

Spitfire's Mural 1

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / May 12, 2014

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The newest entrance among professional string libraries is [Spitfire Audio's Mural](#) which is the British company's second commercial string library, the first being Sable. Both Mural and *Sable* are part of what Spitfire calls its BML, the British Modular Series which are orchestral instruments sold independently rather than in a large collection, all of which are recorded in London's Air Lyndhurst where the projected RT60 for the Spitfire libraries is 2.2s.

To put *Mural* into perspective within the BML, *Sable* is a multivolume small string ensemble library with 4 Violins 1, 3 Violins 2, 3 Violas, 3 Cellos, and 3 Basses, for a total of 16 players. This is nearly the size string ensemble used in the *Morse*, *Lewis* and *Endeavour* TV shows produced by ITV.

Mural, by comparison, has 16 Violins 1, 14 Violins 2, 12 Violas, 10 Cellos, and 8 Basses, for a total of 60 string players. *Mural* is the size of the large dramatic orchestra and therefore has the potential of being used for both concert and commercial works. I emphasize both since there are those who try to slot libraries into either being for concert work or film work. Given the number of bowings available in *Mural 1 and 2*, slotting *Mural* into being either one or the other would be a serious disservice to both the child and the parents!

Because of the high cost of recording string libraries, Spitfire is bringing *Mural* out over a series of four volumes. Volume 1 (v1.0) is shipping by way of direct digital download. Update 1.1 has just been released (and will be the subject of the next review), as has Volume 2. We'll review Volume 2 once we receive it.

Price

All Spitfire libraries are based on the British pound. Based on its list price of 359GBP, in the UK and across most of Europe, it's fairly priced. However, for we across the pond, some cough syrup may be in order as the price, based on today's exchange rate, leaps to \$605.00. *Mural 2*, at 399GBP, jumps to \$673.00. This is, of course, the list price and does not take into account any intro pricing, special or accrued discounts, and so on that Spitfire Audio may offer.

Language of the Bow

Mural comes with many benefits including multi-mic positions and pre-set stereo mixes. Please see the *Mural* [manual](#) for more details on that aspect of the library.

While I realize that many covet these mic positions, the bottom line is that we don't write music by mic positions, we write by string bowings, or what I call the *language of the bow*. So let's see what we have to work with using *Mural 1*.

Bowings

Bowing	Violins 1	Violins 2	Violas	Cellos	Basses
Col legno	Y			Y	Y
Flautando	Y		Y	Y	Y
Legato (fingered)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Long CS	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Long Harmonics	Y		Y	Y	Y
Long	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Pizz Bartok	Y			Y	Y
Pizz	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Spiccato	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sul Ponticello	Y		Y	Y	Y
Tremolo	Y			Y	Y

While I don't have them, let's still take a look at the bowings available in Mural 2.

Bowling	Violins 1	Violins 2	Violas	Cellos	Basses
Legato Detache (recommnd Vol 1)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Legato Portamento (recommnd Vol 1)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
1'0 Shorts	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
0'5 Shorts	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Col Legno Batt	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Longs Molto Vib	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Longs Sul Ponticello	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Longs Sul Ponticello Muted	Y			Y	
Longs Sul Ponticello Distorted	Y				Y
Longs Sul Tasto	Y				
Measured Trem 150 BPM	Y			Y	Y
Measured Trem 180 BPM	Y			Y	Y
Trills Ma 2 nd	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Trills Min 2 nd	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
FX & Tense Longs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Bartok Pizz.		Y	Y		
Longs Flautando		Y			
Longs Harmonics		Y			
Tremolo Unmeasured		Y	Y		
Staccato Dig					Y

Bowings Opinion

Again, I don't have *Mural 2*, so all the benchmarking for this *Insights* article was done with *Mural 1*. The bowings available in *Mural 1* are certainly a good start and you can produce a credible amount of music with them. But overall, I would have liked to have had at least one short (aka staccato) per section, and if I could have had one more, I would've grabbed the detaches, too, because then I would have had a majority of the meat and potato string bowings.

But that's not *Mural 1's* design. So in the absence of having heard *Mural 2*, but based on the quality I've heard so far, I have to say that if you're going to get *Mural 1*, then you should plan on getting *Mural 2* too, as this will give you a very complete set of basic bowings.

Benchmark Test #1: Jerry Goldsmith's *Wedding Plans* from *First Knight*

This cut can be heard on the *First Knight Extended Edition*. I wanted to test *Mural 1* with an actual film cue. Since I was graced with all the cues, this was a direct opportunity to compare *Mural 1* to an actual scoring session. I tested *Mural 1* along with three other libraries.

Let's look at the score excerpt below which I did in Notion 4. For copyright purposes I have screen captured only three bars which reflects a Db triad *only*. Cellos and Basses are in octaves on the Db. Their *Span of Orchestration* position is in the Low and Sub Bass registers. The Violins and Violas are in open harmony with the Db triad. Violins are in the High Register while the Violas are in the Upper Middle Register. In the actual score, 8 French horns play the theme in triads in the Lower Middle Register.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for three bars. The staves are labeled Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Cell., and Bass. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The Vln. I and Vln. II staves are in treble clef, and the Vla., Cell., and Bass staves are in bass clef. The Vln. I and Vln. II parts play a Db triad (F4, Ab4, C5) in open harmony. The Vla. part plays a Db triad (F3, Ab3, C4) in open harmony. The Cell. and Bass parts play a Db triad (F2, Ab2, C3) in octaves. The dynamic marking is *pp* (pianissimo). The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a light beige background.

Observations

Of the four libraries, *Mural 1*, out of the box with no effects or Eq'ing, sounded most like the recorded session. I tested *Mural 1* with both the Longs and then the Legatos. I can't say they sounded exactly like the session, but they were pleasingly close. I also observed on the Longs that they tended to "linger" a bit after the key is released or when moving to another pitch.

All of the basses tended to rise to pitch on the low Db.

In the upper registers, the other libs were either thin or so thick that they sounded a bit synthy. *Mural 1* was neither thin nor did it sound "synthy" at any point.

Candidly, I would have felt extremely secure letting a producer hear this as I thought it represented the cue well (after editing of course!).

Though not shown in the graphic, the cue calls for 8 French horns. So to keep this within a Spitfire BML template, I would need input from them on how to best stretch the existing BML Horns into eight.

Benchmark Test #21: *Musical Offering* based on William Walton's *The Princes in the Tower*

The image shows a musical score for five string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Bass. The music is in 3/4 time and consists of six measures. The Violin I part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The Violin II part provides a harmonic accompaniment with similar rhythmic patterns. The Viola part has a more active, rhythmic role. The Cello and Bass parts are in octaves, playing a steady, rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The score is written on five staves, with the first three staves for Violin I, Violin II, and Viola, and the last two for Cello and Bass. The first measure of the Violin I part is highlighted with a yellow background.

This an example based on a cue written by Sir William Walton for the movie *Richard III*. The soundtrack is available from Amazon and the score is available from Oxford.

Cellos and Basses are in octaves. Violins and Violas are voiced down in triads.

Though only 6 bars it brings out that all string libraries have issues with close harmony as written here. Yet this is very simple meat and potatoes writing. Here I tested *seven* different libraries. I used legato bowings on all the libraries for the upper strings and pizzicato on the cellos and basses.

Observations

Absolutely out of the box, the one library that I would have to rank as #1 would be *Mural 1*. The absence of a staccato (short) was painfully felt. And even though I could have substituted spiccato on the cello/bass parts, the effect was not what I wanted. So I opted for pizz with all the libs. The actual bowing called for was *detache*, but of the libs that had it, I wasn't overly convinced. If I'm sent *Mural 2* for review, then we'll see how it works with this test piece.

Conclusions

My immediate reaction when I first heard *Mural 1* Violins 1 out of the box, was that these were strings to make love with. I just could not get over their beauty.

But! A lot of libs elicit this "love at first hearing" reaction which is why the test pieces for me are so critical. I wanted to test *Mural 1* with other libs with real cues and a piece I intentionally wrote to put these libraries through a basic stress test so I knew what I was working with musically. Having lots of mic positions and pre-mixes is a really cool thing. But for me, the music and the bowings are first.

Based on the bowings list above, with *Mural 2* added in, you do have a sufficient number of bowings to do excellent work without being overwhelmed with choices.

Getting writing gigs is hard enough. The one thing I cannot afford is worrying as to whether or not a string library is going to make me look like an idiot because it doesn't reflect well what I wrote as I wrote it. And equally important, do I have to spend 500 hours really learning a library to get it to sound good?

I'm neither seeing nor hearing that with *Mural*.

That said, this library has a lot of features, so there is a learning curve even though it's in Kontakt format. I mean the Spitfire guys have their own workflow approach that you do have to get used to. Not that it's hard, it's just different. And then there are the mic positions to learn followed by the stereo mixes.

On Mixing

The question will be asked, "Do you need to EQ and add any reverb because of *Mural's* long RT60?"

I posed that very question to Christian at Spitfire. He very honestly replied that they used two hardware items for these issues. The first was a Manley EQ and the second was a TC Works Reverb 6000 to glue the final composition together.

Other Mix Considerations

Based on my tests, you may want to create stems of the *Mural* strings and then using delay, add in a little more spacing stage left to stage right. I found that this makes vertical harmony, regardless of the library, sound a bit more natural.

What About Divisi?

The notion proclaimed by some that divisi string writing is for the concert hall is pure silliness. One of the signature techniques using by Jerry Goldsmith was five part harmony across divided violas, cellos and basses leaving Violins 1 and 2 to perform in the upper registers either in unison or octaves. In the middle register, this leaves a gaping hole for soli French horns or other instruments.

As *Mural* has no divisi capabilities, Spitfire recommends using *Sable* to create the "divided" lines, and for *naturale*, to return to *Mural*.

In Closing

If you're someone who writes for a living like I do, then I think you owe it to yourself to fully check *Mural* out. It's a beautiful sound that benchmarked well against a live recorded scoring session done in Los Angeles where the strings were recorded as *strings* and not "designed strings" as we're so often hearing today. It's not so much that *Mural* has a "Hollywood" sound, it's that *Mural* sounds like real recorded strings. And because of that, *Mural* is not, to use a Hollywood term, typecast.

Because of that, you have a tool that lets you write in lots of different moods and styles without the *futz*ing (a Southern expression) that must be put into other string libraries to achieve a similar end.

Training Suggestion

I do have a training recommendation for Spitfire which is to consider setting up a series of online seminars for *Mural* users on how to get the most out of this lib. No other developer does this for their own libraries, leaving the bulk of training to videos, customers teaching each other in forums, and often, a lot of guesswork. A direct training approach with Q & A is long overdue in the industry.

Something to consider.

Peter Alexander is the author of the Professional Orchestration, Scoring Stages, and Visual Orchestration series of books and video lectures available at www.alexanderpublishing.com.

This article was previously published at SonicControl.tv