The Miroslav Philharmonik Revisited

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / December 31, 2008

Once $3500 on four CDs, The Miroslav Philharmonik is the original library reprogrammed by IK Multimedia now at a very compelling price.
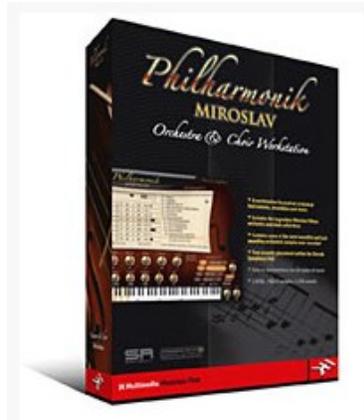
I wrote the following review two years ago in December 2006. I've reposted this review because IK Multimedia is running a special promotion on the *Miroslav Philharmonic* through January 31, 2009. Since this review was written, a "lite" version was released called *Miroslav Classic*.

Star Date 15122006 – Milky Way Galaxy Lower Quadrant, Peter Alexander's Studio
Many of us who've used samples for a decade or more know the name Miroslav Vitous. Separate from being a sample developer, what you might not know that is that Mr. Vitous attended the Prague Conservatory with his brother Alan, along with Jan Hammer, that Mr. Vitous was a founding member for three years of the jazz group Weather Report, that Mr. Vitous attended Berklee College of Music, and that for three years he was head of the jazz department of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

At one time, he offered the most expensive orchestral sample library on the market. For $3500, you could have his complete orchestral library fitting on four (as in 4) CDs. Not DVDs, CDs. By comparison today, you can have the complete QLSO Platinum bundle with nearly a dozen DVDs (before it goes off sale December 31, 2006) and still have about $1000 "spare change" to spend on other things. In fact, you can still get the original CDs. They're available from ILIO Entertainments (ilio.com), but the price has dropped considerably, now $325 a disk, which is $1300 for the four CDs.

What separated MV from the pack, and the reason he could charge so much for his library can be summarized in a single word – quality. And quality endures. In fact, it endures so well, that Sonic Reality and IK Multimedia purchased the library outright, and repackaged it using the SampleTank engine. In August of 2005, version 1.0 was released. Wisely, Dave Kerzner, CEO of Sonic Reality/IK Multimedia, kept all the original CDs available, which can be ordered internationally through ilio.com.

Since Mr. Kerzner's company owns the rights to the entire collection, I have some comments to make about the Miroslav originals at the end of Part 1.

Within the MP plug-in are the original library, plus solo strings (a major asset), the choir library, and extras including concert piano, harp, harpsichord and cathedral organ. I spent a few minutes with each of these, and they add an incredible value to the package.

When the Miroslav Philharmonik was first released, there was a burst of sales, then things went quiet. That surprised me, especially as an "older" member of the producing community who has the original CDs in Giga and some in Roland formats.

Thus, my curiosity was whether to use my MV originals, shelve them, or really consider the Miroslav Philharmonik as a practical production tool. A second curiosity factor involves what I teach my students in my *Writing For Strings* and *Professional Orchestration* classes – it takes a minimum of two libraries to do an effective "life-like" mock-up. Should the Miroslav Philharmonik be part of the quiver?

Yes, definitely. And I base my recommendation on a testing concept I teach my students – the music never lies. So I have in my private library a few passages I test that tell me in a few minutes whether or not the library is worth my money. That's how I know. And whenever someone asks my opinion of what to buy, I root that opinion in the goals of what they're wanting to write, and what I found from my testing, which in quality circles is called benchmarking.

My "quick" test was an arrangement I acquired that was written for Frank Sinatra by the late Robert Farnon. What's important about this is that the first six bars of this arrangement use very dense seven-part vertical "stacked" harmony in the strings. It's a sound you don't hear much of today among younger writers. But by testing with vertical stacked harmony, you determine quickly how versatile the strings are. Granted, this kind of arranging you only find with Michael Buble, Harry Connick Jr., Natalie Cole, Sarah Brightman and a few others. Nonetheless, that musical style is revealing because it tells you the kind of writing assignments you can feel secure in booking for yourself.

The libraries I tested with included Opus 1, the Vienna Instruments Orchestral Strings, the HALion Symphonic Orchestra and E-MU's Modern Symphonic Orchestra (which I co-produced for E-MU).

I have to tell you, I was pleasantly surprised to find out, that the Miroslav Philharmonik executed Mr. Farnon's arrangement for strings, quite nicely. Of the libraries I tested, the MP strings had the warmest, richest, most "live" sound of any of them.

Then, my second acid test. I compared it to my MV original strings in Giga Format.

Results: On the same score, I found the Miroslav Philharmonik to be a much fuller, richer sound. The MP strings really stand on their own. The work Mr. Kerzner and Friends have put into the *Miroslav Philharmonik* really shows.

One subtle string technique I tested was trying to make a "bow change" on sustained harmony. The MP strings are programmed so that on sustaining harmony, you can move from one pitch to the next in such a way that on the keyboard, you can simulate a bow change without it sounding like one sample clunking its way to the next one. Major benefit for pads.

Third test, I turned off all the reverb in the Miroslav Philharmonik player (sorry, Dave). And I did so for the simple reason that over time, experience teaches that "Reverb covers a multitude of sins." 2 Hezekiah 20:1.

So, I tested the Farnon example using reverb within Logic (Space Designer) and the hardware Lexicon PCM 90 (ebay, great price). This may sound like a silly test, but I've tested the Vienna Instruments Orchestra Strings 1 and 2 with different reverbs, and with the Vienna library, I always find that Altiverb and the Waves S1 Stereo Imager are the two keys for getting the best mixed sound for that library (of course, that's how I hear it). So the benefit with the Miroslav Philharmonik, is that even if you don't have an expensive reverb collection, you can use the reverb within your sequencing program to create a great mix. That failing, you can use the onboard reverb within the Philharmonik player.

Fourth, the Miroslav Philharmonik is pre-panned. So, all you have to do is add reverb and adjust the volume. This is a great time saver.

Fifth, you have the addition of 4 Violins for divisi writing. But I was surprised to not see the 4 Cellos from the original library. This is a worthy addition. And I noticed that the Violas, unless I missed something, weren't labeled "4 Violas" as in the original library.

The 4 Cellos should be an update because with them, the arranger/composer who knows string writing, can divide each string section except for the basses. Sales-wise, this would mean that the Miroslav Philharmonik would then come with its own "chamber strings" which is a mighty benefit. But the programmer needs to work with 4 Violins, the 4 Violas and 4 Cellos to insure an accurate divisi sound is achieved. One reference work for that is Henry Mancini's *Sound and Scores*.

If you have the original Miroslav strings, or if you order them from ILIO, then you can have a set of chamber strings without waiting for an update.

Solo Strings.
Well, I'd certainly like to see the MIDI file of the demo on the IK site for Presto, from Bach's Sonata for Violin n.1 in G-minor because that's one amazing demo. Overall, I feel that the solo strings are very useful and have a great sound. But, I really want to see that MIDI file.

SOME THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW
I've checked other reviews and what I'm about to report wasn't covered. This is an older library (if you haven't gotten that point yet), and as such was recorded in mono, not stereo. It's a point you need to know, but it's not a deal killer by any means. The Roland library, which is still in use today, was also recorded in mono, and I wish I had it! I think a major benefit of the library being in mono is that you can do more with less RAM in the computer, and for building MIDI recording skills, it's much easier to mix. To be a bit caustic, the string sound is so rich, so what if it's mono!

This library comes with nearly 1300 instruments (oh my eyes!). Now, a reason you have so many programs is that you have the choice of using either unlooped or looped samples. A looped sample is one where the programming enables the audio sample to repeat endlessly so as to create a sustained sound. With the Miroslav Philharmonik, as with the original, you get both. So that's a good thing.

1.1 Installation – With the 1.1 update, you no longer need the USB key (yea!), and it now operates in stand-alone mode, 16-track multitimbral like Native Instrument players. It's design intent is to operate inside a sequencing program, on both the Mac and PC.

The Interface – I wish that all the developers would pay attention to the eye research now coming out about reading and monitor distance. On average, I keep my monitors back by 24 inches. I'm not alone in applying this usage statistic. MP is easier to read than almost anything from Native Instruments, but it could be improved. It's not just for "eye health" that I'm promoting this. Time is money. The harder to read, the more production time is prolonged.

RE: The Original Miroslav Giga and E-MU– Because IK now owns the entire library, I want to make a few comments because with the price down, there's a lot of sales life left in this library. For the Giga version, I would, with no hesitation, get a GVI version and move, especially the strings, the existing MV library into that player. I would then get Larry Seyer who created the Larry Seyer Reverb inside Gigapulse to set up a series of multiple mic positions so that you have close, medium far, distant, however IK wants to name them.

I would set up the various mic positions to blend with the existing libraries on the market, and, to stand on their own merit. This also solves the keyswitch issue. In making this suggestion, I'm in no way critiquing the IK audio engine.

For the E-MU EOS Version, there's the new software version of EmulatorX and ProteusX. This entire base of customers is now open to you. I've tested bringing in my E4 and EIII libraries into EmulatorX, and they work just great. I suspect the same would be true for the original MV.

UPDATE – TWO YEARS LATER
Since this was written, GigaStudio is no more but the E-MU EmulatorX still exists. Some time ago I tried importing into EmulatorX the original E4 library and I was surprised at how poorly it imported. So I can't recommend this solution today.

While I haven't formally written a review on them, I've worked my way through the brass, woodwinds and choir.

Brass – The best of these are the French horns. A little reverb and you're in business.

Woodwinds – Any day of the week. The flute is really beautiful.

Choir – There are good moments here, but you have to search for them. But when you find them, you find some rich excellent sounds that work today.

FOR 2009 – MIROSLAV PHILHARMONIK IN YOUR STUDIO
Given the economy, is this product worth buying? I think that's the *question de jour*. At the sale price today of $199 I think this is a must have. At $499, IK is competing with QLSO Gold, Vienna Instruments Special Edition, GPO, and to a minor degree, *Notion*.

Having said that, the experience all of us have who do orchestral MIDI mock-ups is the experiential understanding that you need two or more libraries to do the job and to avoid the dreaded "organ effect" which haunts every string library writing beyond two- or three-part vertical harmony. The organ effect happens with *every* library and I have unpublished demos to prove it. With French horns, which is less often talked about, it's about the Chevy Car Horn sound everyone wants to avoid.

To get a $3500 library for $199 is a no-brainer. Just buy the thing. With strings, as a blender, you'll get a great sound with Vienna, QLSO, Symphobia and String Essentials 2. By blending, I don't mean layering one on top of the other. I mean interspersing the libraries over the inner harmony parts to create your own section sound.

That the Miroslav Philharmonik comes with solo strings I think is quite compelling because if you have several solo string libraries, you can add this to it to create a more individual small section sound, or for layering purposes with a larger ensemble.

The French horns have a great nobility to them. The woodwinds *speak*.

IK Multimedia has their own YouTube Channel where you'll find a number of videos demonstrating this library and how to work the player.

When I originally wrote this review, I had not installed the Miroslav Philharmonik on my G5. And I still haven't. So I can't report how many instances you're able to get.

Other than that, this is an excellent library well worth having.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.