

trakmeter

Loudness meter for correctly setting up
tracking and mixing levels



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1 Digital recordings

The digital revolution brought a lot of advantages to the field of audio processing such as higher fidelity, less noise and non-degrading copies. Unfortunately, however, digital audio also introduced some problems of its own.

Whereas the analog domain is relatively inert against levels exceeding 0 dB FS (overdriving some analog equipment actually sounds good), the digital domain punishes even small transgressions into forbidden territory with harsh clipping.

And while digital audio can be transferred without loss in quality, it is degraded by each and every calculation, be it a simple change in level, equalisation or a fancy effect. Crossing domains from analog to digital and *vice versa* leads to additional degradation. Finally, changes in bit depth and sample rate, jitter and inter-sample peaks are nothing for the weak of heart.

However, most of these obstacles can be overcome easily by proper gain staging, minimising the crossing of domains and choosing appropriate bit depth and sample rates. If you also learn how to properly test and operate your equipment, you're well on your way to pure audio bliss...

1.1 Gain staging

Professional analog audio equipment is designed to be run at a nominal level of **+4 dBu** ($1.23 V_{\text{RMS}}$) and leaves a headroom for peaks of about 20 dB. This in turn is consistent with the maximum crest factor of analog audio signals.

Thus, driving all analog audio equipment at +4 dBu ensures an optimal signal-to-noise ratio while preventing clipping and keeping transients intact. The process of setting audio devices to run at optimal input and output levels is called gain staging.

Now let's transfer gain staging to the digital domain. As the maximum crest factor of analog audio signals amounts to 20 dB, we have to adjust the headroom accordingly. To keep with international standards, we'll follow the [EBU R68-2000](#) recommendation and set our average input and output levels to **−18 dB FS RMS**.

Again, this ensures a good signal-to-noise ratio while preventing clipping. It also drives (most of) your digital audio equipment and plug-ins at the “sweet spot”.

Another recommendation is that peak levels should not exceed **−9 dB FS** (EBU R68-2000) during tracking, leaving enough space for inter-sample peaks. Inter-sample peaks are audio peaks that lie *in between* two successive samples and may lead to unpredictable clippings during digital-to-analog conversion.

1.2 Digital audio myths

I can almost hear you: you have heard that digital recordings should be performed at peak levels close to but not exceeding 0 dB FS (“digital full-scale”). Heck, this misinformation has ended up in the manuals of some professional audio equipment. But for the reasons given above it is plain wrong.

Let’s look at the math for bit depths of 16 bit: even if your recordings peak at -18 dB FS and you discard the least significant bit (some people claim that it mostly consists of errors), this still leaves you with a signal-to-noise ratio of 72 dB. That is about what you can expect from the best professional analog tape machines and recording desks!

Or take my professional 16-bit hard disk recorder (Otari PD-80): its analog inputs and outputs are aligned to “+4 dBu (-15 dB from digital full-scale)”. The manufacturer has even marked this level on the meter bridge (small triangle on the photo). Even if the mark is only useful for audio alignment, given that it sits on a peak meter...



1.3 Introducing traKmeter

Most digital audio equipment sadly only has peak meters. This is readily understandable as you want to avoid digital

clippings by all means. However, the lack of average meters makes correct gain staging almost impossible.

For gain staging, you need average meters or – even better – a combination of peak and average meters. And this is where **traKmeter** comes in.

2 traKmeter

traKmeter consists of two meters, a peak meter on top and an average meter below. Both meters have an area of green LEDs that is enclosed by first yellow and then red LEDs.

You may have noticed that the average meter's green area is centred around the **−18 dB FS RMS** mark. This number should be vaguely familiar. Remember, it corresponds to the optimal average audio level in the digital domain.

A fully lit yellow LED on the top end of the peak meter corresponds to a level of **−9 dB FS**. Again, this number should be familiar: peak levels in the digital domain shouldn't exceed this level.

Thus, by keeping meter readout in the green areas and from entering the yellow and red areas on top of each meter, you will automatically track at optimal audio levels.

2.1 Tracking with traKmeter

Open up an instance of **traKmeter** and set it up so that it measures your audio input. That can be done either by

starting the standalone version and connecting it to one or more input channels of your sound card, or by inserting a plug-in instance into an input channel of your digital audio workstation.

In the second case, take care that your digital audio workstation doesn't add additional headroom and that no processing takes place before **traKmeter**. This can be ascertained by feeding calibration tones into your sound card or by directly comparing the readouts of standalone and plug-in version.

Now, feed the signal you want to record into an audio input channel and adjust its level using **traKmeter**. Try to set the input level so that transients reach **−18 dB FS RMS** on the average meter. Make sure that the peak level never exceeds **−9 dB FS**. In case both conditions cannot be met simultaneously, adjust the peak level only.

2.2 Mixing with traKmeter

When you get someone else's tracks for mixing, chances are that they have been recorded far too hot. While you can't change that, you might want to adjust them to optimal loudness so that your upcoming mix is not ruined.

If the original recordings were made with poor equipment and you have the time, it may be worth to **re-record** all tracks through a really good preamp and adjust their loudness at the same time. The result can be stunning!

Another option is to insert **traKmeter** on each channel as first plug-in, enable the “Mixing” button and adjust volume using the gain knob. When traKmeter is closed, the meters aren’t updated, so the plug-in uses less system resources. On slow computers, however, use traKmeter to find the correct gain and then exchange it against a gain plug-in.

In any case, mixing levels will now be much lower than what you are used to. This can easily be corrected by either adjusting the output gain of your subgroups or by inserting a gain plug-in in your master track.

To preserve all transients, the final loudness of your mix should stay within **–20 dB FS RMS** and **–16 dB FS RMS**. Remember that smashed transients will be gone forever, whereas you can always bring up the volume during mastering! My plug-in **K-Meter** and its K-20 scale may help you with setting correct mixing levels.

3 Recording tips

Over the years, I have accumulated a couple of recording tips. You may not know some of them, so read ahead...

Use a good preamp. “Good” doesn’t mean your preamp has to have a lot of channels or features. To the contrary! Go for a simple design and invest your money in professional quality instead. Recordings made with a good preamp make mixing much easier – the tracks simply seem to fall into place.

Use the preamp’s gain control. If necessary, crank up the preamp to yield the needed output level. Do not fear the preamp’s internal noise – making up for low gain in later stages will result in even more noise! Also see [section 1.1](#).

Avoid unbalanced equipment. Run all signals on balanced lines with a nominal level of +4 dBu. If you can’t, use DI boxes or transformers and read the previous sentence again.

Use short audio chains. All equipment adds noise or may otherwise degrade audio, so keep your audio chains as short as possible.

For example, instead of routing your mixer between preamp and hard disk recorder, connect it to the hard disk recorder's *outputs*. This simple change can lead to much better recordings (especially with cheap mixers) and you'll still be able to hear yourself and other tracks during recording.

Record at lower levels. Record digital audio at **−18 dB FS RMS** with peak levels not exceeding **−9 dB FS**. For an in-depth explanation, see [section 1.1](#).

Record in mono. Most audio sources do not contain stereo information that is useful in a mixing context (notable exceptions are audience recordings, string sections and sometimes pianos). The pseudo-stereo effects of some synthesisers may even cause phasing issues in the mixing stage.

Recording these sources in stereo will only waste space and make you miserable during mixing. The solution is to record them in mono.

Use high bit depths. Do yourself a favour and record at 24 bit instead of 16 bit. The additional bits provide an incredible amount of extra detail and you can record at lower levels without losing information. When properly dithered, changing to a lower bit depth even preserves some of that detail.

Also, if you edit audio files or apply effects, calculation errors are inevitable. At 24 bit, however, these artifacts are 48 dB lower in level (and thus inaudible) compared to 16 bit audio files.

Your digital audio workstation's bus should use at least 32 bits to avoid accumulation of the above-mentioned artifacts.

Avoid sample rate conversion. Sample rate conversion usually degrades audio (especially small changes of a few kHz), so try to record at the target sample rate. For instance, tracking for a CD release should be carried out at 44.1 kHz instead of 48 kHz.

There are of course exceptions to the rule, for instance you may prefer to track on a professional DAT machine (48 kHz) when your only other choice is using a consumer audio interface.

For tracking at higher sample rates, it pays to use exact multiples of your target sample rate (such as 88.2 kHz instead of 96 kHz) if your hardware and software permit. Please note that some professionals actually advise against using higher sample rates due to the possible build-up of noise beyond 20 kHz. It is also much more demanding on your computer, audio equipment and plug-ins – and may not be worth the hassle. Try changing from recording at 16 bit to 24 bit first.

Finally, only use professional software for sample rate conversion. This is by no means a trivial task.

Concentrate on recording. When tracking, try to not interfere with the flow of the session. This is easily done by keeping editing and mixing to the bare minimum.

For example, I currently track using an old hard disk recorder, as digital audio workstations tend to distract me too much.

Do not fix things later. A bad recording is a bad recording is a bad recording. You can't really "fix it in the mix". So tools like Auto-Tune, extreme EQ or the edit button should be seen as a last resort. It's easy to kill all of a track's vibe in the process.

Instead, record a few more takes. Treat your room (acoustically and in terms of positive vibe). Experiment with microphone placement. Try everything you can to help the musicians perform better. Maybe you even have to look for better musicians...

4 Installation

In order to use the pre-compiled binaries, simply extract the traKmeter files from the downloaded archive. For the VST plug-in, you'll then have to move the extracted files to your plug-in folder (~/.vst, C:\Program Files\Steinberg\VstPlugins\ or the like).

5 Controls

TO DO!

6 Meters

6.1 Average level meter

The average level meter uses an averaging period of 1024 samples. This meter exhibits a completely flat frequency response.

On rising levels, it takes 10 ms for the meter to reach 99 % of the final reading. The meter then switches to a linear fall time of 6 dB/s.

Peak levels will be held for 10 s and then fall with a speed of 8.67 dB/s.

6.2 Peak level meter

The peak level meter also possesses a completely flat frequency response. It has a rise time of one sample and a fall time of 8.67 dB/s.

Peak levels will be held until the meter is reset.

6.3 Signal meter

The blue signal meter detects peak levels of -60 dB FS and above. The meter has a rise time of one sample and falls to 99 % of the final reading in 2 s.

7 Validation

TO DO!

8 Final words

I want to thank **Rickard** of Interfearing Sounds for asking me how to use K-Meter for tracking. This question and the following thoughts really got traKmeter started. I'd like to thank **bram@smartelectronix** for his code to calculate logarithmic rise and fall times. I must also thank the **beta testers** and **users of traKmeter** for sending kind words, suggestions and bug reports. Finally, I want to thank the **open source community** for making all of this possible.

Although coding traKmeter has been a lot of fun, it has also been a lot of work. So if you like traKmeter, why not send me a short email and tell me so? Write a few words about yourself, send suggestions for future updates or volunteer to create a nice theme – do whatever you like!

Here is my email address (please remove “-nospam”):

"Martin Zuther" <code-nospam@mpzuther.de>

Thanks for using free software. I hope you'll enjoy it!

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A How to build traKmeter

A.1 Preparing GNU/Linux

To build traKmeter yourself, I recommend setting up a chroot environment. This is fast and easy to do on Debian-based systems and might save you a **lot** of trouble. At the time of writing, I'm using Linux Mint 13 (Maya), but the procedure should be similar on your distribution of choice. If you aim at generic 64-bit compilation, simply change i386 to amd64.

To install the necessary packages and install the chroot base system, execute the following statements (please change <http://ftp.de.debian.org/debian/> to a [mirror](#) close to you):

```
sudo apt-get install debootstrap schroot
```

```
sudo mkdir -p /srv/chroot/squeeze_i386
sudo debootstrap --variant=buildd \
  --arch i386 squeeze \
  /srv/chroot/squeeze_i386 \
  http://ftp.de.debian.org/debian/
```

Running debootstrap will take some time. Meanwhile, add the following lines to `/etc/schroot/schroot.conf` (make sure you remove all preceding white space so that each line begins in the first column):

```
[squeeze-i386]
description=Debian 6 (Squeeze, i386)
directory=/srv/chroot/squeeze_i386
personality=linux
root-users=username
type=directory
users=username,another_user
```

Please make the necessary changes to `username`. You may also add additional users, like `another_user`. In case you are setting up a 32-bit chroot environment on a 64-bit system, you'll also have to change `linux` to `linux32`.

When debootstrap is done, log in as superuser:

```
schroot -c squeeze-i386 -u root
```

to install a few packages. The packages `less` and `vim` are optional, but might come in handy:

```
apt-get update
apt-get -y install bash-completion libasound2-dev \
    libjack-jackd2-dev mesa-common-dev xorg-dev
apt-get -y install less vim
apt-get clean
```

If you like bash completion, you might also want to open the file `/etc/bash.bashrc` and unquote these lines:

```
# enable bash completion in interactive shells
[two more lines...]
fi
```

Finally, log out and log in as normal user:

```
schroot -c squeeze-i386
```

Congratulations – after you have installed the dependencies (see below), you are ready to build traKmeter.

A.2 Dependencies

A.2.1 premake4

Importance: required

Version: 4.3

License: BSD

Homepage: industriousone.com/premake

Installation

Place the binary somewhere in your PATH. Depending on your platform, you should run *premake* using the scripts `build/run_premake.sh` or `build/run_premake.bat`.

A.2.2 JUCE library

Importance: required

Version: 1.53

License: GPL v2

Homepage: www.rawmaterialsoftware.com/juce.php

Installation

Extract the archive into the directory `libraries/juce`.

A.2.3 Virtual Studio Technology SDK

Importance: optional

Version: 2.4

License: proprietary

Homepage: ygrabit.steinberg.de

Installation

Just extract the archive into the directory `libraries/vstsdk2.4`.

A.2.4 Audio Streaming Input Output SDK

Importance: optional
Version: 2.2
License: proprietary
Homepage: ygrabit.steinberg.de

Installation

Simply extract the archive into the directory `libraries/asiosdk2.2`.

A.2.5 Artistic Style

Importance: optional
Version: 2.01
License: LGPL v3
Homepage: astyle.sourceforge.net

This application formats the code so it looks more beautiful and consistent. Thus, you only have to install it if you plan to help me with coding traKmeter.

Installation

Place the binary somewhere in your PATH. Depending on your platform, you should run *astyle* using the scripts `src/format_code.sh` or `src/format_code.bat`.

A.3 Building on GNU/Linux

After preparing the dependencies, start your chroot environment, change into the directory `build` and execute

```
./run_premake.sh  
make config=CFG TARGET
```

where `CFG` is one of `debug32`, `debug64`, `release32` and `release64`, and `TARGET` is one of `linux_standalone_stereo`, `linux_standalone_multi`, `linux_vst_stereo` and `linux_vst_multi`.

The compiled binaries will end up in the directory `bin`.

A.4 Building on Microsoft Windows

After preparing the dependencies, change into the directory `build` and execute

```
./run_premake.bat
```

Then change into the directory `build/windows/vs20xx`, open the project file with the corresponding version of Visual C++ and build the project.

The compiled binaries will end up in the directory `bin`.

B GNU General Public License

Version 3, 29 June 2007

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