

Masters of the net

Fancy getting your tunes mastered by the same people who have worked on tracks by Oasis, Kasabian, The White Stripes and Madonna? Well now you can, thanks to the internet...

Music technology, eh? Sometimes it seems like the fastest moving of all technologies. First synths made it possible to create new sounds, then samplers meant that everyone could go wild with existing ones, then computers made it possible for absolutely everyone to make music. And now, thanks to the internet, anyone in the world can have that music mastered by the experts. Yes, some of the biggest mastering engineers and studios – who have

worked with everyone from Oasis to Depeche Mode – are now offering their services via the web to anyone prepared to pay for them, record deal or not. Excellent news for all musicians, then...

The logistics

But is it really as simple as uploading your half-baked track to a mastering company's server for them to finish cooking and return to you as a fantastic hit record? No, none of them claim to

iMastering/Metropolis

www.imastering.co.uk

COST:
£75 per track. Vinyl £100 per side

TURNAROUND TIME:
Within five days

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS AND OTHER SERVICES OFFERED:
"Metropolis also offers DVD authoring and graphic design, and has its own TV and video production company, as well as a TV post facility"

PRE-UPLOAD ADVICE:
Clients should send the highest resolution files possible, and not data-compressed (ie, MP3)

STUDIO HIGHLIGHTS:
SADIE DSD8 mastering workstation; Prism A/D and D/A converters; custom built desks; Sontec, Maselec, Summit and Manley outboard; digital processing by Weiss and TC Electronic; customised Neumann Lathes; PMC BB5-XBD monitors

Metropolis Studios in Chiswick, London, is a highly respected complex with a long list of experienced engineers. It's had tunes by Robbie Williams, Madonna, Oasis and The Prodigy through its doors, so there's clearly no shortage of expertise here. The online service, iMastering, is the costliest of those we're looking at, however. Engineers include Tony Cousins (who's mastered albums by David Sylvian and Massive Attack) and Tim Young (Sugababes and DJ Shadow).

The service is very easy to use. Register online to get a password, choose a product, and then pay for the service

before uploading your track and filling in an online form for the engineer with specific requests relating to your music. The company promises that the track will be mastered within five days (ours took just two), you're informed by email when it's ready, and you can have it sent back on CD or via download. If you're not happy with the results, iMastering will gladly redo the track free of charge for the first revision.

We were certainly impressed with the job iMastering did on our track. As you can hear on the DVD, it's loud but not too bright, has a pleasing colour to it and is a lot warmer than the original – just what we asked for. You don't get to find out which engineer mastered the track, which makes it a bit impersonal, but the facility promise that an experienced engineer is in on every session. The company are also launching a new service called Named iMastering, where you choose your engineer for £150 per track. It might sound like a lot, but while it's pretty cool to be able to say, 'Metropolis mastered my track', think of the kudos that comes from saying it was mastered by the engineer who did, say, Massive Attack's *Blue Lines*.



About
Products
FAQ
Contact

About iMastering

iMastering allows you to easily and securely order unattended mastering sessions at Metropolis, London – recently named as one of the world's top 3 mastering plants.

To get started [choose the products](#) and number of tracks you require. Once you have logged in and confirmed your payment details you can upload or post us your tracks.



Metropolis, The Power House, 70 Chiswick High Road, London, W4 1SY, United Kingdom
[Home](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Credits](#)

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▲ If it's good enough for the Material Girl, it's good enough for us

WHAT THEY SAY

"Easy to use, highly secure website with guaranteed high quality mastering"

WHAT WE SAY

The priciest of the bunch, but you are getting quality – just look at the iconic names who have benefited from the Metropolis touch...

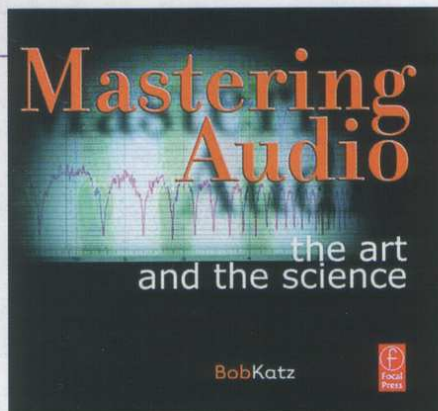
iMastering's top mastering tip

"Don't attempt to use any mastering plug-ins, or to over-compress or over-limit prior to mastering. When mixing, use other music you like the sound of as reference. If you do want to make it as loud as possible for impressive playbacks, then send an uncompressed copy for us to master from. We'll still be able to make it loud but with far less distortion and unpleasant artifacts."

What, exactly, is mastering?

After you've mixed your music, you might think it sounds great, but unless you really know your stuff the chances are it won't sound as sparkly, professional or loud as your favourite music does on CD. Don't worry, though, this is normal! Your track now needs to be mastered, whereupon processing such as EQ, multiband compression and loudness maximisation are applied to the mix. These give the track colour, punch and volume – that elusive professional sheen, in other words.

You can, of course, do this yourself – there are numerous guides out there to help you (including this very magazine), and it's quite tempting to do so – you can at least then claim to have produced your track entirely on your own. However, getting another set of ears in at this stage is a great idea – arguably, a crucial idea, in fact. It's good to get someone who can bring a bit of fresh subjectivity and expertise to the proceedings, and that's where these mastering houses come in.



▲ Subject matter: if you plan to take the DIY approach, make sure you read up on the subject first



turn your tunes into hits, nor will they make your tune sound good if it isn't mixed well in the first place (turd polishing is *not* on the menu). What you will get is a tune with added presence

and level, not to mention a more professional sound.

With all this in mind, we chose a cross section of companies (in terms of facilities, price and location) to test their

services – but don't forget that there are more out there, with new ones cropping up all the time. Thanks to their proliferation, pricing has become very competitive, starting at £40 a track.

Sounds too good to be true? Time to find out. We submitted two tracks to four different mastering houses to see what they could do: one was an old mix in need of general improvement, and the other was a very digital, cold track crying out for some warmth. Here we explore the results... **cm**

“TURD POLISHING IS NOT ON THE MENU. WHAT YOU WILL GET IS ADDED PRESENCE AND LEVEL”

Online mastering.com

www.online-mastering.com

COST:
£45 per track (or £38 for more than five tracks)

TURNAROUND TIME:
Two days (seven for an album)

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS AND OTHER SERVICES OFFERED:
Audio restoration and remastering

PRE-UPLOAD ADVICE:
“Avoid over-compressing the file or applying other processing. Don't save as MP3. Use 44.1kHz sample rate and 16-bit or higher”

STUDIO HIGHLIGHTS:
Manley analogue equipment (eg, Vari-Mu); DBX and other outboard gear; M6000 multiband dynamics; high-end software tools for EQ; CEDAR tools for audio restoration

Mastering engineer Oliver Betz started Online Mastering in 2003 as a way of adding international clients to his largely German database. The company have mastered a whole spectrum of music including dark rockers Oomph!, and dance hits by Commander Tom and Ernesto vs Bastian (both of which reached number one in all sorts of European dance charts).

The process of getting your track mastered is similar to that of the other sites on test here. You register your details at the website, upload your track via an FTP server or through the site, name it, give the engineer a reference point on how you want it to sound – any artist, album or specific sound – and they do the rest. Easy! It's one of the clearest sites on test, with a very good interface and a user area in which you can track what's happening to your music. The company also gave us feedback on the track before they started work on it – a good way of ensuring the client doesn't set their expectations too high or low. Online Mastering also send you a one-minute demo of your master to make sure you're completely happy with what they're doing prior to actual delivery. In fact the feedback emails,

though automated, were very helpful all the way through.

The quality of the returned master was very good. Our low-level mix was boosted in gain, and we asked for 'rounded' and got it. A gentle boost in low-end EQ appeared to have been added – nothing too dominant but enough to bring out the bass and kick. The width of the tune was also enhanced with some extra sparkle, and overall there was little to tell between this master and the Metropolis master of the same track.

Online mastering.com top tip

“Try to make the mixdown as good as possible. The better the unmastered file, the more amazing the results of proper mastering. In the best case, mastering shouldn't have to fix serious mixing problems, concentrating instead on adding the superb extra touch to make your productions sound outstandingly good.”



▲ This site's ease of use makes the world of difference to the online mastering experience

WHAT THEY SAY

“We try to offer the best customer service possible. It's anything but anonymous. A good business relationship is one of our main goals”

WHAT WE SAY

Very efficient service, cost-effective and delivering excellent results



Emasters

www.emasters.co.uk

COST:
£50 per track

TURNAROUND TIME:
Usually 48 hours

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS AND OTHER SERVICES OFFERED:
Personal web page plus 1GB storage area

PRE-UPLOAD ADVICE:
"Don't process the whole mix unless you're absolutely sure of what you're doing. Compression is irreversible and can sometimes ruin the dynamics and overall sound of the music"

STUDIO HIGHLIGHTS:
Airman compressor and Manley EQs; vintage Neumann cutting equipment; custom-designed Maselec analogue mastering console; Pro Tools HD; Prism Dream ADA8 converters; Sonic Solutions software

eMasters started in August 2004 as a result of the high pound. Clients were finding it too costly to travel to the UK, so company owner, Kevin Metcalfe, set up the online operation along with mastering engineers Streaky and Alex Wordsworth. Between them they have a huge wealth of mastering knowledge, having worked on tracks by The White Stripes, Kasabian, U2, David Bowie, Go! Team, Moby, Groove Armada, Britney Spears, Depeche Mode, Snow Patrol and a whole

stack of drum 'n' bass artists.

You register at www.emasters.co.uk and simply log in with your name and password. In the Library section you can upload the tracks you want mastered. Once that's

eMasters



▲ Get a more personal service with eMasters

WHAT THEY SAY

"Emasters clients get a personal service from the engineer. We have many other free services, which you can automatically use after registration"

Emasters top mastering tip

"Mix at low levels, as you can hear the balance, dynamics and EQ better. You tend to take more top end off the louder you listen. On the mastering front, always use an experienced engineer whose work you've previously heard. It's not an expensive process but it's pretty important, especially if you're working from a home studio – it's good to have a fresh pair of ears listen in a controlled environment that they're really familiar with."

done, you then go through to a secure payments page and can at any time trace your song's status. Along the way you're also asked about the track and what you want done with it, with reference points on how you'd like it to sound. Just one day after we submitted it, we got a mail back saying our track was completed.

Our song was mastered by Streaky, who also passed back some useful comments about it. The level on the mastered version was much higher and the overall sound was maybe a bit mid-heavy, but that was down to Streaky EQing to get the snare to come through. We were very pleased with the results – it was certainly much more brash and upfront.

Emasters encourage communication between client and engineer, and we found this to be good throughout the short but sweet time we spent with the company. The engineer was more than happy to go back and revise the master if we wanted, so we can't fault them on that. It's one of the cheapest and, by far, quickest services out there.

WHAT WE SAY

Good value, great one-to-one communication and very fast turnaround time, good results

XARC

www.xarcmastering.com

COST:
Varies, though a five-minute track is £58

TURNAROUND TIME:
Five days to three weeks, including delivery. Can do it in one to two days for an additional fee

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS AND OTHER SERVICES OFFERED:
Artist area, vinyl mastering, distribution info. Also check out <http://lorenzvauck.com> where XARC's founder offers free mastering info and advice

PRE-UPLOAD ADVICE:
"24-bit/44.1kHz quality, compressed with lossless application like WinRAR. Do not send MP3s"

STUDIO HIGHLIGHTS:
"A good magician never tells how he does his tricks! That said, much of our outboard and DSP is custom built, not something you'd get off the shelf. Other than that, it's a healthy mix of analogue and digital"

Lorenz Vauck's Germany-based XARC Mastering serves well over 1000 customers a year, including former Motown writers and producers, Eurovision entrants, videogame soundtrack artists and chart groups. XARC's approach is to concentrate on communication, and this was borne out when we uploaded our track. No other company demanded as much information about what we required, so top marks for that. Like others here, XARC offers a preview of the final track so you can check before agreeing to pay.

Again, the process is very easy. You can contact XARC direct or fill in a form on the site. You then get a welcome email, including details of your login and how to use the service. It's essentially the same as the others in terms of uploading, but what does differ is that before any payments are made, the engineer tells you if there are any problems with your track. XARC don't like to rush the process, preferring to return to the project with fresh ears after a few days.

XARC top tip

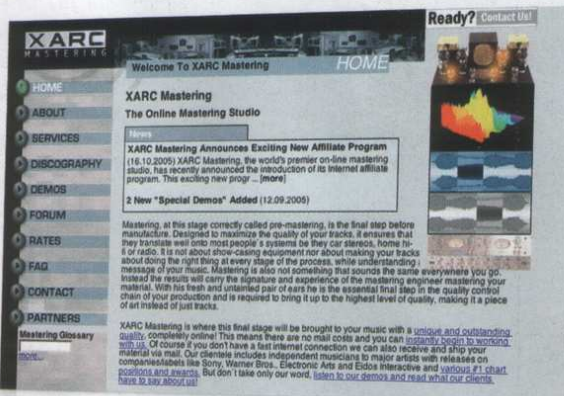
"Like dentistry, it's best to put mastering in the hands of the pros. We will also have fresh ears and be impartial to the project. When mixing, the artist spends a long time trying to get a 'huge' sound that's best left to the mastering engineer. As odd as it seems, a dull mix is a lot easier for us to work with. Also, be restrained when using mastering processors like compressors, limiters, etc, as they can't be undone."

WHAT THEY SAY

"We strive to constantly set the standard in the industry, in terms of the three main factors: pricing, quality and service"

When the track was done (only a week or so after uploading) the attention to detail was obvious. It was accompanied by in-depth notes about what Lorenz had done to the track. The master was slightly louder and more subtle, and the depth and width had been improved, giving it a lot more character.

XARC's detailed service is outstanding, and the mastering itself is absolutely up there with the best.



▲ Lorenz's sheer passion for the job ensures top-class results

WHAT WE SAY

Great communication – these guys really want to know how you want your track to sound