

Daniel James: Mixing L.A. Scoring Strings and Symphobia

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / February 19, 2011

Daniel James is a film, television and video game composer based in the United Kingdom. He began writing music in 2001 as a lead singer for a rock band and later went on to study music performance at West Kent College Tonbridge UK. In 2009 Daniel finished writing music for his first film project entitled 'Metal Gear Solid Philanthropy' Since then he's made composition his goal with a focus on creating unique and original sounding scores that making strong use of custom sampling and sound design. Dan's main instrument voice in which he majored in at college. He also plays the piano, guitar, and various hand based percussion.

One of the big MIDI mock-up questions issues today is effectively mixing L.A. Scoring Strings (LASS) and Symphobia 1 & 2 since both were recorded in two different stages in two different countries. In the video below, Dan outlines his procedure for mixing both libraries. Below the YouTube video is our exclusive interview.

YOUTUBE VIDEO: <https://youtu.be/8uVD8NP5QKE>



SCTV: Why did you select ArtsAcoustic over a convolution reverb like Altiverb or Space Designer in Logic or the new Vienna Suite Convolution reverb?

Daniel: When I first started out in film scoring I made the conscious decision to mix my own material. The main reason was because of my style of writing, with all its sound design and manipulation, the mixing process actually becomes part of the composition process. So I started looking at forum topics and reviews for a good sounding reverb. Initially I wanted to use convolution reverb, after seeing many composers I respect praising them on message boards, but the problem I ran into was my computer at the time (A Macbook to be more precise) would have struggled with the way I like to use reverb. So I set out looking for an algorithmic one.

ArtsAcoustic jumped out at me for two reasons, the first of which was the UI (Ed.: user interface). It was all laid out very neatly and just from screen shots I could see in my head how I would achieve certain effects I may want to try with regards to sound design. The second reason was, of course, the most important of all and that was the sound. ArtsAcoustic offer a demo on their site and after I had it installed I tried out some of the presets by which time I was sold. I did of course try out some of the other algorithmic plug-ins out there and although the sound of a few were similar to that of ArtsAcoustic's, it felt like a lot more work to create the spaces I had in mind.

SCTV: The sound you've achieved for the whole orchestral setting was just with ArtsAcoustic with one instance assigned to each orchestral section. Is that correct?

Daniel: That is indeed correct. In my setup I have a bus for each section, i.e., Strings, Brass, Percussion, etc. Each bus has its own individual instance of ArtsAcoustic reverb which I tweak to make that section sound good within context of the particular track I am working on. For example, let's say I was working on a track and I needed the brass section to sound fuller and more upfront. I could give just the brass a larger room or perhaps even make the room smaller to make them feel more in your face. On the flip side, if I wanted the brass to sit in the back a little more, I could lower the dry level and tweak the room size until they 'feel right'

SCTV: In your video, you said that you started with an ArtsAcoustic preset. Is that *Full Strings Generic 01*?

Daniel: Yes. On my strings channel I start with the *Full Strings Generic 01* and the battle is half won before I even start composing, of course every project gets its own tweaks. The presets in ArtsAcoustic are phenomenal and get me close to the sound I want every time, it is also extremely helpful that they took the time to create presets for most orchestral instruments and room types.

SCTV: About the Room Design section. It has four sections to it: Room Size, Room Width, Diffusion and Density. The video is a little hard to read. Could you describe briefly these four settings and the role they play in shaping the string sound?

Daniel: This question is much better answered in the [manual](#) if you want the technical description of what each of these parameters do. However I can explain how I use them and what they mean to me.

So firstly, Room Size. To me the room size slider is affecting how 'deep' the reverb is in front and behind you, kind of like the distance to a far wall if you are looking forward. The room width is how wide the room is left to right, you can think of this as almost like a stereo setting, with 0% sounding mono. Diffusion is kind of tricky to explain, at its lowest setting it's as if the sound is hitting a flat wall where as 100% is shouting at a wall the has lots of jagged edges which send the sound waves out into many different directions so the sound doesn't sound like its hitting the wall and coming right back at you. Finally, the Density Dial is basically how many different reflections you hear from the diffusion setting. As the manual explains, in the real world the density would be infinite however that room might not sound perfect for your needs, so this dial, to me, is one of those ones you play with till it sounds good.

SCTV: For readers who struggle with EQ, could you explain briefly the difference between grouping the string tracks and applying a standard EQ vs. changing the EQ in the ArtsAcoustic reverb?

Daniel: The main thing here is striking the best balance for the sound you are aiming to achieve. When I talk about doing EQ within ArtsAcoustic, you have to remember that the EQ I am changing within the plug-in is only going to effect the reverb. So, therefore, the EQ will *only* affect the sound depending on how dry and wet the signal is.

Think of the EQ on the reverb as which sound frequencies are bouncing around the room. For example, if you had a room with acoustic treatment to stop all of the bass frequencies, that would be the equivalent of lowering the bass EQ in ArtsAcoustic.

If there are bad sounding frequencies in the sound before it even entered the reverb, I would EQ that first because like I say, the EQ within the reverb is designed for sculpting the sound of the reverb (which is only the wet signal).

One bit of advice I would offer here, if I may, is that you should always approach things like EQ by using your ears, rather than using frequency charts of where instruments should be. If it sounds good to you, then it is good.

SCTV: When you made your EQ change in ArtsAcoustic, it's in the Damping section. Could you briefly touch on their 3-band damping concept?

Daniel: Like I mentioned in a previous question, the best way to think about the dampening section is to think of it as the type of acoustic treatment of the room. Like those foam like acoustic tiles you have for your studio, some are designed to stop bass frequencies and others are designed to stop high frequencies. You tweak this EQ (dampening) to create the type of room you want by placing those virtual tiles on the wall.

SCTV: Have you tried other software reverbs to see if they're capable of achieving the same results you achieved with ArtsAcoustic? If so, what did you find?

Daniel: As mentioned above, I did try other types of reverb but I found them either too limiting, processor heavy or simply I found it took too long to achieve the types of sounds I wanted. ArtsAcoustic sounds great to me and has all the parameters I want laid out in a nice clean fashion.

SCTV: LASS and Symphobia come with their own onboard EQs courtesy Kontakt. Did you use any of these settings or did you turn EQ off and use as is?

Daniel: With LASS and Symphobia, I tend to leave those EQ's on. They never sounded bad to me. So I went with the, "if it isn't broken, don't fix it," mentality. I would just like to clarify that in my last sentence the key word was 'bad' and not 'real'. My aim when mixing or composing is to make things sound good as opposed to real, which, of course, is a very big personal opinion topic for another time.

SCTV: Some have complained that the LASS Violins 1 are a little harsh. How did you get around that? Did you use the full Violins 1 ensemble or one of the others? Or Violins 2?

Daniel: I personally have never found them sounding too harsh but the two things I normally do to get around problems like these are as follows. My first way is to simply dial back the dry signal on the reverb until the harshness goes away (as shown in the video). My second method goes back to my statement in the previous question where I aim for a good sound over a real sound. What I would do is dial back the velocity on the MIDI notes as softer dynamics tend to have less harsh frequencies and then just turn the volume of the patch up to compensate for the gain lost. The pitfall of my second method is if I am planning to have lots of dynamics within the violin line, in which case I would use my first method.

SCTV: Thank you, Daniel.

Daniel: You're welcome!

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