and experiences do you want to create? Break down that vision into actionable, achievable goals that will guide you through the process and keep you aligned with your artistic vision.

Action Step: Align Your Goals with Purpose

- Take a moment to reflect on the larger purpose behind your work. Are your goals aligned with that purpose?
- Review your vision and goals to ensure they align with your intrinsic motivation. Do they need adjustment to ensure a more meaningful outcome?
- Ask yourself: How do these goals support your broader artistic vision?

Paving the Way: Bringing Your Vision to Life with Purposeful Goals

With purposeful goals in place, you're ready to begin the final phase: turning your vision into reality. By applying these goal-setting methods, you'll have a clear roadmap to guide you through the creative process, ensuring steady progress and a fulfilling journey.

- Authentic Goals: Set meaningful, intrinsic goals that align with your personal musical vision.
- Actionable Framework: Use structured frameworks like SMART goals to define clear, actionable and time-sensitive objectives.
- Continuous Evaluation: Regularly review and refine your goals to stay focused and avoid distraction.
- Balanced Approach: Strike a balance between creative freedom and clear purpose to maintain momentum and direction.

What emotions, sounds and experiences do you want to create? Reflect on these questions and break down your vision into concrete, actionable goals.

Keep in mind that creative projects often evolve unexpectedly. For instance, while you may have set a goal to work on the bass sound, experimentation with new sounds might lead you to rethink your entire approach to the track. Acknowledging that flexibility and spontaneity are part of the process could help reduce the pressure to "stick to the plan" when things naturally shift. Be open to creative accidents.

It's important to celebrate small accomplishments along the way. Acknowledging milestones, no matter how small, can fuel motivation and maintain enthusiasm throughout the project. For example, once a specific sound design goal is achieved, take a moment to appreciate it before moving on to the next task. This can prevent burnout and help maintain creative energy.

Take a moment now to set your first clear goal. It could be as simple as 'Design a distinctive kick drum using Maschine's sampler,' or 'Outline the song structure with specific scenes for the intro and chorus.' Whatever it is, make it something you can measure and achieve. Then, follow this process to bring your creative vision to life.

Remember, goal-setting is a personal journey. Adapt these frameworks to fit your style, and don't hesitate to revise them as you progress.

Case Study: “Ain’t So”

The following track-creating process serves as a case study in applying the goal-setting techniques outlined above, particularly the use of OKRs, SMART goals, and effective time management.

By first establishing clear objectives, I could break down the work into manageable tasks with measurable outcomes. Using SMART goals, I defined specific, attainable targets for each element of the track, like selecting the right instruments and setting realistic deadlines for their integration. Throughout the process, I prioritized time management, setting aside specific blocks of time for composition, sound design, and refinement, ensuring steady progress and avoiding burnout.

This structured approach kept me focused and on track, allowing for a creative yet disciplined workflow.

Planning

Objectives and Key Results for the Track

Objective 1: Create an Emotional Soundscape

This overarching objective focuses on the feeling I want to evoke— a cry for understanding conveying a sense of yearning, being answered with the uplifting embrace of total acceptance.

Key Results:

- Use muted piano sounds to establish a soft, reflective atmosphere.
- Incorporate a plucked instrument (harp or guitar) to weave a contrapuntal melody that adds depth to the cry of the soul.
- Develop a vocal line that captures the feeling of emotional release and connection.
- Create percussion that evokes the sound of natural, hand drums played in a canyon-like atmosphere without relying on typical "World Music" clichés.

Objective 2: Maintain Simplicity and Space in the Arrangement

This objective ensures that the track doesn't become overstuffed, enhancing the emotional resonance by keeping it focused and reflective and allowing the feeling of seeking and receiving to shine through.

Key Results:

- Keep instrumentation minimal with only the muted piano, plucked instrument, vocals, and hand percussion. Add no additional instruments unless they contribute to the emotional core.
- Build space in the arrangement where the listener can feel the vastness of the mesa or canyon.
- Maintain a sparse, organic feel throughout the production process.

SMART Goals for Each Stage of the Track

Sound Design & Instrumentation:

- Specific: Create a sound palette that captures the feeling of the mesa and vortex. Use a muted piano sound, a plucked instrument (such as a harp or guitar), and an organic hand drum sound.
- Measurable: Finalize the sound design for piano, plucked instrument, and percussion by the end of Week 1.
- Achievable: Use plugins or samples to craft the muted piano and plucked instrument sounds, ensuring they blend well together.
- Relevant: Make sure these sounds support the atmosphere of connection and serenity.
- Time-bound: Complete the sound design by Day 7.

Chords and Composition:

- Specific: Establish a chord progression that conveys longing and peace. Focus on chords that have an open, expansive feel (e.g., using suspended or extended chords).
- Measurable: Have the full chord progression finalized and tested with my piano and plucked instrument by Day 10.
- Achievable: Experiment with chord voicings that use open intervals and avoid too much harmonic tension.
- Relevant: The chords should reflect the emotional journey—from yearning to being embraced.
- Time-bound: Finalize the chord structure by Day 10.

Vocal Line & Lyrics:

- Specific: Write and record a vocal line that expresses both the cry for understanding and the uplifted feeling of being held. Focus on sparse, emotional phrasing.
- Measurable: Have the main vocal line recorded and mixed by Day 14.
- Achievable: Record in a quiet, focused space to capture the emotional depth I want. Keep things simple but evocative.
- Relevant: The vocal line should act as the emotional focal point of the track.
- Time-bound: Complete vocal recording by Day 14.

Drums/ Percussion:

- Specific: Design percussion elements that evoke the feeling of hand drums in a canyon, emphasizing natural sounds.
- Measurable: Have percussion recorded and integrated by Day 12.
- Achievable: Use organic percussion samples or actual recordings (if possible) of hand drums.
- Relevant: Percussion should enhance the track's feeling of natural, spiritual connection.
- Time-bound: Finalize percussion by Day 12.

Time-Sensitive Milestones (Two-Week Production Plan)

Week 1: Sound Design & Basic Composition

Day 1-3: Develop and finalize the muted piano sound, ensuring it conveys a feeling of calm and introspection. Start experimenting with a plucked instrument (harp/guitar) sound.

Day 4-6: Work on basic chord progressions that reflect the emotional arc I want to express. Test the piano and plucked instrument together.

Day 7: Finalize sound design and chord structure. Ensure the sound palette aligns with the spiritual, expansive tone I want.

Week 2: Vocal & Percussion Integration

Day 8-10: Write and test the vocal line. Ensure it feels like a "cry of the soul" while also leaving room for emotional resolution. Record the vocals if the melody feels right.

Day 11-12: Design and record the percussion that evokes the feeling of being in a canyon, using natural, hand-drums or organic percussion samples.

Day 13-14: Finalize the vocal line and percussion, making sure the production feels sparse but emotionally resonant. Begin initial mixing.

Refining & Adjusting the Course

As I proceed through production, be prepared to adjust:

Monitor Emotional Resonance: Listen to my track regularly to ensure it conveys the right emotional arc—from the cry of the soul to the feeling of being held. Adjust the vocal line, chord choices, and percussion if needed to enhance the emotional tone.

Refine the Arrangement: If the arrangement feels too cluttered, simplify it further. I can always reintroduce elements in later passes, but the emotional clarity should be my top priority.

Balance Creative Exploration with My Vision: While it's important to stay aligned with my emotional vision, give myself space to experiment with small details, like reverb or delay on the piano, which can enhance the track's natural, spiritual feel.

Purpose-Driven Goals

Emotional Impact: My goal is to convey both the deep cry for understanding and the comforting embrace of being answered. Keep that central, and ensure each musical choice serves this emotional core.

Self-Exploration: Experiment with sounds that reflect my journey—sounds that resonate with nature and spirituality, ensuring that I express something personal, authentic, and unique.

Technical Mastery: As I work through the production, focus on achieving a clean, organic mix that allows the sparse instrumentation to breathe. Aim for a technical result that supports the raw emotional power of the track.

Action Steps to Align My Goals with Purpose

Reflect: How does my current track connect to my deeper artistic motivations? Is there anything in the production process that feels out of alignment with my vision? If so, adjust it.

Review: Continuously assess if my SMART goals are still relevant and achievable, and tweak them to stay true to my emotional goals.

Refine: Ensure that every decision, from sound design to the final mix, aligns with my desire to create a track that feels connected, calm, and uplifting.

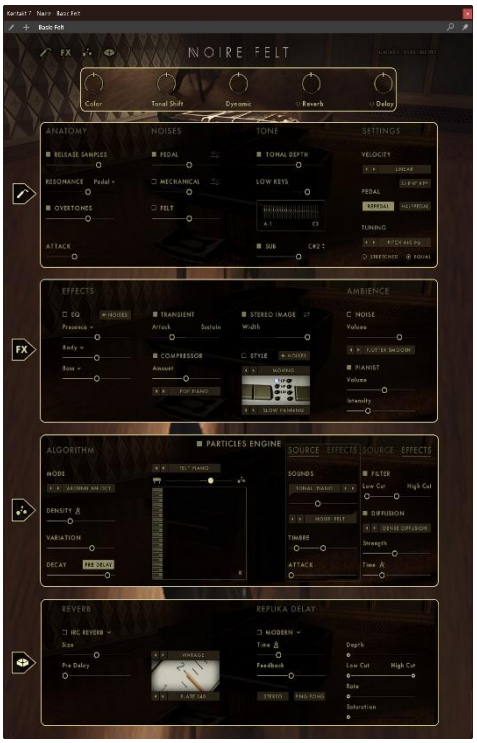
Results

Sound Design & Instrumentation:

My goal was to craft a sound palette that evoked the feeling of the high desert mesa using a muted piano, plucked instrument, and organic hand drums.

Muted Piano

The Noire Felt Piano VST offers the soft, intimate tone I needed for this track. A layer of felt between the hammers and strings of the grand piano creates a muted, warm sound, establishing a reflective, calming atmosphere. I fine-tuned the warmth and texture with the Tonal Depth and Low Keys controls, achieving an ethereal feel. The adjustable release samples, body resonance, and overtones add depth while keeping the sound soft and intimate. Mechanical and felt noises, along with the Particles Engine, introduce subtle motion and texture, enhancing the organic quality without disrupting the tranquil mood.



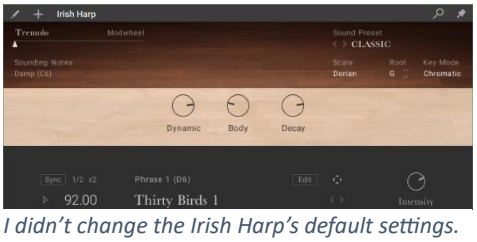
The Noire Felt plug-in has four pages of options.

I engineered a warmer, less focused sound by raising the presence of particles in the mix, while simultaneously lowering their attack and timbre to emphasize the lower registers. At the same time, I set a fairly assertive low-cut filter and a quarter note diffusion to give the piano's warmth and depth a papery and ethereal quality. I set the player to re-pedal mode and emphasized the mechanical sound of the pedals. I also increased the ambient volume, so the pianist can be heard leaning back and forth on the bench as the intensity ebbs and flows.

Plucked Instrument

The Irish Harp VST provides delicate, resonant tones perfect for contrapuntal melodies. The gut strings' immediate, crisp attack contrasts beautifully with the piano's muted warmth. I used the harp's nuanced presence to elevate emotional depth and enhance the sense of connection.

After laying down a melody and counterpoint over the piano, I spent some time editing it to give it a more considered touch. As usual, I built the melody first in the Pattern Editor. After building patterns with all the other instruments, I moved to the Arranger, where I could build out the track. With all the instruments in place I could hear where I needed to pull back to create more space.



I didn't change the Irish Harp's default settings.

Hand Drum

The Bongo VST from the Kontakt Factory Library captures the essence of natural hand percussion. Though the preset patterns were designed for high-tempo Latin rhythms, I slowed them down and adjusted the feel to create a meditative atmosphere. The dry, warm tones complement the piano and harp, adding a grounding element to deepen the emotional flow without overwhelming the other instruments.

To mimic a human drummer, I pushed the articulation to the max and set it to interpret a higher note velocity as a harder hand strike, rather than an increase in volume. Panning the instrument to the right overall while panning left in the randomizer gives the impression of both left and right hands drumming. I used the smallest room to avoid oversaturation in the mastering phase.

The Bongos' intuitive controls are easy to use.

Vocals

The Sia sample pack from Native Instruments' 2020 Community Drive offers wordless vocal lines full of emotion, ranging from soaring cries to gentle hums. Used sparingly, they serve as a meditative, atmospheric element, with sparse phrasing that enhances the reflective nature of the piece. I used them as-is, without changing anything. The vocals create a powerful emotional arc, moving from yearning to a sense of embrace, complementing the intimacy of the felted piano, harp, and bongos, and reinforcing the sense of connection I want to convey.

By choosing a pre-existing sample pack, I trimmed days of writing, performing and recording vocals from my initial plan. Not only did this adjustment leave me with extra time to fine-tune other aspects of production, but it also greatly reduced the pressure I felt to perform, which helped me maintain a calm and creative approach to the project as a whole.

Mixing

During the mixing phase, my goal was to do as little custom tweaking as possible, relying instead on factory presets for compressors, equalizers, and effects for each instrument. This simplified the process while maintaining a consistent sonic character across the track. By focusing on the balance of tonality, timbre, and stereo placement, I ensured that each instrument had its own space in the mix.

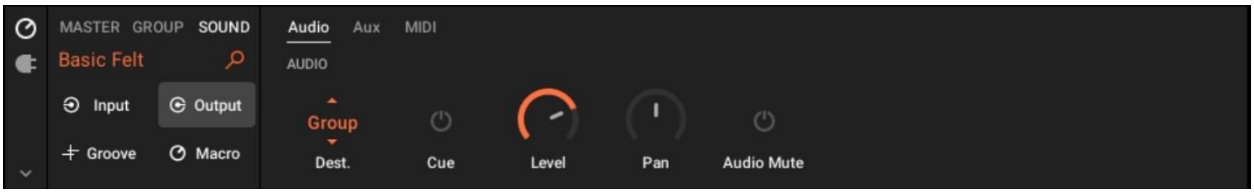
The aim was to create the feeling of a live performance in a natural acoustic environment, as if the track were recorded in a box canyon in the high desert.

Noire Felt Piano

I experimented with applying vocal parallel compression settings to the felt piano track. It presented a unique texture, rich in mechanical and player noises, that I wanted to retain in the mix. By using parallel compression, I was able to smooth out transients while keeping those incidental noises present, adding depth and character to the sound.

This approach worked particularly well in carving out a distinct dynamic space for the piano, ensuring it didn't compete with the vocals in the mix. The gain reduction settings typically used to boost vocal presence were instead applied here to subtly push the piano out of the vocal frequency range. This allowed the piano to remain an integral yet non-intrusive element, providing texture and warmth without overshadowing the primary vocal line.

The result was a cohesive mix where the piano maintained its organic and intimate qualities, enhancing the overall sonic landscape. Trying parallel compression in this unconventional way achieved a balance that both smoothed the dynamics of the piano and supported the prominence of the vocals.



Since both piano and vocals sit in the center of the stereo image, I needed another way to keep each part distinct.

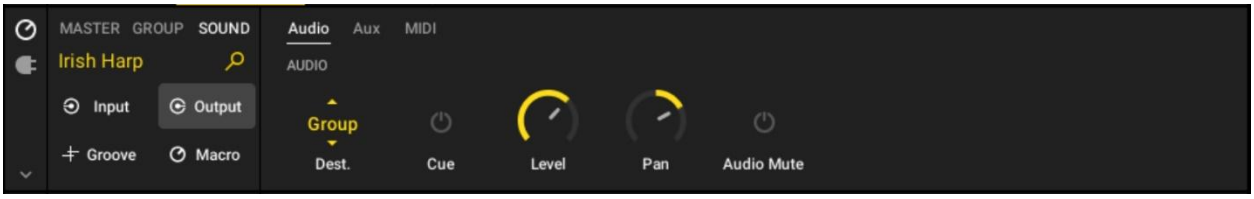
With a vocal parallel compression setting, the piano no longer competes with the vocals for attention and space.

Irish Harp

For the Irish harp, I chose an acoustic guitar dynamic compression preset to achieve a clear, balanced sound. The harp's bell-like resonance needed to stand out without intruding on the piano's chordal warmth, the vocals' melodic prominence, and the percussive hits of the bongos. The acoustic guitar setting tamed the harp's dynamic peaks while preserving its delicate tonal qualities.

The preset's moderate attack and quicker release times allowed the harp's transient detail to shine through while ensuring that its sustained notes didn't overwhelm other elements in the mix. The soft knee and a subtle compression ratio provided just the right amount of control, maintaining the harp's natural, expressive dynamics. This approach ensured that the instrument contributed to the arrangement's harmonic richness without drawing undue attention.

By treating the harp with the nuanced compression typically applied to acoustic guitars, I created a cohesive mix where each element complemented the others. The harp's bright, bell-like character now enhances the overall texture, adding clarity and depth while blending well with the surrounding instrumentation.



The Irish Harp sits to the right of the piano, across the sound space from the bongos.

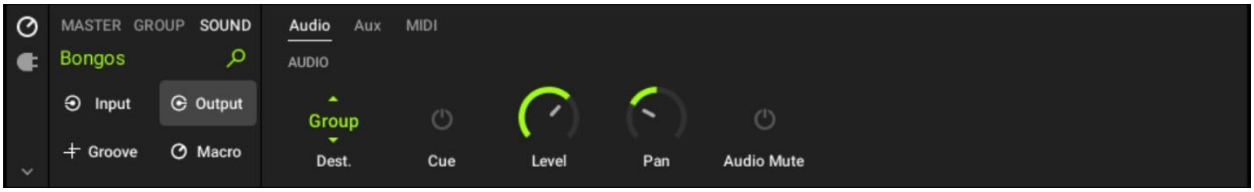
Acoustic guitar compression settings helped retain the harp's brightness without compromising the overall mix.

Bongos

In mixing the bongos for this project, I opted for drum overhead EQ settings rather than dynamic compression. This approach allowed me to address some of the sharpness in the bongos' tone and subtly shave harsher frequencies while maintaining the quick slap that makes them so compelling in a natural, acoustic setting.

By focusing on frequencies typically in the cymbal and hi-hat range, the overhead preset achieves a delicate balance: a slight reduction in mid to high frequencies helps tame harsh overtones, ensuring the bongos don't overpower other elements of the mix; meanwhile, small boosts in the higher frequencies enhance the clarity and presence of their percussive attack without introducing excessive brightness. These adjustments sound clean and transparent and the bongos retain their organic character.

Thus, the bongos integrated seamlessly into the mix, complementing the chordal piano, melodic vocals, and Irish harp while standing out with their rhythmic precision. This restrained EQ setup preserves the authenticity of the bongo performance, ensuring it contributes to the track's lively, balanced soundscape.



The bongos are panned slightly to the left to give the listener the impression of a small, intimate ensemble.

Drum overhead EQ settings were perfect for taming sharpness while retaining the tight, fast character of the bongos.

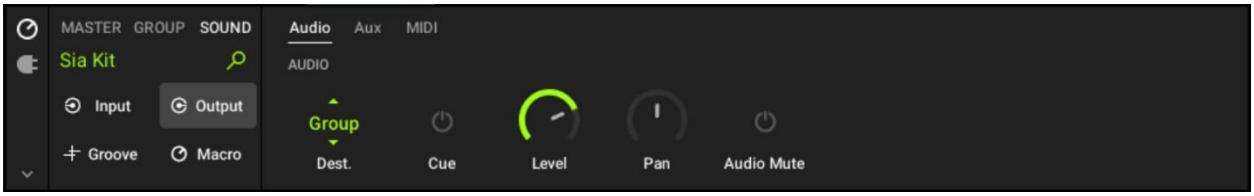
Vocals

Sia's vocal samples came professionally recorded and mixed with a polished sound optimized for pop and dance music. Fitting them into the project's acoustic, intimate aesthetic required refinement: how could I retain their definition while preventing them from becoming overbearing?

I applied the vocal preset on the dynamic compression plugin. This maintained the vocals' clarity and presence while fitting them seamlessly into the mix.

The dynamic compressor's faster attack and higher ratio effectively tames louder peaks, preventing them from dominating other elements while preserving the vocals' natural energy. With the threshold set to engage only on the most pronounced transients, the vocal lines remain expressive and dynamic. The medium-fast release time allowed the compressor to "breathe" with the music, adding subtle polish without introducing a compressed or artificial sound.

This approach, combined with the vocal parallel compression settings on the piano, allowed both elements to share the stereo space without frequency clashes. The vocals sit confidently in the mix, clear and articulate, complementing the warm, textured instrumentation while enhancing the overall cohesion of the track.



The vocals sit in the center with the piano; minor velocity adjustments in the Arranger helped with ensemble balance.

The vocal setting on the dynamic compressor kept the energy of the samples alive while taming some of their power.

Mastering

I continued with the same minimalist approach of using factory presets in the mastering phase as well. The goal was to refine the balance so all elements work together cohesively without sacrificing individual character. By emphasizing clarity and dynamics, the mastering process brought out the natural textures of the recording and enhanced the sense of depth and presence.

The result is a polished track that retains the raw, live quality established during mixing while achieving a finished, professional sound.

Reverb

I applied the "Museum" preset from the Raum plugin on the master channel to unify the track and give it a live, natural, outdoor feel.

This reverb setting blends a subtle pre-delay with minimal feedback to create a spatial echo and cohesive ambience. The high cut filter plays a crucial role in shaping the reverb's character, ensuring the echoes don't sound brittle or glassy. This maintains warmth and softness in the sound, preventing the reverb from becoming overwhelming or unnatural. The size parameter is set to suggest a large but finite space, emphasizing the outdoor feel of the production while maintaining a semi-enclosed quality.

All the instruments now play within the same open-ended, airy space, enhancing the realism and intimacy of the mix, as though the music unfolds in a deep canyon under a limitless sky.

Raum's Museum setting made all the elements sound like they were recorded together in the same outdoor space.

Bus Compression #1 (Glue)

To achieve a cohesive and polished mix, I applied the Solid Bus Comp plugin on the master channel.

The "Mix Glue" preset applies gentle compression to enhance the overall balance and provide natural cohesion, unifying the performance. It operates with a musical sensitivity, preserving clarity and punch across the frequency spectrum and maintaining transient detail so percussive elements like bongos retain their impact, while more delicate instruments like the Irish harp remain articulate and present.

The Solid Bus Comp plugin emulates the bus compressor from the famous SSL 4000 G series consoles of the late 80s.

Bus Compression #2 (Tube)

I applied the Supercharger plugin's "Mix Bus" setting to increase depth and presence.

The slight harmonic distortion inherent in the tube emulation enriches the tonal character of the mix, creating a polished and inviting sound. It balances percussive hits, melodic lines, and ambient elements to achieve added depth and warmth.

The Supercharger brings color and warmth to the mix with its tube-style compression.

Conclusions

Structured Approach

This project demonstrates the transformative power of goal-setting techniques like OKRs, SMART goals, and effective time management in achieving creative and technical success within tight constraints. I was able to move from concept to completion faster than anticipated, producing a track that not only met but exceeded my original objectives. By clearly defining my aims and breaking them down into manageable steps, I maintained focus and momentum throughout the process, balancing creativity with discipline.

One of the key factors in this success was the clarity provided by OKRs. By establishing specific objectives—such as creating an emotional soundscape and maintaining simplicity in the arrangement—and pairing them with measurable key results, I stayed aligned with my vision while making steady progress. SMART goals further refined this approach, ensuring that every task was specific, achievable, and time-bound. For example, setting a deadline for finalizing the muted piano sound by the end of Week 1 helped me maintain a sense of urgency and avoid perfectionism, a common trap in creative work.

Time management played a critical role as well. By allocating dedicated blocks of time to specific tasks, such as sound design, composition, and mixing, I avoided burnout and maintained a balanced workload. Using pre-existing resources—a sample pack for vocals, factory presets for the mixing and mastering plugins—streamlined the process without compromising the quality of the final track. These strategic decisions allowed me to focus on the artistic and emotional aspects of the music while still delivering a polished result ahead of schedule.

The results speak to the effectiveness of this structured approach. Each instrument, from the muted piano to the Irish harp and bongos, found its place in the mix, creating a cohesive and immersive soundscape. The track captures the emotional arc I set out to achieve—a cry for understanding answered by the uplifting embrace of acceptance—while maintaining the sparse, organic quality that aligns with the track's spiritual and natural themes.

In reflection, while additional time for tweaking settings might have yielded a more polished result, I am grateful for the constraints that encouraged swift decision-making and focus. The track I produced is not only a testament to the value of thoughtful planning and goal-setting but also a reminder that art often benefits from pressures that force us to trust our instincts and move forward. This case study reinforces the idea that clear objectives, disciplined execution, and the right tools can help grow ambitious creative ideas into efficiently produced and artistically satisfying completed works.

The results of this process can be heard here: "Ain't So" on Soundcloud.

Future Directions

This project offered valuable insights into both creative and technical processes, as well as the interplay between artistic vision and efficient execution. Moving forward, I plan to build on these experiences.

Expanding Instrumentation and Techniques

While the muted felt piano, Irish harp, and bongos created a cohesive soundscape, I'd like to experiment with a broader range of instrumentation. Introducing string sections, wind instruments, or modular synth elements could open new emotional and textural possibilities. Additionally, blending acoustic and electronic elements more overtly might enhance the dynamic range and complexity of my compositions.

Deeper Customization

This project leaned on presets for efficiency, but in future tracks, I aim to explore more custom settings in sound design and mixing. For example, crafting unique reverb tails or layering multiple compression techniques could yield a more personalized sonic signature. I also want to experiment further with unconventional applications of plugins—like the use of vocal parallel compression on the felt piano—to uncover new creative opportunities.

Enhancing Space

The "Museum" preset provided a compelling sense of space, but I'd like to delve deeper into spatial mixing techniques. Experimenting with 3D audio or binaural panning could evoke even more immersive listening experiences, particularly for tracks inspired by natural environments.

Exploring Narrative Structure

This track followed an emotional arc, but I'd like to explore more explicit storytelling in future compositions. Incorporating spoken word, evolving thematic motifs, or sung lyrics could create a deeper connection with listeners.

Pushing Time Constraints

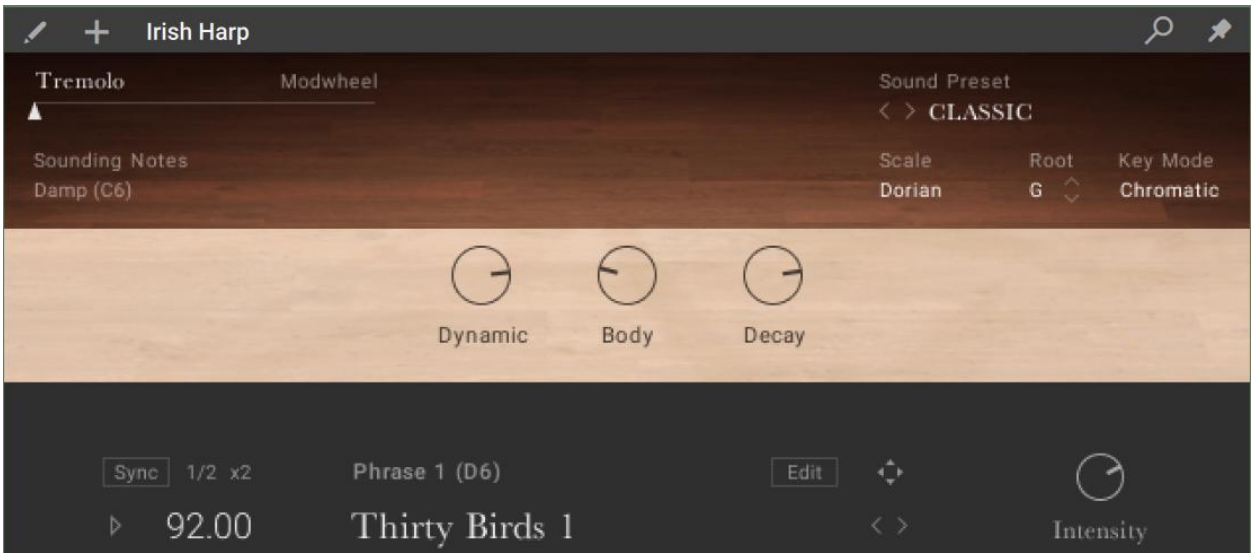
While working within a tight deadline encouraged focus and decisiveness, I'd like to test different creative workflows. Extending timelines for experimentation and iteration could lead to more ambitious projects, while maintaining deadlines for specific milestones might preserve momentum.

Integration of Field Recordings

Given the theme of outdoor spaces, incorporating field recordings—wind, bird calls, water, or even sounds around town—could enhance future projects. This would deepen the connection between the music and its inspirations, creating a richer and more immersive experience.

Full-Size VST Images

Irish Harp Settings



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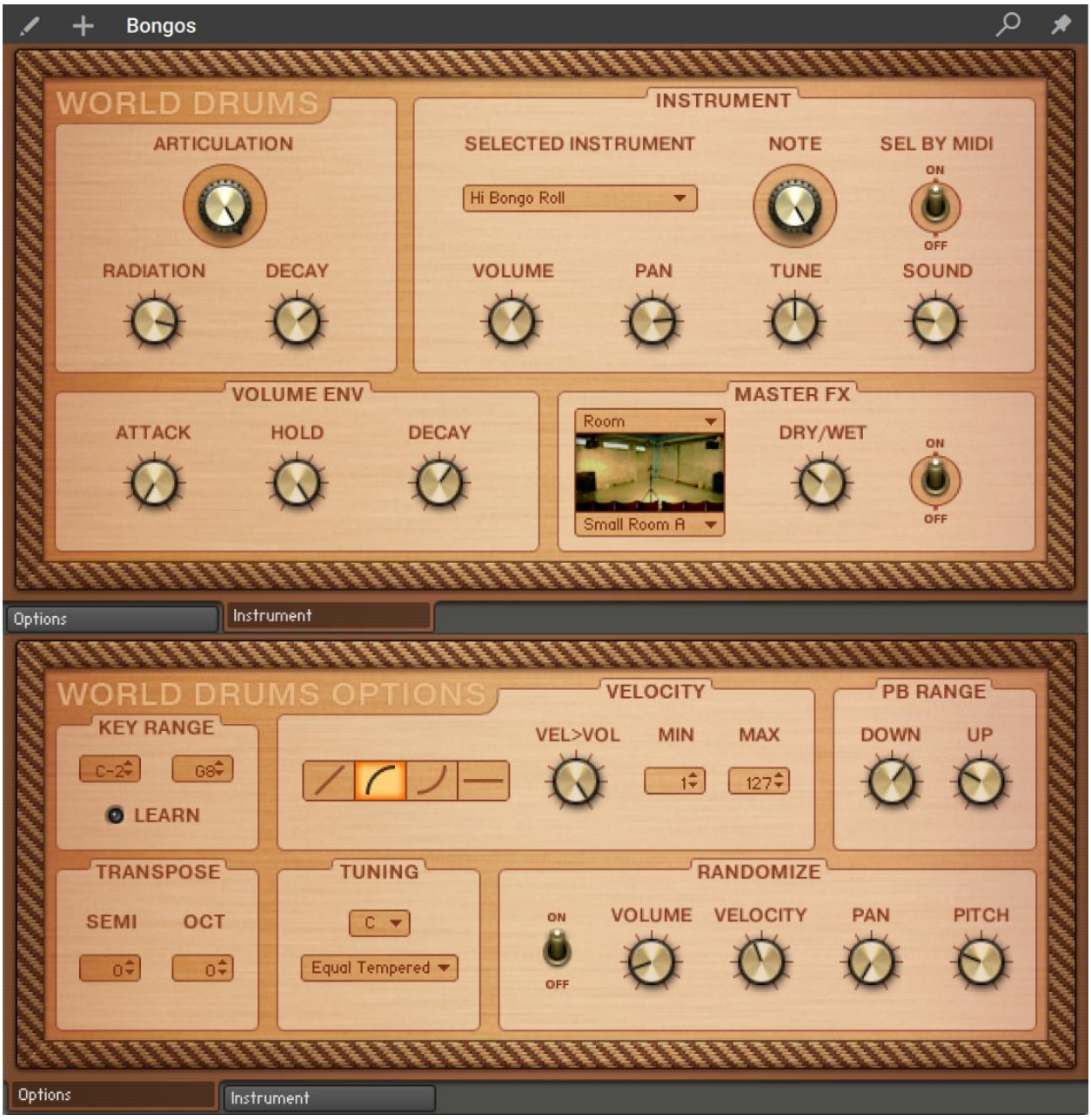
Bongos Settings



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Noire Felt Settings

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