

# The Death Of Dynamics

CHRIS BINNS EXPLAINS HOW AND WHY CHANGES IN LIFESTYLES AND TECHNOLOGY ARE SPOILING THE DYNAMIC RANGE OF MUSIC RECORDING

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Much heated discussion has recently taken place within the recording world on the subject of 'loudness'. More specifically, the music industry's desire to record and master material at ever increasing levels, so that a particular CD or track will stand out from the rest of the crowd. This has resulted in a fiercely competitive situation, particularly in the commercial pop world where radio play and downloads form a major part of the listening medium, and different artists' recordings are played alongside one another. On a superficial level the human brain perceives that the louder track is better or more exciting, and this ultimately leads to increased sales of that particular piece of music. Which, in the world of commercial pop, is of course the most significant factor.

The downside of pushing up the average level is that sound quality inevitably has to suffer, to a degree that might be tolerable on a transistor radio, but is unacceptable on even a modest hi fi system. The core of the issue here is not so much about loudness, but about dynamic range – and losing it.

It would be easier to write this off were it just a phenomenon that occurred with (for want of a better description) top twenty records, but it's a disease that has increasingly infiltrated all types of music to some extent, and although it might not be quite as acute with classical and jazz recordings as it is with mainstream rock, it's still very much in evidence. For anyone who has listened to CDs by contemporary bands in the last couple of years, the results are painfully clear, and it is also significant that it afflicts quite a lot of re-mastered recordings that have been appearing lately – even more surprising, given that the original vinyl is often around to serve as some form of reference.

Loud? Oh yes. The volume control goes down a number of notches, in an effort to make this offensive, dense ball of sound tolerable. And it is then that you realise that nothing much in the way of musical expression that can fight its way out of this murky cage, and all the energy that the musicians have put into a performance or recording has been trampled down to something almost as bland as white noise. It's a bit like trying to watch television with the contrast turned down: