Insights: The Truth About Vienna's Dimension Strings

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / January 23, 2014

Just a few days before NAMM 2014, the Vienna Symphonic Library released the third installment of their *Dimension Strings*, the violas, so that now users have violins, violas, and cellos, with the first installment of the basses releasing on March 1, and the balance at an undisclosed date. On February 28, 2014, the early bird special of €795 comes to an end. On March 1, 2014 the price jumps to €1190, which based on the exchange rate today is roughly $1612.00.

I first reviewed the Dimension Violins on March 7, 2013.

Some things in this article I will repeat from my March article 2013, particularly for those attending the 2014 NAMM show in Anaheim. As a disclaimer, I am not a dealer for Vienna and this library was provided for review.

Design Considerations
Those who are part of my *Visual Orchestration* courses will immediately recognize what I'm about to write. In virtual orchestral sample library land, there are two approaches for designing a library. With the exception of VSL, just about every developer puts their emphasis on creating a library which is a closed system, meaning that the entire virtual orchestra is recorded in the same room with every section recorded in their onstage seated position. The obvious advantage of this approach is that if the library is well recorded, the end user need only concern themselves with composition, MIDI mock-up considerations, and putting a touch of reverb on the mains. EQ, salt and pepper as desired.

This is *not* VSL. It wasn't VSL in the beginning. It's not VSL today, and it's not going to be VSL in the future. Herb Tucmandl, president of VSL, is firmly committed to a vision he has never once flinched from. He has proceeded in a direction as solid as the Rocky Mountains in providing end users with an orchestral sample library that they can shape as they desire.

It's like the story of three graduate school MBAs who all read *Dress For Success* and bought a spiffy new gen-u-wine all leather briefcase which they each brought to a post-exam job interview set up by a Big 8 accounting firm. Each candidate was asked the same question.

How much is 2 + 2?

Candidate #1 answered with 4. He was politely thanked and didn't get the job.

Candidate #2 got ticked and wanted to know what kind of company and corporate leadership would ask him such an inane question. He stormed out in a huff. He didn't get the job.

Candidate #3 thought for a moment and followed up with another question: *What do you want it to be?*

He got the gig.

And the reason that that young MBA got the gig is why someone buys VSL. It's not the only reason, but it is one of the top buying reasons.

You can go to the VSL samples and ask the question, "What do I want it to be?"

I emphasize this because no other orchestral library developer has this philosophy. Put simply, Vienna stands alone in this design approach, and despite the criticism of many, they keep breaking new ground and setting new standards as they have with the Vienna Ensemble Pro and MIR.

This leads to another truth about Vienna. Once the main orchestra and the Vienna Instruments Player was complete, they then began developing tools to enable customers to shape not just the sound of Vienna, but of most any library. Thus was born the Vienna Effects Suite (when there were already plenty of effects suites on the market including one in just about everyone's sequencer) and their new pride that's beginning to impact how some mix, MIR.

Ensemble Size
Below is the size of the Dimension Strings. Everything I wrote about this size ensemble in my Berlin Strings article applies here, too. The asterisk indicates that there are no second violins and these must be created by using the transposition trick. More on that shortly.

8 Violins 1
8* Violins 2
6 Violas
6 Cellos
4 Basses

Look carefully at the above numbers. A stupid sentence. All the numbers above divide by 2. This means that for Violins 1 you can write div a 4 as you can for Violins 2. For violas and cellos you can write div a 3 and for four basses div a 2.

This is another design consideration. Players sit two to a music stand, also called a *desk*. So eight players represent four desks which can be four different parts. Or two different parts, or just one part for the whole section.

Only one other library comes close to this capability – LASS. That's it. There are no others.

However, over the past ten months of testing Dimension Strings and also the Dimension Brass, similar to LASS, you can either double the parts and/or through the transposition trick create:

16 Violins 1
16* Violins 2
12 Violas
12 Cellos
8 Basses

One reason this works is because of how the strings (and brass) were recorded. Sticking with the violins, the section sound of Violins 1 is built by adding 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 which yields an 8-person section. A build-up results which creates a sectional sound. This is not new to Vienna in that over the years, some of the top MIDI mock-up specialists have acquired every

solo string library available and used the 1 + 1 + approach to build a sectional sound. That I'm aware of, Vienna is the first developer to push this technique to create a section as they have/

So by using Violins 1 a second time, then doing the transposition trick to create 8 more players which you then double, you get 16 Violins 1, 16 Violins 2, etc.

Others have tested this and posted their findings on the VSL forum.

One caveat: try it and see if you like it. If you do, then you're able to create two strings out of one.

Two other points I want to bring up. Because of how Dimension Strings are designed you are not limited to doing "orchestral" as we understand it today. You can just as easily take the Dimension Strings and recreate Baroque ensembles. You can within this one library, without needing the transposition trick, set up smaller ensembles like the original 13-piece one used by Copland in Appalachian Spring. Here, two string quartets with a single bass was used, and with plenty of divisi writing! Or you can even create small string ensembles as might be used on a vocal date. Consequently, not *a* template, but possibly many templates for different situations and sounds.

The other point is spatial placement, which we tend to apply mostly to traditional orchestral seating arrangements. But why? Is there a Henry Brant in the house who might want to create a piece for violins only (for example) and similar to a pre-viz in film, set up a unique stage design to see/hear how it might go?

In the words of Mr. Spock, "There are always possibilities!"

The Language of The Bow
Generally I try to list the bowings organized by on the bow, off the bow, pizzicato, trills/tremolo and color bowings. Just for the Dimension Violins this takes a 26-page manual, so multiply that by four!

Below is a screenshot of just one matrix for Violins 1. This will give you a starting idea of just how many bowings have been recorded. And this truly is just a taste because this level of detail has been applied to bowings for each of the four strings for each instrument. So if you want a group of consistent bowings for sul G, for example, you have them.
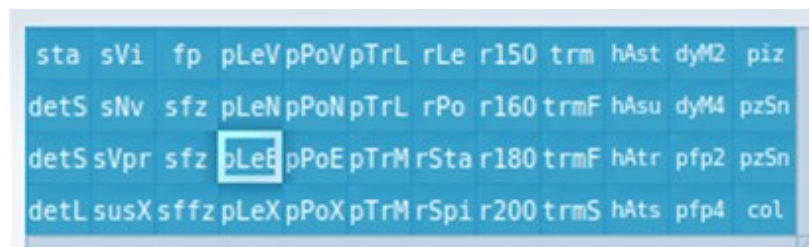
You also have this level of detail (consistency!) for each individual player, by desk, by group, by open string. Along with the "regular" meat and potato bowings, there are also repetition performances, trills, col legno, snap pizzicato, dynamics, harmonics and more. I realize this sentence sounds like an ad, but there is truly no other string library I'm aware of that's available with this amount of detail!

One bowing I do want to single out is the legato bowing. There has been some criticism about its connectivity. First, you should be aware that there's not just one all purpose legato bowing in the Dimension Strings. There's performance legato vibrato, performance trill legato, performance legato no-vibrato, performance legato expressive, and performance repetition legato. As I wrote originally, you can also adjust the legato using Interval Threshold under the Advanced tab.

However, in my testing over the past few months, one thing I've found, and this is true for most string libraries, not just Vienna, is that legato connectivity is/can be affected by tempo, rhythm, and both the early reflections and reverb tails chosen.

I've found that some libraries with their legato bowings cannot play the opening triplet line in Mussorgsky's *Night On Bald Mountain*. I had several other composers test this with me to verify my results and to find which bowings in which libraries could perform it, and how to perform it.

Pardon the pun, but sometimes you do have to "fiddle" with things, regardless of the library, to make certain musical phrases work. And in this case, "fiddling" means learning to work the Vienna Instruments Player beyond a rudimentary level.

The Dimension Strings Sound
As mentioned above, the Dimension Strings sound is created by adding individual string players to make a section. The sound is different, a little "thicker", compared, for example, to libraries where the entire section is recorded.

So the question is, "How do you best bring out the sound of the Dimension Strings?"

After a lot of testing with Vienna's string libraries, Dimension Strings and other libraries (including LASS), I've consistently found for me that the sound I like best comes from the Vienna Suite Convo Reverb with the FORTI/SERTI package created by Numerical Sound which VSL represents.

For example, one of my favorites is 24 ER Orch 36 99 Med where the ER starts at 36ms and the entire length is 99ms. I also like adding in a TILT Filter Dark 3 C3 for the violins and violas and TILT Filter Dark 3 C2 for the cellos and basses. From here I can pull my covering reverb tail from FORTI/SERTI, Hybrid Reverb, or a software or hardware reverb from outside the Vienna family.

But the key to getting the great sound, in my testing, rests in selecting the right early reflections. With FORTI/SERTI you make your selections using an A/B comparison which only takes a short time. Not everyone will agree with this, but it works for me.

I also find that bringing down the dry (source) helps to soften the sound.

The Dimension Strings & Spatial Placement
Another aspect about Vienna's design concept is enabling you to place wherever you want the strings and any other orchestral instrument they've sampled. As there are six different seating positions for the strings, you can do any of the six you want with Dimension Strings. Vienna doesn't limit you to the standard seating plan. The same is also true for the Dimension Brass. You can place them conventionally or in other concert seating arrangements. Seating contributes to your overall sound. So you have the choice.

For spatial placement, you have two options within the Vienna family and two outside the family.

Immediately and for little cost, there's MIRx for three rooms: Teldex Berlin, the Vienna Concert House Mozart Hall, and the Vienna Concert House Big Hall. Of the three, I prefer the Teldex Berlin. MIRx, once engaged, automatically spatially places the Dimension Strings, Brass, and other Vienna libraries. You can also select pre-EQ and a feature brought over from MIR called natural volume. To make use of this you will need to update to the Vienna Instrument Pro. There's virtually no learning curve for spatial placement. Just insert the instrument, select your room, and MIRx plus the Vienna Instrument Player Pro do the rest for you.

Next up from Vienna is MIR Pro or MIR 24.

If you want to do spatial placement outside the Vienna family, there's Virtual Sound Stage and SPAT from Flux/Ircam Tools. One thing about SPAT is that SPAT is not MIR. When using SPAT to work with the Vienna libraries, I turn *off* SPAT's reverb and merely use it for spatial placement. For string libraries that tend to be wide or bigger than life, SPAT has a control that enables me to narrow the stereo width to get a more natural sounding recorded string sound.

I mention these alternates because some think that you can only use MIR to get the most out of the Dimension series which just isn't true. At minimum, there's MIRx. And then you have these other options I've mentioned.

Conclusion
Hopefully this article has given you some Insights on the Dimension Strings series. It's a powerful library with powerful features that definitely merits your consideration given the options you have to choose from in just the first quarter of 2014.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.