

Hollywood Strings Gold: A Professional Orchestration Pre-Review

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / May 26, 2011

In this first review, we look at the risk/reward behind Hollywood Strings and The Language of The Bow.

This is a *Professional Orchestration* pre-review of Hollywood Strings Gold. I asked specifically for Gold over the Diamond edition because the size is only 48GB and its 16bit so it's a little easier on computing resources. It's also easier on most systems which run the standard 7200RPM drives, which is what most customers have. Another reason. Hollywood Strings Gold has dropped dramatically in price since its introduction. So for customers willing to put their toes into the water, HS Gold seemed the right place to start.

But I had another reason. You can upgrade to the Diamond Edition. This means you can get your feet wet on the system you have and really learn this library, then after upgrading, your major learning focus will be on mastering the Legato Bow Change and the various mic positions.

Finally. I'm reviewing this at a time when PLAY 3.0 is about to be released. So in fairness, I'm not making any comments about the player until 3.0 is released. Besides, there's plenty to learn before that.

INVESTMENT AND INNOVATION

Before jumping into the overview, in fairness, I'm starting in the same place I did with L.A. Scoring Strings – innovation.

When we in America think about innovation, we often think about the small entrepreneur doing ground breaking work in his or her garage or bedroom, fighting the good fight, and then making it big. We Americans love this story. By comparison, at the ground level, we don't often match innovation with the bigger companies unless we love them, like Apple.

One of the things that can happen when a company gets bigger, and they have the nice offices, or two, is that risk becomes more risky because they fear losing what they've already achieved.

That could have been said about EastWest, who's clearly not operating out of their garage!

They have offices in multiple locations. In Los Angeles, they own their own recording studio. An envious position to be in, for sure. They manage several shipping centers. When you see a commercial for UPS talking about logistics, that's EastWest. Except they ship with FedEx. Not only are they the OEM, they're also sub-distributors for several companies. They have a very strong presence on Facebook and have been aggressively learning to capitalize on social media. Judging by the comments on Facebook, it looks like they're doing pretty good, too.

The above paragraph brings a single word to mind – coast. Another phrase, play it cool. Or, be safe.

So why risk? Why innovate? Why take a chance in a crappy global economy especially when you already have one of the best selling orchestral libraries in the world that's still selling?

All fair questions.

And then, there's one more factor. It's no secret that the company has been hit with a lot of forum criticism over its PLAY player. That alone was enough to delay and defer investing in any major new library. Thus, the easy way out was to wait.

So what did EastWest do?

They risked and moved forward.

No one has told me the behind the scenes story. But I've been there enough times in my own entrepreneurial journey to know that the vision to go forward and a knife twisting in your gut to encourage non-action are often traveling companions. One has to win. There cannot be two masters. Every sample library developer that's still around or about to make the plunge knows this.

What has been missed by many is that EastWest's decision to go forward was a gutsy move in a time where playing it safe would have appeared to be the wiser decision.

But who ever said that entrepreneurs are wise?

In simple words, the goal was to have, "the most detailed collection of string orchestra instruments ever assembled." And Doug Rogers plunked down the cash to make it happen. In short, they went for it.

The money didn't just cover the recording time. PLAY itself had to be vastly updated to handle the vision presented by Nick Phoenix and Thomas J. Bergersen. So that meant extra programming costs. And more beta testing. And then over time, discovering just what type of computing power was really needed.

Every decision was a risk. Then the programming of PLAY took longer than expected. Then the programming of the library took longer than expected. So that delayed the launch by several months, until finally they said something I've heard about a few Thanksgiving dinners, "It'll be ready when it's ready."

And that announcement represented yet another round of risk. With more investment!

Christmas 2009 and NAMM 2010 came and went. But April came, and it was released. A "mere" one million samples and over 3000 patches for Diamond alone. There had once been a plan to have a Diamond and a Gold package. But that was changed to Diamond only, then back to Diamond and Gold. What I have read, and I don't recall where I read it, is that within a few weeks of its release, EastWest had made back its investment.

Risk \Rightarrow reward.

The general conversation about Hollywood Strings frequently uses this short phrase, *game changing*. But *why* is it game changing? I think that specific reasons come faster when you look at Hollywood Strings from an orchestration perspective. So let's do that.

STRING ORCHESTRA SIZE

Hollywood Strings is one of the few libraries that has recorded this large a string section. All of the sections are independently recorded including Violins 2, which used a second group of players to sound different.

While many will look at this as a big film orchestra, outside filmland, this is a post-Romantic sized section, meaning that it's very close to that used by Debussy, Holst, Mahler, Ravel, Wagner, and slightly bigger than what Berlioz asked for – 57 strings

Violins 1 – 16
Violins 2 – 14
Violas – 10
Cellos – 10
Basses – 7

Consequently, the end sonic result should be a big beautiful massive sound, depending on how you write. It has been the trend over the past few years to play Baroque works with a string ensemble maybe a third this size. In his letters to his father, Leopold, Mozart wrote with joy and excitement about hearing his symphonies played with a much larger ensemble. Hearing *A Little Night Music* or portions of the *Requiem* mocked up with HS would be a treat, and not at all “historically” inaccurate.

I mention this because Hollywood Strings should not be considered for film/TV/game work only. If you're someone who wants to compose outside those genre, then don't pull back from Hollywood Strings because of its name. This library has vocabulary as you're about to see.

Additionally, a live string section this size can handle woodwinds and brass in 3s and still be in balance. Mahler proved it, and sometimes he wrote for six to eight horns! When compared to the soon to be released Hollywood Brass, you find that the size of Hollywood Brass also follows the Mahler-model.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE BOW

The beginnings. Stating the obvious. Strings are bowed instruments. This means that with rare exception, all of the sounds produced on the violin come as a direct result of the bow. How many string bowings are there? Well, the American String Teachers Association publishes an entire book of them. So there's far more actual bowings than what are usually available in string libraries. I mention this to point out that Hollywood Strings has recorded an enviable list of bowings that once you learn how to play them from the keyboard, gives you a good portion of that envious language from live performance, *the language of the bow*.

More bowings = more composer expression.

In the chart below (next page), I've organized the bowings as listed on the Hollywood Strings home page, in the way string players often speak about them: on the string, off the string (the spiccato family), special effects, tremolo, and pizzicato.

On The String	Off The String	Special Effects	Tremolo	Pizzicato
Detache: Up/Down	Spiccato (RR x9)	Col Legno	Measured	Pizzicato (RR x4)
Legato	Ricochet (RR x2)	Sul Ponticello	Trills: Whole Step	Bartok
Legato: Slurred		Flautando (Vlns 2)	Trills: Half Step	
Bow Change Legato (D)		Harmonics		
Bowed Sustains: Up/Down		Portamento		
Staccato: (RR x9)				
On The String Staccato (RR x8)				
Staccatissimo (RR x16)				
Repetitions (RR x4)				
Marcato: Short (RR x4)				
Marcato: Long (RR x4)				

The Hollywood Strings PDF manual gives you their definitions of all the bowings.

As I wrote at the top, the phrase *game changing* has been applied mostly to the sound, not to the bowings. I suggest that *game changing* might also be applied to Hollywood Strings bow choices, too.

Legato

There are two types of legato played in a string section. The first are those pitches played under a single bow. The second is by connected detache bowings which is a back and forth or push/pull motion.

Hollywood Strings Diamond gives you both types, Gold gives you one. One is called Legato and the other Bow Change Legato. The one available in Diamond is called bow change legato, and from what I've heard, that sounds to me the detache definition of legato I just gave you. See Nick Phoenix's Legato Tutorial #1 for demonstration.

Not a criticism, but I wish that EastWest had considered placing this feature with at least Violins 1 in Gold to demonstrate the musical reasons for updating to Diamond beyond getting the multiple mic positions.

If you're not sure the difference between the two bowings and why it's exciting to have them, see if you can find a video performance of Brahms *Symphony #4* and you'll see many of the

bowings in action found in Hollywood Strings. The Berliner Philharmoniker Digital Concert Hall has an excellent performance by Herbert von Karajan. You can find an excerpt on the Berliner Philharmoniker YouTube channel.

(Brahms: Symphony No. 4 / Karajan · Berliner Philharmoniker YouTube Channel)



Sul G, Sul D, Sul A, etc.

Hollywood Strings has a feature described on the web site as, “Up- and down-bowed sustains, all at 4 finger positions, at least one full octave on each string.”

What this description does not clearly indicate is that the composer can create his own Sul G, Sul D, etc., with all four members of the string section.

For example, let’s consider the pitch D above middle C where middle C is C3. That D is the open D string on the Violins. The G string can also play that pitch. Though it’s in the First Position, some composers specifically mark that they want that D on the G string vs the open D. The score is marked Sul G.

Again, stating the obvious, this is the same pitch whether it’s played on the Open D or the covered G string. But they don’t sound the same. And that’s the whole point! The difference is intensity. The further down the neck towards the bridge the performer plays on a single string, the more intense the sound becomes.

Point: until the release of Hollywood Strings, unless a library had recorded pitches up an individual string, this capability has simply not been available before.

Separate Upbows and Downbows

EastWest is not the first to have this feature, but they do have it. The bowing has to be heard to be appreciated. Watch the opening of Beethoven *Symphony #7, Second Movement*, conducted by von Karajan on the Berliner Philharmoniker Digital Concert Hall to see repeated upbows in action and how they sound. You can find an excerpt on the Berliner Philharmoniker YouTube

channel. Other recorded versions of this symphony place the upbows in different locations. The benefit of the feature to the composer is again, more vocabulary, and more musical expression.

(Beethoven: Symphony No. 7 / Karajan · Berliner Philharmoniker YouTube Channel)



Examples of Spiccato and Staccato Mixed

Regarding the actual performance of spiccato and staccato, I spoke to violinist Hannes Frischat at Strings On Demand who explained, “While in violin school, books and slow motion explanations, spiccato leaves the string and staccato does not, in reality the distinction is not really as easy. Fast spiccato often stays on the string while very short staccato can leave the string.” To see an example, visit the Violin Lab Channel on YouTube and look for their video “Spiccato vs Staccato”

(Violin Lab Channel on YouTube: Spiccato vs Staccato)



Col Legno

Col Legno is found in the opening of *Mars* from *The Planets*. To protect the bow, some of which cost \$2000 and up, players often turn the bow to the side, as you can see below performed by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra at the 2009 Proms.

(Holst: The Planets Suite - Mars - The Proms 2009)



Measured Tremolo

Hollywood Strings is the first library to offer accurate measured tremolo because it syncs to tempo. This is another innovation not talked about too much.

BOWINGS: THE FIRST GAME CHANGER

I'm really surprised that more "fuss" (in a good sense) about the bowings in Hollywood Strings hasn't been made. Those who know their bowings and always wanted the tools to score electronically this way, now can. Those who don't know the bowings, have a library with which to grow. These bowing choices also give you another way to consider setting up your string template.

LEARNING HOLLYWOOD STRINGS

I think there's a genuine need to have some game changing *instruction* for this library. The starting videos created by Nick Phoenix are very good. But I'd like to see more videos given the bowing potential Hollywood Strings gives you.

In fairness, I can say the exact same thing about two other libraries. So I'm not "picking on" EastWest.

CONCLUSION

When you look at Hollywood Strings from an orchestration perspective, it's evident that this library, Diamond or Gold, is genuinely game changing not just at the "sounds great" level, but also at the starting point, the compositional/orchestration level, the language of the bow.

Now to learn it.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.