

Listening for Dynamics Processing, Panning, and Equalization

By Mathew Gomes

Consider the opening, title track of Rapsody's *Laila's Wisdom* (2017). The album was her second and debut in affiliation with Jamla / Roc Nation. "Laila's Wisdom" samples Aretha Franklin's recording of "Young, Gifted and Black," the title track of her 1972 album. In particular, the track includes samples from the first 90 seconds.

1. Consider differences in the loudness, panning, and equalization between the sampled recording and the sample, as used in "Laila's Wisdom."

Listen to the first 90 seconds of Aretha Franklin's (1972) "Young, Gifted and Black." Pay particular attention to the segments between (0:00-0:35) and (1:02-1:16). Next, listen to the first 90 seconds of Rapsody's (2017) "Laila's Wisdom."

DYNAMICS PROCESSING

- a. What sounds are loudest in Aretha Franklin's recording of "Young Gifted and Black"? Which sounds are loudest in Rapsody's recording of "Laila's Wisdom"?
- b. The sample of "Young Gifted and Black" is not as loud as Rapsody's voice on "Laila's Wisdom." What do you think is the purpose of this mixing choice?
- c. How do the different loudness levels impact your interpretation of the messages of each of these tracks?
- d. Are there additional differences you notice in the loudness of these two tracks?

PANNING

- e. In Aretha Franklin's recording of "Young Gifted and Black," you may hear the panning decisions made during mixing: Franklin's voice is panned to the center, the choir is panned to the left and right channels, the organ and drums are largely in the right channel, while the bass is in the left channel. What panning does this space evoke?
- f. What differences do you hear in the panning of "Young Gifted and Black" when it is sampled on "Laila's Wisdom"?
- g. Where is Rapsody's voice panned? What do you hear in the left and right channels? What may have been the purposes of panning "Laila's Wisdom" as it is now?
- h. How does the panning impact possible interpretations of the message of "Laila's Wisdom"? How might listeners interpret the song if Rapsody's voice were panned to the right channel?

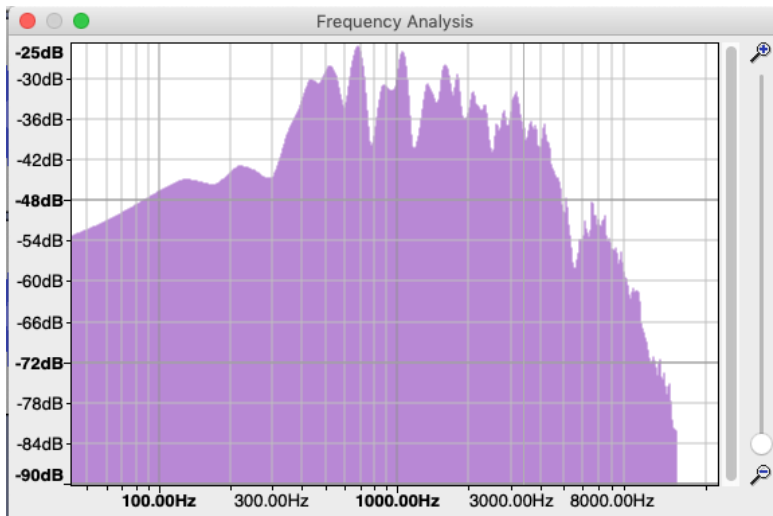
EQUALIZATION

- i. What are the differences do you hear in the equalization of the sample compared to the 1972 recording?
- j. What sounds does the equalization on "Laila's Wisdom" evoke?

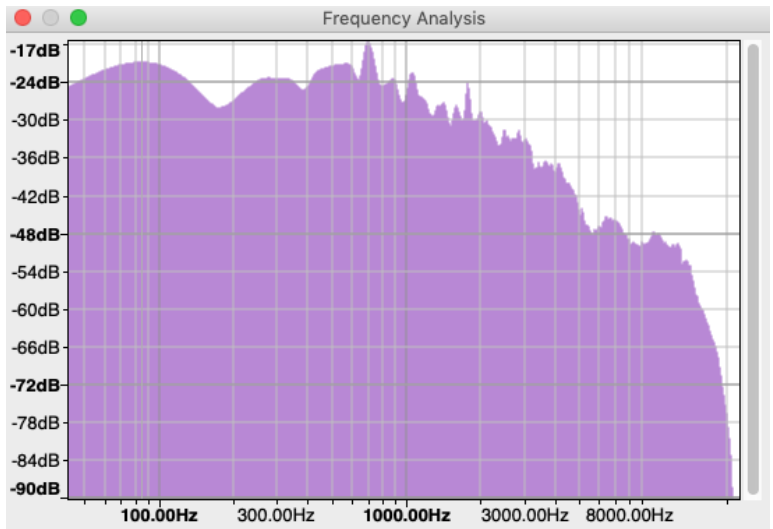
2. Consider the audible bands of frequencies in the first 90 seconds, focusing on three distinct moments:

- (a) before the main vocals (Rapsody) enter and before the drums enter;
- (b) after Rapsody's vocals enter, before the drums enter;
- (c) after Rapsody's vocals and drums enter.

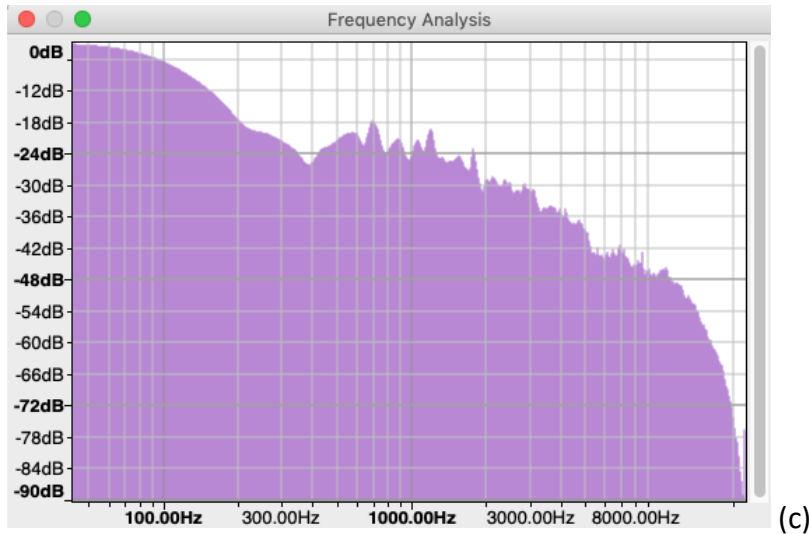
a. Compare the frequency spectra of these three moments. What differences do you see in the three spectra? Pay attention to the Y axis of the chart, as the endpoints of the scale change as the track gets louder:



(a)



(b)



- b. How would you describe the differences, between these three moments, as you hear them?
- c. How do you experience the loudness of these three moments in the song? Are there any differences in your perceptions of the loudness of these moments?
- d. What sounds do you think contribute to your perception of the loudness of the track?

3. Consider the panning near the end of the track (2:50-3:00).

- a. What do you hear? In which channels do you hear those sounds?
- b. What is the purpose of having different voices saying “we’re good over here” panned to alternating channels? What effect does this panning have for you as a listener?
- c. How could this panning effect relate to other messages or moments in the song?

Consider for example the following line, and the annotation Rapsody submitted to the website Genius.com:

Lyrics	Rapsody’s Annotation
<p>When haters come around look em down tell em “we don't owe you” You gon lose some friends but those circles are better than the ovals</p>	<p>This is just playing with the oval and circle thing. You always hear people talk about your circle of friends and it just goes back to Africa.</p> <p>In Africa communities are built in circles, like a circle is a big thing because you’re not supposed to break the circle, and it’s supposed to be about family and community and keeping everybody connected.</p> <p>You hear that plenty in life, like my circle of friends, my family. The people that are allowed in your circle are very important so the oval can be bigger than the circle, but sometimes you don’t need all those added people.</p>