

Q.

**Axel Kacoutié**

# **Sound Design Worksheet**



# Who is Axel?

A brief outline of who I am, what I've done and what I do

I am the Guardian's theme composer and Sound Designer for their daily news podcast called, Today in Focus. It took a long time for me to accept the title of "sound designer" as it was drilled into me when studying Music Production for Media at Ravensbourne University, that I should mainly focus on the music whilst students on the Sound Design course did their thing.

At that time I was solely focused on being a composer who wanted to write music for TV and film or collaborating with singer/songwriters. Fast forward to today I quickly understood that separating my skills would do me no good. It's my musical understanding of the rhythm of speech and mood in the delivery, that makes me understand how to pace an interview or build that sonic world that feels necessary when describing what it's like inside a black hole.

Music is sound and sound is music and it's the words that gel it all together. With that synthesis which I apply to my practice, it's led me on to create work for the BBC, Channel 4, NOWNESS, feature in the Barbican as well as win a number of awards both national and international.





# Working with a client

## What to expect?

Whether it's responding to a job submission or a commission has landed in your inbox, here are a couple of checkpoints you should always ask before saying yes.

## Timeline:

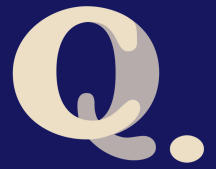
- When is the expected delivery of the final project? Get that deadline date in writing even if it's provisional.
- Does this include revisions? Your client may be also working for a client meaning there are more cooks in the kitchen. Iron out the expectations of how quickly feedback would be provided. You don't want to play a game of tennis, continuously sending new mixes over the net.

## “What's your rate?” vs “What's your budget?”

- In my experience, it's simpler to layout your rate first. It usually gets to the conversation about their budget sooner and you are figuratively as well as literally showing your worth.
- Remember it's not always about how quickly you can get the job done, it's also the technical expertise you've accrued that needs to be reflected. Spending all that time in forums troubleshooting wasn't for nothing!

## Technicalities:

- How will it be delivered to you?
- What editing software is everyone using and is it compatible with your Digital Audio Workstation (DAW)?

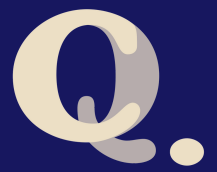


## Thoughtful Notes:

1. [UK Audio Network](#) has some good resources that you could consider for establishing your day rate.
2. Use your own discretion when negotiating, make sure it's always on your terms. In other words, if the client doesn't have the budget or offers less than you would normally accept, you are absolutely free to say no if it is a job that would only pay the bills. However, if it's an exciting project that you can't wait to get your hands on, I personally see no harm in saying yes every now and then. I still do now. Just don't make 'compromise' your first port of call.
3. Time will forever be more valuable than money. Burnout is real. Better to do 2 jobs really well, instead of 5 half-hearted.

## Glossary

- **Level mixing:** Making sure the volume of every track is as loud (or as quiet) as you want it to be. For example, if the music is overpowering the voice-over (too loud) then you'll need to balance that out.
- **Crossfades:** When two audio clips are fading into each other. Typically one is fading out and the other is fading in at the same time. When done on the same track, this effect will look like an 'X'.
- **Breath(es):**
  1. The inhale of air the speaker would do between two words or a sentence to keep talking.
  2. Occasionally used as another word for a beat (see pacing).

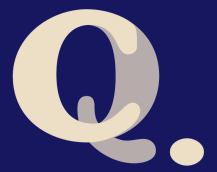


- **Pacing:** the speed at which whatever it is you're listening to is going. It's often referred to as three things:

1. **Words:** any speaker will have a rhythm, or flow when speaking. At times it may be noticeably fast or slow either by itself or in relation to the music or something else that you're mixing.
2. **Music:** Pacing may refer to the musical version of the word, tempo i.e. upbeat, downbeat.
3. **The whole podcast as a whole:** Perhaps the whole rhythm of the podcast feels too slow or there's not enough time to process the information that was given.

This is where giving an extra “beat” could be used to imply spacing the time between we hear one thing from the next. For example, the guest may have shared something deeply personal and instead of immediately placing music straight after she's finished, give it a moment. In other words, add some extra seconds between when they've finished and when we begin to hear the music. The desired effect is feeling like you're letting the production “breathe”.

- **Tempo:** the rate or speed the music is being played. (Occasionally used synonymously as pace)
- **EQ (Equalisation):** the balancing and/or manipulation of frequencies to any sound. It's generally used for two different purposes:
  1. **Mixing:** adjusting the frequency response to enhance (or lessen) certain frequencies, to the sound in order or to reflect the qualities of what we'd expect our ears to hear.  
For example, if a bass guitar doesn't feel as warm, present or deep, we could EQ the sound by boosting the lower frequencies to adjust this discrepancy.
  2. **Effects:** You're more likely to make something sound like it's underwater or coming through the phone manipulating the frequencies as such.  
A quick Google or Youtube of “how to EQ” will give you a great breakdown for your general or specific needs.
- **Compressing:** In the simplest way possible, it lessens the dynamic range of a sound. In other words, depending on the settings, it can make the louder bits less loud and raise the quieter bits slightly more.



- **Master and mixing:**

**Mixing** is the part in post-production (after recording what you need and edited down) that involves making sure all the working parts of your podcast sound as you like it. This includes, EQ, compressing, automating volume (music and vocals), panning (Left/Right) Reverb etc.

1. **Mastering:** primarily used in music and often confused for a final mixdown, is not the same. To officially master a song (or podcast) it's sent off separately to a mastering company to work their magic. They check for consistency, prepare it for distribution and unify the sound of an album.
  2. There's a strong argument to do the same for podcasts, as the same polishing is something your final mix could benefit from but it does require time and money. The best alternative is to focus on the loudness of your mix. A good read on setting loudness can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- **Bussing:** a path where you can send one or more audio signals to a particular destination. It can be used for many things but a common bus route is: sending a vocal or music track in your mix to a "reverb bus" meaning that if you send that signal to that, it will sound like it's in the reverb you selected. The greater the signal the greater the effect.
  - **Reverb:** the reflection of a sound off a surface. This occurs naturally when you enter a space such as a hall. The distance of the reflected sound and quality of surface determines how the sound 'sounds'. All this to say, adding reverb on a particular track changes the "room" where the sound is heard. For example, from a well padded studio (original) to a gigantic arena (added).
    1. **Reverb tail:** the lasting seconds of how long you hear the trail (echo) of a sound before it fades out.
  - **Noise Reduction:** explained in the RX plugins.
  - **Noise Gate:** Not hearing anything under a certain frequency. This is useful for cancelling out hisses or low level rumbles between words or during a breath.
  - **Muddy and Bright sounds:**

A **muddy** sound means there's not enough clarity or definition in a sound. Often they'd be in the same bracket of frequencies like a bass guitar and a kick drum. Your podcast could sound muddy if, for example, a deep bassy



voice is paired with music with a heavy bass or deep drone rumble. It will sound muffled or distorted and not pleasant to the ear.

A **bright mix** is a sound that is too sharp, harsh or crisp. Frequencies that could jar the ear the same way like really loud static noise would. Be wary of this as this can cause listener fatigue sooner.

- **Listener Fatigue:** caused by listening to audio either too loud (or bright) for an extended period of time. Be sure to rest your ears by taking regular breaks.
- **Sound Design:** it varies greatly depending on the industry. Theatre can be different from film which is different from podcasting. In a podcast I liken it to “bringing to life” the production. The editing process are the nuts and bolts, the bare bones of what the narrative is. The sound design is where you really think about how the production is experienced.

It's the decision of not using music over picking the right song. It's being literal with the scene described, by sourcing or recording the sound of a train station because that's what your contributor talks about first as opposed to compelling “train music”.

Those are the subjective/creative elements but it also includes the technical sides defined in the glossary above.

- **Izotope RX7/8**

A powerful audio repair toolkit that has features such as de-noise (noise reduction that helps reduce background noise) and de-reverb that makes the audio source sound less echoey. Of course one should always focus on optimising the conditions of recording (e.g a quiet space) but this is the best go-to product to have when the audio quality doesn't go to plan. Always keep an eye out for sales. If you're not in a rush, this bundle is often discounted!

- **Gullfoss**

An adaptive EQ that optimises the sound in real time. What that basically means is that it brings a real natural sounding clarity to the mix depending on how you set it. The only downside is that you could get addicted/lazy with it and apply it to every track. I wouldn't recommend using it if you don't know how to EQ confidently. You won't know what to fix if you don't know what you're doing! There is a nice breakdown [here](#)



# Q&A with Axel

**How do I approach sound editing work? Where does a sound designer start first?**

**Useful sites to have profiles on:**

- Soundcloud
- LinkedIn
- The Dots
- Twitter
- YouTube
- ALL LINKED
- TO A SIMPLE PORTFOLIO WEBSITE

Have you listened to radio/podcast productions you've enjoyed? Check out the credits, who produced it? Look them up, say hi, introduce yourself and make yourself available. You are more likely to get a response from independent companies. Best to start small to build a working relationship and potentially a reliable source of work.

**Where can a sound designer find out more information about Creative Commons Licensing?**

I refer to [this](#) religiously if ever I'm in doubt about the licensing.

**What are stings?**

Short musical phrases used in radio, television and film as a form of punctuation. This can be used to move the story along or to identify a particular voice, moment or character.



## **What makes a good sonic mark? Do I need one?**

Not necessarily but if you wanted to? One word, consistency. If it can be helped and you can stick to a particular style of music or genre, that would help with the identity of the production.

For example, if you selected a hip-hop track that has a vinyl crackle in it, task yourself to source more tracks that have that similar sound or “old school” feel.

## **What other Digital Workstations are out there for a Sound Designer to use and their price points?**

**EG; Adobe Audition, Pro Tools, Garage Band etc**

### **Long Answer:**

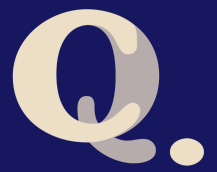
We're living in a world now where all DAWs are becoming more powerful and really the only difference are the shortcuts and the look of the interface. I strongly believe it's a myth there's one true one to work with and only what production companies have arbitrarily decided to use given the knowledge, experience and advice given at the time.

There's a definite advantage to familiarising with more than one. For example I know how to use Reason, Logic, Cubase. I'm less comfortable with Pro Tools and Audition but confident enough to know that I'd still be able to mix. I'll just be slower because I'm figuring out where's what.

### **Short Answer:**

Sound designing on the same DAW that the producers are working on saves a lot of trouble. It's as easy as making a copy of their project and mixing away. For that reason, here are the programs I often find out people are using:

**Audition and Reaper.**



## Could you do a quick dummies guide to laying music?

- Learn the energy of the music. Where does it sound busy vs mellow? Use the busy moments to establish the song, mood and the mellow moments for voice overs to come in.
- Learn the structure of the song. Is it ABABC? Or ABAB? Familiarise yourself with it and learn to manipulate it. For example, delay the anticipation by a couple seconds of the transition from section B back to A. It just keeps things interesting.
- Get rhythmic. Most music you can nod your head to. Follow that natural rhythm to help you:
  - Know when to lay vocals over it (narration, clips etc.)
  - Loop a particular section to hold that energy
  - End a musical sequence.
  - It doesn't need to be complicated. Sometimes one pulsing note heard 4 times is all you need. Especially for transitions

## What music libraries do you use?

- Epidemicsound <https://www.epidemicsound.com/>
- Blue Dot Sessions <https://www.sessions.blue/>
- Artlist <https://artlist.io/>
- Soundstripe <https://www.soundstripe.com/>
- Musicbed <https://www.musicbed.com/>

## Where are good places to find sound effects for my podcast?

- Soundly is probably my favourite and most recommended, affordable library. It has a very simple drag and drop method and searching sounds works just as well as Googling. It also integrates the free to use sounds from Freesound in the search which is an added bonus.
- Epidemic Sound is a great resource. Great value for money for high quality sound effects.