

Insights: Cinematic Strings 2.0

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / May 3, 2012

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And the happy news is this: You get a great sound right out of the box without having to work hard to make it happen.

String Ensemble Size

Let's start from an orchestration perspective, ensemble size:

12 1st Violins
8 2nd Violins
7 Violas
7 Cellos
6 Basses

This size fits into what's typically called the "standard" orchestra string section, but it's recorded in such a way that it has the sound of a much bigger ensemble.

Patch Load Design

Don't mistake simple for simplistic. CS2.0's elegant patch load design often hides what's going on under the hood, which is why it's so easy to use!

For example, you're not overwhelmed with articulation choices. Instead, you load five patches one per track: V1, V2, Violas, Ces, and Basses. Once you've loaded these five patches, you just loaded your string section – on five tracks!

Under the Matrix tab, you see that each patch has eight bowings, each selectable by keyswitch. Keyswitches are consistently placed for each string section, even the basses, which (as in a traditional score), are positioned an octave higher than they sound.

The benefit is *learn once*.

Be aware that when you load a patch, you're loading all eight bowings which is about 1.2GB for Violins 1 and slightly less for the other patches. So if you're not using a particular bowing, you can literally turn it off, and that purges the samples for that bowing.

Overall, patches take up around 400-500mb per patch if you only load up the Mix mic position.

The included bowings, in order, are: arco, tremolo, half step trill, whole step trill, run mode, staccato, marcato, and pizzicato. Here I have one minor critique. I would have ordered the bowings in their most frequent use, which would be arco, staccato, marcato, pizz, then the remainder of the bowings. Happily, part of the design is that you can re-order the list with a couple of clicks.



Arco – already set to legato (monophonic). To turn legato OFF, click the legato button at page bottom. The arco contains a staccato overlay which is triggered by velocity when playing velocity above 60.

Staccato – You can choose between staccato (longer) and staccatissimo (shorter) bowings, and under the hood, (the Advanced tab), you're given sliders to control length. The sliders are also available for pizzicato.

Marcato – This is a sustained marcato so that when you strike the keyboard, you get an accented note but the pitch sustains.

Playing Position – This is another tool that keeps the track count down. I don't know which string position these reflect, but you have a choice of Low vs High. The Low means all the pitches available are recorded in the lower string positions. This provides a very rich sound. High means all the pitches are recorded in the higher string positions which creates more intensity the higher you write.

Vibrato Control

Yes, there is vibrato control!

This can either be handled by velocity (playing above 60 increases vibrato) or with CC2 breath controller, which you can also draw in. I prefer to draw it in as too much vibrato creates an unnatural string sound in vertical harmony.

Velocity Crossfade – On the mod wheel. Volume is controlled by CC11.

Patch Loading Summary

On the surface, it appears as if you're only getting eight bowings per patch. But that's not true. By the time you factor in Low/High Positions, Vibrato, Staccato/Staccatissimo, Legato/non-Legato, and note length options under the Advanced tab, you have many more. Additionally, you have close, stage and room mics, each of which has the same number of bowing choices per patch.

Hall Reverb

To the right you see a knob for hall reverb. Per Mr. Wallbank, this is the standard algorithmic reverb that comes with Kontakt which he felt had a nice neutral sound for quick work. Mr. Wallbank tried to match the sound and feel of the hall as much as possible with it and suggested turning the dial to around 4.5dB. While it's a good sounding reverb, I chose to turn it off so I can pick from others in my collection that can be used on the whole mix.

Mic Mixer

The mic mixer enables you to adjust the volume per mic, which is handy when blending with other libraries. Your choices are close, stage and room.

My Tests

Cinematic Strings 2.0 is now the third string library to imply it has the Hollywood sound. I put that to the test by writing a short 1 minute piece, slow tempo, with voicings similar to that of Jerry Goldsmith.

I test this way because you can get away with murder in a demo that's got the chugga-chugga thing happening in the middle register, cellos-basses in octaves in the lower register doing a different rhythmic line, and then writing a long languid violin line in the upper register. Add percussion and some brass, a dash of EQ and 2 tablespoons of reverb, and voila! *A cue is born!* Adjust tempo to taste.

But when you start adding vertical harmony, that's where the story is written, at least as I see it.

My piece is written in Dorian mode, and I voiced the low strings (Basses, Cellos and Violas) in triads starting with the open voicing of Root-Fifth-Third. To stress the string samples, I wrote long sustains. I set the strings in Low position which increased the depth and warmth of the section. I turned off all reverb and applied no EQ. So this is as out-of-the-box as you can get!

Once the volume levels were set to achieve a sectional sound, and velocity was edited to be less than 60 (to insure light vibrato), what I found was that I had achieved, with no significant effort or time outlay of my own, a finished sound, which is also what Daniel James said in his YouTube video about Cinematic Strings.

Now an inner line. Well, no chugga-chugga. Instead I used ba-du ba-du ba-du ba-du by placing Vienna Instruments Harp 1 in the middle register playing an alternating eighth note pattern.

I put Vienna Flute 1 on the melody, then at the end of the phrase, I shifted the melody to Violins 1 and 2 playing in unison.

I felt that the Vienna Flute and Harp worked well with CS2.0 because all three have what I would describe as a similar “round” sound. So they blend well.

To spatially position, I used Spat with reverb off (sorry, Jose!) to position the Flute and Harp. I positioned the harp to the far left where it’s often positioned in a scoring session. And since I was just working with one (1) flute, I positioned in the center, but pushed back behind the strings.

Using Spat took me all of 2 minutes to spatially position the two instruments.

Next I added reverb.

Here I tried several but came away liking the Medium Vocal Hall from Ircam’s Verb which I set at 40% wet/dry.

At this point, I had achieved a great sound. It took me longer because I was learning the library at the same time. But once I finish with the MIDI editing and adding a touch of EQ, I have a commercially salable work.

And I must say, hearing that R-5-3 voicing sounded a lot like the strings as I remember them sounding at Warner or Sony/MGM. So for this piece, and my experience, yes, this is the Hollywood Sound.

Mr. Tchaikovsky

OK. I admit it. I’m the only reviewer who thinks about Tchaikovsky when doing string library reviews. And that’s because I’d like to write beyond chugga-chugga! But in this case, I tested CS2.0 with a passage in the upper register employing 6 vertical chord tones.

The image shows a musical score for five parts: CS V1, CS V2, CS VAS, CS CES, and CS BASSES. The score is in 6/8 time and consists of four measures. The first measure is marked with a '2' above the staff. The second measure is marked with a '3' above the staff. The third measure is marked with a '4' above the staff. The fourth measure is marked with a '5' above the staff. The CS V1 part is a melody in the upper register. The CS V2, CS VAS, and CS CES parts are chords. The CS BASSES part is a bass line. The score is written in treble and bass clefs.

Violins 1 – Melody

Violins 2 – 2-part (double stops)

Cellos – Melody

Violas – 2-part (double stops)

The following popular string libraries are not divisi: CS2, HS Gold, LASS Lite and Miroslav. This means that to play more than 5 pitches in a vertical harmony stack, you have to either ignore string scoring principles and do what you want, or use double stops for the inner harmony. When you approach this passage with double stops, this means that you don't need divisi, you can use V2 or Violas ensembles with two insertions each.

Since the pitches played by V2 and Violas can be performed as double stops, this yields triad over triad in octaves – which is a big sound). So to produce this with CS2.0:

Violins 1 – Legato On

Violins 2a – Legato OFF (individual track)

Violins 2b – Legato OFF (individual track)

Cellos – Legato On

Violas a – Legato OFF (individual track)

Violas b – Legato OFF (individual track)

Here, as with any library with controllable vibrato, the vibrato has to be at a minimum in medium to heavy vertical harmony, otherwise the cumulative effect is an unnatural “buzzy” sound in the strings.

CS2.0 pulled this passage off, admirably. I didn't hear any synthiness with CS2.0 as some have reported. Not always, but often synthiness is due to not writing sample strings as you would for live.

Inner Octaves

Ex: 3. *And^{te} sostenuto.*

The musical score for Ex: 3, titled "Andante sostenuto", is written for five string parts: 1st Violins, 2nd Violins, Altos, Violoncelles, and Contrebasses. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The 1st Violins part has a melody of sustained notes, starting on G4 and moving up to B4. The 2nd Violins part has a melody of sustained notes, starting on C3 and moving up to E3. The Altos part has a melody of sustained notes, starting on G2 and moving up to B2. The Violoncelles part has a melody of sustained notes, starting on C2 and moving up to E2. The Contrebasses part has a melody of sustained notes, starting on G1 and moving up to B1. The score includes dynamics markings like *pp* and accents.

The tempo is Andante Sostenuto, or a slow walk. This little baby is a stress tester. Violins 1 and Violas are in octaves and are sustained. Violas are on their bottom open C. Enter the Cellos then the Basses leading to diminished chords with the bottom pitch separated by nearly two octaves. Though from the 1800s, this is still a very contemporary sound.

CS2.0 executes it beautifully – right out of the box with a professional sound.

Critiques

As some have observed with personal comments, there is some noise in the samples. With the basses, for long sustains, I think the loops should be rechecked, and I found that with several other libraries, not just CS2.0!

I would like to see the online Quick Start Guide copied into a Pages document and released as a PDF. CS2.0 *is* easy to learn and use, but you do need the Quick Start Guide to learn your way around and it's just more convenient learning it from a document you can print out vs. going back and forth online.

I would like to see CS2.0 add one more group by creating unison violins (V1 + V2) as this has been for decades one of the top combinations for dramatic film scoring. This can be programmed as it was for the ensemble patches in LASS and MV2.0. So no new recordings are required.

I also think that it would be worthwhile to consider adding, as a future update, some ensemble patches for all strings arco, staccato and pizz at minimum. Again, no new trips to the recording studio required.

Some seem to be bothered that the spiccato bowing is missing. I'm not. First of all, since spiccato is achieved by bouncing the bow off the strings, you do have a tempo limitation to it. Additionally, no matter how well spiccato is performed the composer still needs to bring some piano chops to the keyboard by pulling the fingers off the keys, not dissimilar in how you approach pizzicato.

Spiccato didn't become "happening" until Mendelssohn. So we have several hundred years of practice without it. But if you feel you must have spiccato, and you don't have a library that has spiccato, then consider Symphobia 1.

The Company Demos

I point you to this one demo to start. I admire what the developer, Alex Wallbank, did. He told the whole world flat out that he added EQ and a separate reverb.

This is honesty!

YOUTUBE VIDEO: https://youtu.be/MzOn4T0G_Ho
(Cinematic Strings 2 - Blog 1: EQ and Tempo Automation)



However, Mr. Wallbank went a step further. He explained how he applied EQ to get the results he did and then he put up what the settings were!

Can you think of any company demo where it was explained how the demo was actually produced, down to the EQ settings?

The never ending question on the forums is: How'd ya do that?

And the never ending answer is: *silence*, otherwise known in marketing circles as, “no speaka da English.” (**Note:** this is a universal sentence so please supply your own accent.)

But now the answer is published for Cinematic Strings.

Conclusion

As several of us have found writing about Cinematic Strings 2.0, you get great sounding results without an engineer, or having to become one. You get a polished dramatic sound that covers the wide genre of the Hollywood sound. The developer has told you how to EQ it to achieve his same results. It's simple to learn and restful to use. Like every string library on the market, it has its quirks, but nothing detracts from the final end result of what you can achieve.

You can buy it as a download and the price is very, very reasonable. And if your currency is the Euro or British Pound Sterling, since CS2.0 is priced in USD, it's a steal.

For all the rest of us, it's a killer value.

Go for it!

Disclaimer: Alexander Publishing is not a dealer for CS2.0. Alexander Publishing is a dealer for Spat and Project SAM.

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