

Hans Zimmer On The Hans Zimmer Sound

By [Admin](#) / March 1, 2012

Hans Zimmer explains how he gets the Hans Zimmer sound.

On January 18, 2012, a question was posted on the *VI-Control forum* as to how could an individual get the big roomy Hans Zimmer sound when mixing and mastering. On February 16, around 2AM PST, Hans Zimmer surprised everyone by posting his answer to the question, which you'll find below. We thank Hans Zimmer for taking the time to give such an in-depth answer.



...To answer the original question a little bit, with some random thoughts:

Start with a concept of your sonic world. Limit your palette to fit the sonic world you're trying to create – you can get lost and never write a note if you scroll through 1000 presets on average sounding synth. I got rid of most VSTi's and just work with the ones who's audio engines have real depth and quality, like *Zebra* and *Diva*, or the *Virus*. And yes, I have a lot of great old analogue synths that I bought for next to nothing when everyone ran out to buy a DX7.

Before writing a single note, my team and I spend a lot of time programming new sounds, sampling new instruments.

If you want things to sound big, make sure you limit your upper dynamic range. All instruments – especially percussion – sound bigger when played relatively softly. You can always turn it up. When you hit drums too hard, or any instrument is played too loud, they tend to sound only bright and thin and pingy.

I write very strategically for the spaces I record in. For instance, the Hall at Air Studio has a gallery, so I put my horns up there above the orchestra in *Batman*. The space you have people perform in is as important as the quality of their instruments. Players respond to good acoustics and will give you a better, more committed performance. The same goes for sampling. A dead room gives an artificially suppressed performance. It's no fun playing in a dead room. Especially

brass players like “using” the reverb in the room to give them time to catch their breath between notes, so they’ll have the courage and strength to play the next note stronger. I like recording in churches and halls, not studios and artificial reverb. Two thousand years of architects like Brunelleschi figuring out how to amplify a sound beats the 20 years we’ve had of fake reverb development. But if your budget is a bit tight, try a school auditorium. Or an empty warehouse. Use your imagination. You belong to the proud fraternity of poor, starving artists. People expect you to ask them for favors in the name of the great piece of art you are about to unleash upon the world Smile

I got pretty good ears (I just had them tested...I got the frequency response of a 20 year old. Just luck. I’ve been listening to music in my studio too loud every day for 30 years). But the biggest thing is to learn how to listen analytically.

That takes time.

I learned from really good producers and engineers. Two months with Trevor Horn on a bass drum sound will either drive you crazy, or really make you understand the damn thing (I’m not sure which side I’ve ended up on...). I know how to engineer, I know what all those knobs do, but I know that Alan Meyerson has a gift and is better at it than me. But at least I can communicate to him – very specifically – what and how I hear my piece.

I think there is nothing worse for a composer to be at the mercy of technology, the players or a recording engineer.

It’s your piece of music. No one understands it better. (I always wonder...I grew up (?) working on Neves and Trident “A”s, Harrisons, etc. So I know why I pick a 1073 for certain sounds or a DBX 160 in my UAD plug-ins. If you never used the hardware, how do you know?).

I always have my monitors set to the same level. It’s the only way I know I’m not kidding myself. I don’t use very expensive speakers, I just use what I really know – and can get replaced easily.

Yes, we built our own sampler, because I can hear the difference, but the commercial stuff is getting better. And my career was just fine when I was only using Akai S1000s with 8 megs of ram.

I’m a bad player, but a good programmer. I’m forever trying to explain to great players that want to become composers that they need to treat learning and practicing the computer as seriously as they practiced their guitar or piano.

The computer is a musical instrument and the more virtuosic you get on that, the better you can express your ideas.

The moment I start writing, I start mixing.

Since I don’t write on paper, I spend a long time making each note and sound convey the right emotion. It helps later with the live musicians. I can be very specific in my language (and I use English, not Italian) to convey to them why I want a note or phrase played a certain way. I don’t make changes on the scoring stage, I don’t let directors make changes with the musicians there. The recording is about getting a performance, not re-writing the cue. Nothing sounds worse than a bunch of bored musicians that had to wait while someone’s changed an arrangement.

Most of the stuff I use on a daily basis is off the shelf software – and not the really expensive stuff, either. The best DAW is the one you're used to.

I don't understand why people don't sample their own stuff. I've been (more than once) asked to judge "young composer" competitions. After a while you can't hear the music for the sameness of the sample libraries. I wonder how directors or producers can tell the difference.

And no, you can't sound like me. You are not me, you are you. Just like I can't sound like any other composer. Not with any degree of authenticity.

I hardly ever get a temp in the movies I work on (Chris Nolan will not temp with anything that's not written for the movie. That whole Francis Lai thing is bull. I'm a fan, but I had never heard that score before. And if the rude ignoramus who was trying to hide behind a question mark when he called me a thief had actually analyzed the score a bit, he'd have noticed that the whole thing was based on the notes C and D. Not just that riff. It's a fairly straight forward musical tension device. Seconds, anyone? And the rhythmic figure was – on purpose – a cliché. People can take large chunks of dissonance if you put a groove with it...)

I can get obsessively lost in sound design and just spend 4 days making one pathetic little sound...But it helps me think the whole piece through...

And I procrastinate from writing by answering this question...

*This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.
The original thread can be found at the VI-Control music forum.*