Insights: Miroslav Vitous String Ensembles 2.0

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / March 8, 2012

The Miroslav Vitous String Ensembles 2.0.1 library is the most velocity sensitive general string library on the market. Consequently, SE2 is not just a player's library, it's a library designed to be *performed*, live or in the studio.

This review reflects the 2.0.1b update which is available as a free download for registered MV 2.0 users. The 2.0.1 replaces the existing 2.0 files. It adds an additional 78 programs. Per Miroslav Vitous more free updates are in the works. Because this library is so vast, I'm covering what I feel are the more important points.

Background

This library is developed by Miroslav Vitous, a Prague Conservatory and Berklee alumni, and the former head of the jazz department at New England Conservatory of Music. A renowned jazz bassist, Mr. Vitous is the founding member of the jazz group Weather Report and has played with such musicians as Art Farmer, Freddie Hubbard, Bob Brookmeyer, Stan Getz, Herbie Mann, Miles Davis and Chick Corea.

In the early '90s, he released his legendary 4-CD sample orchestral library in formats for Akai, E-MU, Gigastudio, and Roland which cost composers US$3500 for the set. Several years ago, the original library was licensed to IK Multimedia and rereleased as the Miroslav Philharmonic.

In the 2009-2010 season, Mr. Vitous released his new String Ensembles 1.0 in Engine format. In January 2012, he released String Ensembles 2.0 in Engine 2.0 format which is a 2DVD 11GB set available through a small group of dealers and shortly his own web site. String Ensembles 2.0 will be followed by both a brass and woodwinds library.

First Listen

When you first listen to most string libraries, many sound loud and in your face. That's because in the psychology of sales, loud = big and big = better.

That's not what you get when you first load MV String Ensembles 2.0. That's because MVSE2.0 fills a sonic gap in currently available string libraries with its softer, more symphonic sound that lends itself well to lyrical, melodic writing – think Alexandre Desplat for *Twilight: New Moon*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows 1 & 2*.

Said British composer Rohan Stevenson (*Merlin*) about SE 2.0:

> *I must say, these strings are surprisingly pleasing. Particularly the sustained violins are extremely lush and expressive. The different velocity layers have their own individual expressiveness so that the sound is really organic. You really get a sense of the players pulling the bow through the note. The pizzicatos are great too, really great in fact. And the inclusion of sul ponticello is very welcome – not many other libraries have them.*

Performing With the Library
The Miroslav Vitous String Ensembles 2.0.1 library is entirely velocity sensitive. It's designed to be *performed*, whether playing live or when recording for studio work and MIDI mock-ups.

Understand this and you understand how to approach and use the library.

Play the keyboard lightly, and it sounds soft. Play the harder and it sounds louder. Leaning into the keys produces an even richer, more expressive sound. The result for the end user, as testified in writing to me by several of the demo composers, is that SE2.0 is quick to learn, quick to work with, and is as easy on the brain as it is the CPU since you can just sit, play, and get a great sound. I emphasize this since the other major commercial libraries on the market are usually velocity sensitive on the short articulations only.

Thus, the more expressively you're able to perform, the more expressive SE2.0 sounds.

The best way to understand this is to start with three key Violin folders containing the *patches*, which in Engine 2.0 language are called *layers*. These folders are Full Sections/1st and 2nd Violins, VS Mod Wheel Velocity Zones, and Round Robins.

Full Sections, 1st and 2nd Violins
All of the programs in this folder are velocity sensitive and *none* of the programs, as in *not one*, has any mod wheel implementation.

If you want mod wheel implementation for volume or expression, it's a snap to do in Engine 2.0 with its MIDI Learn feature. Once you've assigned the mod wheel, you have the full volume range from *no sound* to loudest.

The Full Section programs are programmed Violins 1 + Violins 2 giving you a solid 24 violins unison sound. Violins 1 are a 14-person section while Violins 2 are a 10-person section.

In this folder, as in the Violas, Cellos and Basses, are the following type programs: sustain, sustain expressive, sustain legato, sustain legato expressive, sustain swells, various detache, pizz, staccato, tremolo, trill tool, and sul ponticello.

Modwheel Velocity Zones
This folder contains selected programs designed for more traditional film scoring applications. The programs are still velocity sensitive, but with mod wheel crossfades. However, there is a difference between these mod wheels and the ones you can program in the other folder in that Mr. Vitous has restricted the volume range to work in a more symphonic manner conducive to MIDI mock-up work. When you bring the mod wheel down to the very bottom, you still hear a little sound (meaning it doesn't fade in from zero).

Mr. Vitous' reasoning for programming the mod wheel patches this way interestingly enough, was explained in an unrelated quote by Hans Zimmer:

> *If you want things to sound big, make sure you limit your upper dynamic range. All instruments – especially percussion – sound bigger when played relatively softly. You can always turn it up.*

Round Robins
Again, all velocity sensitive. However, you're given several different RR approaches to select from, each yielding a slightly different result.

The Second Library Within
Miroslav Vitous has the only string library that goes beyond giving customers the fundamental string library. With SE2.0, Mr. Vitous has included a rather complete mini-symphobia for strings. By this I mean that Mr. Vitous has included all string programs (though approached totally different from Project SAM's Symphobia 1 and 2), unison and octave combinations, pads, and even a starting string template yielding roughly a 40-track setup.

These also are all velocity sensitive and for those wanting to use SE2.0 in live performance, give you really beautiful pre-programmed string combinations not found in any other library.

Time Saving All-String Programs – These are the first of the symphobia-like programs in SE2.0 and they're found in Projects. There are two combinations: Violins – Cellos – Basses (used in West Side Story's orchestration) and Violas – Cellos – Basses. The VS-CE-BS have five variations while the VL-CE-BS has two. There are two different performance types for each combination found in two separate folders.

String Templates – Again, these are found in Projects. You have pre-set templates for the Violins, Violas, Cellos and Basses. I didn't count all the programs in each section, but this looks like a 40-track string section template ready to go. Loading the templates is a quick way to get introduced to SE2.0.

More importantly, Projects is where you can create your own MV templates very quickly, either for a full section or individually for Violins 1 +2, Violins 1, Violins 2, Violas, Cellos, and Basses.

As a Logic user, I found that the Vienna Ensemble PRO was ideal for working with either Projects or setting up a separate template just with VE Pro.

String Pads – Miroslav created a really great set of programs that I tested out with the five pieces for MIDI mock-up I wrote for the *Writing For Strings Course*. These programs are clearly labeled as Pads (sustains). I tested on a Jerry Goldsmith inspired voicing of Root (basses), Fifth (cellos) and Third (Violas), and it was very easy to pull off. The blend was just great. Depending on what you're writing you'll find these to be a very useful set of programs.

And again in live performance, will give you great string colors to work with.

The Language of The Bow
As with all the newer libraries, you are the virtual concertmaster. MV SE 2.0 gives you a goodly amount of bowings to choose from. The chart on the next page shows the bowings (aka articulations) available with MV String Ensembles 2.0.

Miroslav Vitous Language of The Bow

On The String	Off The String	Special Effects	Tremolo	Pizzicato
Detache	Spiccato/Staccato	Sul Ponticello	Tremolo	Pizzicato
Sus Legato			Sul Ponticello Tremolo	
Legato Detache			Trills Whole Step	
Staccato			Trills Half Step	
Detache Marcato				

Each section has its own folder for Round Robins.

String Ensemble Overview

MV SE2.0 comes with two completely different string sounding ensembles, the Main Library and an experimental set called Blends. The Main Library has a very lush, beautiful sound, while The Blends are less lush and more aggressive. Because they're a bonus to the original library they have fewer articulations than the Mains. See the chart below.

2 Ensembles For Main & Blends

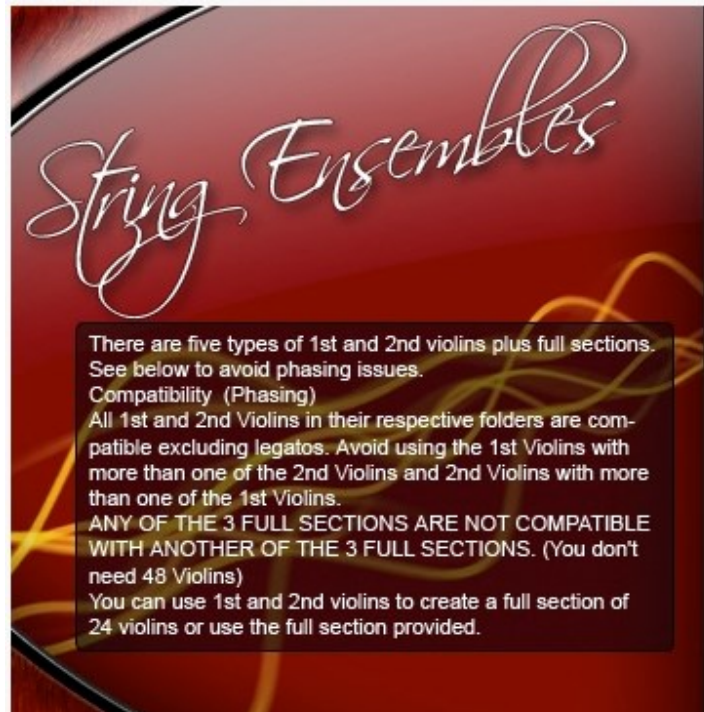|	Large	Small
Vlns 1 + 2	24	
Violins 1	14	10
Violins 2	10	10B*
Violas	8/14	8
Cellos	10	5
Basses	8	4

* = NAMM 2012 Update

Panning

Like Vienna, you have to use panning to position the individual sections whereas the combinations are pre-panned for you.

Some will complain about this, but since so many use Vienna Ensemble Pro, using PowerPan you can set the panning in a few seconds. Since there are 5 predominant seating positions for the string section, you can select the one that works best for your piece without being locked in to the standard seating arrangement. And when blending MV SE2.0 with other libraries, it enables you to match and blend them more easily.

Overall, you have a very practical string library that's player driven. While it lacks some of the more sophisticated features found in LASS like ARC, Stage and Color, its completeness and simplicity in learning more than make up for that. Also, sometime in later 2012 there will be paid updates available for advanced trills and glissandi/portamento.

Recording Aids

Mr. Vitous has also included helpful insights inside the Engine player. The screen capture below, for example, explains how to pick violin programs to avoid phasing.

String Ensembles

There are five types of 1st and 2nd violins plus full sections. See below to avoid phasing issues.
Compatibility (Phasing)
All 1st and 2nd Violins in their respective folders are compatible excluding legatos. Avoid using the 1st Violins with more than one of the 2nd Violins and 2nd Violins with more than one of the 1st Violins.
ANY OF THE 3 FULL SECTIONS ARE NOT COMPATIBLE WITH ANOTHER OF THE 3 FULL SECTIONS. (You don't need 48 Violins)
You can use 1st and 2nd violins to create a full section of 24 violins or use the full section provided.

Legato Implementation

In checking with Mr. Vitous, he now has Legato Interval method patches being programmed for the library which, as I understand it, will be a free update. The newer LI patches, as in the other string libraries that use this method, will be monophonic.

Once the new LIs are released, you won't have to choose between either methodology. You'll just pick the one that works best for your performance/recording situation.

Hence, the existing library does not use the LI method.

However!

Mr. Vitous has created what he calls a mapping technology legato for the detaches that can be played single line or polyphonically. Depending on the string section, Mr. Vitous has created detache legato programs (look in a folder labeled Det Legato) that have 2-3 speeds (med, fast, faster) and a special mod wheel program which lets you switch between the programs depending on the tempo of the piece. Below is the Violins Det Legato folder covering 24 Violins, 14 Violins and 10 Violins. The mod wheel program contains all 3 speeds, unfortunately, Mr. Vitous neglected to label the section size for it! Well, a quick email to the registered base will fix that problem until the next major update. Nonetheless, even with a minor labeling glitch, you the player still have a 2-3 speed detache legato performance choice *per section* (violins, violas, cellos, and basses) for any tempo!

VS Det Legato
MV-1st VS 14 Det Legato medium.ytil
MV-2nd VS 10 Det Legato medium.ytil
MV-VS 24 Det Legato Full medium.ytil
MV-VS 24 Det Legato full.ytil
MV-VS 24 Legato Det med fast.ytil
MV-VS 24 Legato fast.ytil
MV-VS 24 Legato faster.ytil
MV-VS MW Leg med fst fstr.ytil

Computer Stuff
MV String Ensembles 2.0 Engine 2.0 player is backwards compatible to Windows XP on the PC, and the G5 (10.4, 10.5 and above) on the Mac. I originally installed the earlier version of Engine on my G5 (pre-Intel) with no problems. I installed the newer Engine 2.0 on a Mac Pro 12-Core with no problems.

Tech support on Best Service Engine is handled by Best Service.

For those like myself on 64bit systems, you can use any Engine 2.0 in your sequencer, but really, for best all around computer performance, better to get the Vienna Ensemble PRO and run all your 32bit apps there. This way, depending on what you're using, the sequencer is free to read all the RAM in your system, Mac or PC.

Programs load in the blink of the eye.

My Observations
My initial mistake with SE2.0 was approaching it the way I approached Hollywood Strings or LASS, which is exactly the wrong approach. Once you understand that SE2.0 is completely velocity sensitive, your expectations for using it are reset in that the primary level of expression comes from your playing with volume/expression assigned to the mod wheel adding to that expression.

Writes Mr. Vitous in the 2.0.1 update PDF:

> *However, you must choose your own velocity according to your project. We have experienced that if the velocity of the strings is higher than a standard classical volume, it becomes to adapt fusion sound and it begins to sound synthy.*

Consequently, you'll need to work with your keyboard controller and velocity curves within Engine to get the feel that's best for you.

My next lesson was in getting velocity levels just right so that the beautiful Prague sound emerged, a darker warmer sound which is unlike any other string library. That's because the velocity zones are not mathematically placed as in other libraries. Instead they're placed based on the samples themselves. Here's the range as reported by Mr. Vitous:

0-80: *pp, p, mp*
81-104: *mp to mf*
105-127: *mf-f*

The more lyrical sound, I've found, comes when staying within the 0-80 velocity range.

However, when checking this for technical accuracy, Mr. Vitous didn't agree! He wrote:

> *Actually the best vel zone would be from 0 – 110 as the MP changes to MF at 105. Anything above the 112 is dangers as it gets very loud. If you want to play 115 on the keyboard you have to hit really hard so hard that you could not play any music or voicings. Then they can get the F and FF from the special patches made just for that and adjust the volume to the need.*

I then wrote back and asked, "What special patches?"

Writing back, he pointed me to the Det Marcato and Sustain Expressives folder (see below) for all string sections. Here you find specially programmed patches to handle the louder dynamics. Those patches labeled **Max 2 Voices** mean not to perform more than two pitches in vertical harmony with that program

VS Sustain Expressive

MV-1st VS 14 Sus Exe.ytil

MV-2nd VS 10 Sus Exe.ytil

MV-VS 14 Sus ff Lead max 2 voices.ytil

MV-VS 14 Sus Forte exe.ytil

MV-VS 14 Sus Sforzato f.ytil

MV-VS 24 Sus Exe 1.ytil

MV-VS 24 Sus Exe.ytil

MV-VS 24 Sus ff Lead max 2 voices.ytil

MV-VS 24 Sus most exe bright.ytil

SE2.0 is a first rate team player when used in combination with other libs. I tried MV SE 2.0 with a multi-part divisi test using LASS where I simply switched an appropriately sized MV ensemble for one in LASS. I was very pleased with the results. Others tested it with Albion and found that SE2.0 blended well with it.

Given the fundamental library plus all of the unison and octave combinations, templates, and all-strings programs, I found MV String Ensembles 2.0 to be a complete production package and time-saving to use.

For those who like editing programs, you have many options within the Engine 2.0 player, and as a registered MV user, you have the option to upgrade to Independence Pro.

Conclusion
Mr. Vitous has produced a beautiful sounding, useful, practical, Swiss-army-knife of a string library for professionals and everyone else that's great for both live use and studio use and value priced.

Since Mr. Vitous is a bassist himself with symphonic performance experience, the library is enriched by being given so many performance options including variable speed detache legato that can be used polyphonically, specially programmed patches for louder dynamics, a good variety of bowing choices, a bonus experimental library called The Blends, large and small studio string ensembles, and the late Spring/early Summer release of the additional LI programs.

Just to mention a few!

Fortunately, Mr. Vitous has a new website being worked on that will give plenty of tutorial support by videos and MP3s to show you how to really get the most out of his library.

Because of Mr. Vitous' relentless pursuit of perfection, as demonstrated with multiple updates since the original January release, and more announced, this 2.0.1 update makes String Ensembles 2.0 even more of a contender than the original 2.0 update.

And as I've already written, there will be more updates prior to the release of the new brass and woodwind libraries.

Work cooperatively with Mr. Vitous' velocity/volume approach and you should achieve a warm beautiful, lyrical sound, whether performing live or recording.

Because of its velocity/volume approach, String Ensembles 2.0 is an excellent next step for those wanting to upgrade to their first independent string library, not only for its sound and ease of use, but also because for now, Engine 2.0 is backwards compatible to Windows XP, enabling you to load a goodly sized string section within the 4GB RAM limitations of that OS.

For those who already have several string libraries, adding SE2.0 to your collection adds to your palette with a stand-out color the others don't have.

It merits your consideration. SE2.0 is available from Best Service.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.