

The Vienna Instruments: First Look

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / February 14, 2006

We look at the Vienna Instruments from the Vienna Symphonic Library.



The new Vienna Instruments en total represent what the Vienna Symphonic Library calls its [Symphonic Cube](#), the third step in its evolution from the First Edition (the Classical Symphony instrumentation), and the Pro Edition (the Impressionistic Orchestra instrumentation).

In the US, the complete Symphonic Cube, if you buy all the extended editions, will cost just under \$11,000US. When I first heard the VSL presentation several years ago, it had always been planned that the Symphonic Cube would cost \$10,000 US. However, for those who bought the First Edition, there would be a stepping-stone procedure called the VIP plan whereby no one would pay for the same sample twice.

This procedure worked well going from First to Pro Edition, although it was still a sizeable sum of money, even on the upgrade. With the Symphonic Edition, a shift occurred. Originally, VSL was to be a GigaStudio 3.0 product. When GigaStudio 3.0 was late to market, the VSL folks had to make a decision as to whether they should wait for GS3 or release in GS2.54. While the good folks at Tascam hate hearing and reading this, the bottom line is that they were not giving any developers, much less VSL, a clear idea of when GS3 would be released. This is significant because from the onset, VSL was originally to be released as a 24-bit library. By going with 2.54, by default, VSL had to release The First Edition as a 16-bit library, and later, also the Pro Edition.

Between the Pro Edition and the Symphonic Cube, VSL released a smaller series of instrumental packages under the Horizon Series name. Some of these were repackaged excerpts from the larger library while others, like the Classical Guitar, Epic Horns and others were recorded new.

With the Symphonic Cube and its individual components, the VSL team made a drastic, but uniquely wise decision (from my perspective). Heretofore, they had developed libraries for GigaStudio, Logic's EXS24, with special downloadable programming for Native Instruments Kontakt 2.0 and Yamaha/Steinberg's HALion samplers. However, between the release of the First Edition and the first wave of the Symphonic Cube, a new innovation emerged, the Sample Player. With the sample player, you

bought the library pre-programmed in a self-contained software package. It could be installed on either a separate computer or on the host computer containing the sequencing program.

This was a brilliant innovation because:

- 1) the customer bought a self-contained package which was easy to understand conceptually vs. having to make a two-step purchase of sampler, then library.
- 2) the customer could sequence, load libraries, and record all within one computer system.
- 3) for the OEM, they could bring out a 24-bit library.

For the OEM, to buy into the sample player costs big bucks. Some reports are that up to \$30,000 is needed in advance to cover the R&D time, duplication and projections on sales that have to be prepaid before shipping.

In creating a sample player for his library, the OEM, has a pure marketing/sales decision to make: he must choose a player that functions on both the Mac and Windows platforms, and where some of the tech support is shared.

In looking at these factors, Herb Tucmandl, President of the Vienna Symphonic Library GmbH, with his investors, made a bold move. Rather than license from another company, they would simplify matters and create their own sample player for both the Mac and PC platforms.

No decision is without its consequences, and for VSL, the consequence, separate from the R&D dollars to be invested, was how to re-establish the VIP program since with the release of the Symphonic Cube, GigaStudio would no longer be supported. With GigaStudio not being supported with the Symphonic Cube, there was no easy VIP upgrade path to follow since the 16-bit samples were now being replaced with 24-bit.

After a great deal of internal deliberating (from what we hear anecdotally), it was decided that everyone would pay the list price for the basic Symphonic Cube, but those owning earlier libraries qualified for discounts on the extended editions depending on what they owned. An online “calculator” was programmed to calculate this new “VIP” approach. We hear that because of the diversity of VSL customer buying, there are nearly 15,000 possible ordering combinations!

Another decision made was that owners of the previous libraries, under the current licensing agreement, can't resell and transfer their registrations.

A third decision was that the library would be copy protected using a Vienna Key. With the purchase of the Symphonic Cube, one Vienna Key is included. Additional keys can be bought for \$23US each from the local distributor. When individual libraries like Woodwinds or Chamber Strings are bought, no Vienna Key is included. The customer must purchase the Vienna Key separately.

These latter decisions caused a huge uproar that started on the Vienna site and spread to others. As predicted, the chief complaint was no VIP plan to offset the cost of the new basic Cube Edition (however, the price of the Extended Edition is significantly reduced with the new applied VIP program). Second some customers felt angry that in purchasing the new Symphonic Cube, their previous library purchases were obsoleted, and while still perfectly useful, were sitting on the shelf like a dead stock, not producing income.

As a buyer/user, my feelings on these points are:

- 1) The VI player is a huge innovation and giant leap forward that once learned, saves a lot of production time.
- 2) At \$23, no one should complain about “buying” copy protection. Here, I think, no matter VSL did, no one would be happy. But with the ability to buy Vienna Keys at \$23 each, I’m able to spread out the library appropriately across my systems.
- 3) If the only Vienna library I’m going to use is Symphonic Cube, then because of this innovation, unique to other companies, I should be able to sell and transfer licensing of the First and Pro Editions of the library. However! This could be offset by the release of GigaStudio VSTi, which if released at Summer NAMM in Austin, could offer additional uses even for those owning the Symphonic Cube Vienna Instruments. At minimum, I think VSL could do a trade-in with ALL the DVDs returned to Vienna directly and a credit given towards the Extended Editions and other libraries not yet acquired. What VSL would “lose” in upfront sales would be regained through sales of a pre-owned library, plus a lot of goodwill from customers.

With such an idea, only VSL’s distributors would be unhappy because they would lose a potential slice of the pie. I’m sure, however, this could be worked out. And I point out to VSL, the real servicing and customer support comes from the dedicated, mission directed people at the VSL web site. Except to fulfill the order, the VSL customer’s true relationship is with VSL directly. And that’s true for customers of Garritan products with their forum on www.northernsounds.com and EastWest and their forum at www.soundsonline.com.

Despite my feelings about this, it would be unfair to not point out that Mr. Tucmandl has undertaken to record, and give away at no charge, a new series of sectional violins called The Passionate Violins (English translation since I’m lousy at spelling in Italian), to those who upgraded from the Pro Edition to the Symphonic Cube. That’s very gracious and more than fair. However, as former President Harry Truman noted, “No matter how hard you try, there’s always going to be some SOB that’s not going to like it.”

FLEXIBLE & EFFICIENT SYSTEM NEEDS

At my request and that of others, the Vienna team ran and posted the results of a series of stress tests on various PCs. The purpose of this was to determine a basic “parts list” for those who wanted Vienna Instruments-only systems. Seven machines were used in the test including one laptop. From this, we discovered that the Vienna Instruments are the “Jeep” of sample players.

Here, I want to make a significant point that may be missed by many. If I’m wrong, someone should correct me, but I can’t remember any software company ever creating a stress test and publishing the results for their customers as VSL. The VSL team should win a tech award for this alone. Thank you, as this takes the mystery out of what to buy for additional PCs in the recording studio.

Of the seven systems initially tested, it’s system #7 that tells the story. And anyone currently running GigaStudio on a PIII, 1Ghz system with 2GB of RAM should take notice: Vienna Instruments run on PIII’s! On a P4, using a program from Yamaha/Steinberg called V-Stack, you can open up 16 different Vienna Instruments. Using another program called “Chainer” with V-Stack enables you to open 24 “instances” of Vienna Instruments. As a comparison, using VSL in EXS24 format on a Mac, it’s common to open 32 instances or more. So with Windows XP, the number of instances achievable is fairly comparable to the Mac, but at a lower cost. On a PIII with the specs I listed above, you can open up five (5).

For more detail, see the test results I copied over from the VSL site at the end of this first review.

CONNECTIONS

Unless you're familiar with all the various software programs allowing for setup and connections, this can seem a daunting task. However, it's really very straightforward. To put this into a perspective, I'm briefly covering Mac to PC connections, then PC to PC connections.

MAC TO PC CONNECTIONS FOR VIENNA INSTRUMENTS

Yes, you can install Vienna Instruments on your Mac. I haven't done it on mine yet. Instead, I'm still installing on various PCs in my studio.

For about \$49 you go to www.steinberg.net and download a program called V-Stack. V-Stack installs a virtual mixing board into your computer (Mac or PC) including a fully functional EQ section. With V-Stack, you have the ability to submix within a single system, then record that audio into the main sequencing computer. You only need to make sure you have an audio card with ASIO 2.0 drivers to make it work.

You only need ONE (1) MIDI port to make this work. So on this V-Stack system, you can use the Steinberg MIDEX3 which V-Stack is specifically designed to use.

You could use a lower priced USB model from M-Audio, but where Steinberg is concerned, I always think it's better to use the Steinberg hardware to insure timing accuracy.

For audio cards, the jewel of the market is the E-MU 0404 card with a street price of \$95. VSL tested the 0404 earlier in 2005 and it delivers a very powerful clean sound for a remarkable price. With the 0404, you get 1/4" stereo In and Out (aka I/O), a pair of MIDI connectors for MIDI In and Out and S/PDIF using a Lightpipe connection (aka, ADAT Optical). The 0404 also comes with PatchMix which contains over 600 effects that can be used within V-Stack. For orchestral work, I don't use them. Instead, I route the audio from each V-Stack system into a MOTU Traveler. With this setup, I now have all the audio coming into Logic where I add effects, EQ and record the final work.

VSL has tested V-Stack with MIDIoverLAN, but you'll still need an audio card.

PC TO PC CONNECTIONS FOR VIENNA INSTRUMENTS

You can use the same approach for connections as with the Mac. Or, if you're sequencing with either Cakewalk Sonar or Cubase SX, you can save several hundred dollars per machine by installing FX Teleport on the Cubase/Sonar System, and then by installing FX Teleport on all the other systems in your studio. Benefit: you connect all the computers in your studio to the main computer using LAN cables and a Router. For best results, you need GigaBit LAN inside each computer. If it's not on your motherboard, you can buy a card and install it.

HOW'S IT SOUND?

I'll cover this in more detail in the next review where I'll cover the joys of installation. However, the general consensus is that VSL sounds even better than before. And now, a note on the strings.

One of the major complaints about VSL in the past, and it's still true for the present, is that VSL strings lack the big full sounding sweep of the so-called "Hollywood" sound. And that's true. To an extent. The bottom line, and what every working composer who has to use sample libraries knows from Los Angeles to London to the Netherlands is that it takes two or more libraries to create a truly realistic string section sound.

As a working composer, I would LOVE to have one library that does the whole job. But the reality is that you need more than one string library especially when writing vertical harmony. Here, by placing VSL on the lead lines and other libraries on the inner harmony parts, a far more realistic effect is achieved. This is true for all sample libraries, not just VSL.

In fact, let's just get it on the table that you need two or more libraries for each section. No one wants to hear read or hear what I just wrote, but it's the truth. It's also what I teach the Learners who have my Writing For Strings courseware. More in my next review.

CONCLUSIONS THUS FAR

If I have a bias, it's because I've known these folks from the very beginning. However, I think the best compliment I can pay is that I put my money where my mouth is. I've not discussed installation in this portion of the review because since the release of VI in late February, there have already been several updates. So when I talk about installation, we'll do so with the most current update available.

VSL VIDEO TUTORIALS (Left side of page)

https://vsl.co.at/en/Instruments/Symphonic_Cube#!Instruments_Overview

AUDIO DEMOS

https://vsl.co.at/en/Instruments/Symphonic_Cube#!Demos

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