Insights: Assembling a Kontakt Sample Library Orchestra

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / July 27, 2012

If you want to write for Kontakt-based orchestral sample libraries in a manner similar to writing for live orchestral ensembles, you can now assemble a virtual orchestra that may empower you to do just that.

With the release of two Native Instruments Kontakt based woodwind libraries in July and August 2012 (Cinewinds and Berlin Woodwinds), customers can now, for the first time, assemble a Kontakt-based sample library orchestra by combining libraries from independent developers. In this article, we'll look at orchestral issues behind your buying choices, libraries using the Kontakt format that meet these orchestral criteria, and the pitfalls and pratfalls to consider before you buy.

The Size of An Orchestra
Before considering a standard orchestral size, buyers need to understand that the concept of a film orchestra comes from the concert hall, not the scoring stage.

TV orchestras can be as small as the ensembles used by Haydn (who had just nine (9) total string players) while a large budget film orchestra can be as large as the concert requirements for a Mahler symphony including 8 French horns, 6 trumpets and upwards to 60 strings.

> **Note:** We know the recommended string section sizes for composers like Mahler, Strauss, and Wagner, because in selected scores they noted the number of strings required to play the work as aurally envisioned.

Expanded string sections from Mahler, Strauss and Wagner also allowed for the expansion of the woodwind and brass sections following a guideline I called the Rule of 3s and the Rule of 4s in my Writing For Strings Course.

That said, there is a standard orchestra size which is the basis for both symphony orchestras and large film score orchestras. The string section size listed below balances with the brass and woodwind size sections posted. However, actual string section size can vary by orchestra but they'll still hover around the size listed below.

Flutes: 2 (w/Flute 2 doubling Oboe)
Oboes: 2 (w/Oboe 2 doubling English horn)
Clarinets: 2 (w/Clarinet 2 doubling Bass Clarinet)
Bassoons: 2 (w/Bassoon 2 doubling Contrabassoon)

French horns: 2-4
Trumpets: 2-3
Trombones: 2-3 Tenor Trombones
Tuba: 1

Violins 1: 12
Violins 2: 10
Violas: 8
**Cellos:** 8
Basses: 6

Timpanist: 1

Percussionists: 2

Harp (optional): 1

String Divisi: Violins can be div a 2, div a 3 and div a 4. Violins 2 can be div a 2, Violas, cellos and basses can also be div a 2,.

The graphic below gives you an idea of both size and seating arrangements and also reflects, panning considerations. In the strings, two (2) players share a stand while each woodwind and brass player has their own stand.
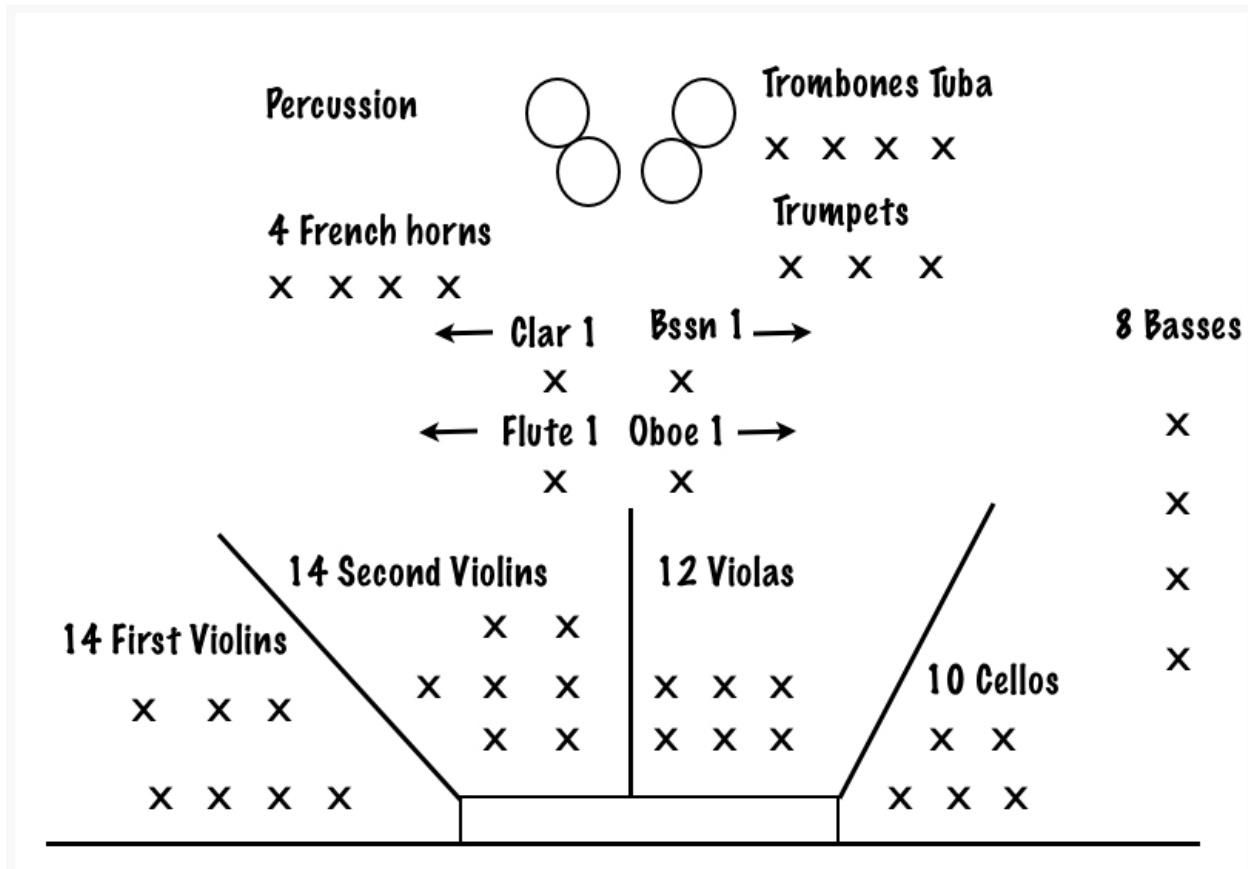
Sectional Libraries to Consider
Purely from an orchestration perspective, a starting group of Kontakt libraries you might consider are:

Berlin Woodwinds (releases August 8, 2012)
Sample Modeling Brass Ensemble Bundle
LASS: Strings (divisi capability)
Cinematic Strings 2.0 (non-divisi but satisfies standard orchestra string section size)

Berlin Woodwinds from Orchestra Tools. Because of its design, it *appears* that Berlin Woodwinds will enable the composer to write fully for woods in 2s both individually and in unison respectively with flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon. I have to say "appears" as BWW has not yet been released, but the demonstration videos posted on YouTube and the Orchestral Tools website certainly suggest the accuracy of my statement.

There are three flutes allowing for an expanded section, plus piccolo.

There two oboes plus English horn.

There are two clarinets, three clarinets recorded in unison, but no bass clarinet.

There are two independent bassoons, but no contrabassoon.

What all this means for the composer is a standard woodwind section with doubles for piccolo and English horn, but not bass clarinet nor contrabassoon.

Consequently, to have woods in 3s or woods in 4s, complementing instruments from other libraries are needed.

If you have Kontakt 5 complete version, there's a mini-set of woodwinds licensed from VSL that can fill in for the third oboe, the third clarinet/bass clarinet, the third bassoon/contrabassoon.

For other woodwinds in Kontakt there's also the new Cinewinds and Cinewinds Pro.

Sample Modeling Brass Bundle from Sample Modeling.
Again, based on size and balance, Sample Modeling Brass works similar to Berlin Woodwinds by enabling you to build a brass section up to the standard orchestral size of three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, and four French horns.

Other current brass libraries in Kontakt include Project SAM Orchestral Brass Classic, Cinebrass and Cinebrass Pro (when six horns are needed, then the library by size that meets the requirement is Cinebrass, while their Pro Edition has 12 French horns).

Now Strings
There are two main string libraries in Kontakt: Cinematic Strings 2.0 and L.A. Scoring Strings 2.0. As I've written in previous LASS reviews, its size is that of a Mahler string section. Because of its mini-ensemble design, with one library, the composer can create string ensembles as similar in size to Haydn/Mozart all the up to Mahler, which by the way, is the size of a large A-list movie.

To add solo strings, Spitfire Audio's Solo Strings are also in Kontakt format.

Thinking Compositionally
What Berlin Woodwinds, Sample Modeling Brass Bundle, and LASS have in common is that you can build sections to write independent lines, unisons and light vertical harmony within each section just as you would for a live orchestral ensemble.

> In short, if you like how they sound and work together, you can *potentially* write for these three sections as you would a live orchestra.

Historically, you don't really see significant string divisi until Berlioz, Mahler, Strauss, and Wagner, and later Debussy and Ravel. All others, when a sixth harmony part was required in the strings cleverly wrote the parts to allow for double stops. And according to Carl Czerny, a student and later "employee" of Beethoven, all the Beethoven symphonies could be played with a string ensemble size as small as 66443. Knowing that string section sizes could so widely vary, divisi was rarely deployed in the strings until later years and bigger budgets were available.

That's why Cinematic Strings 2.0 is such a valid choice for the standard orchestra string section.

Percussion
Percussion writing opportunities are significant for both concert, film, and game works, along with specialized percussion ensemble compositions.

Three companies using Kontakt stand out here: Cinesamples, Project SAM, and Spitfire Audio. This includes:

Cinesamples: Deep Percussion Beds, Drums of War, Drums of War 2, CineSnare, CineCrash, CineHarp;

Project SAM: True Strike series;

Spitfire Audio: Spitfire Harp, Spitfire Percussion, and Spitfire Harp.

Specialty Libraries
Three problem solution libraries include Cinesamples' Hollywoodwinds, Orchestral Tools' Symphonic Sphere, Project SAM's Symphobia Series, and Spitfire Audio's Albion.

And Now Some Caveat Emptor
What's oh so obvious in music technology is that innovation is alive and well. And what independent entrepreneurs (aka developers) have created is downright startling when you consider how much financial risk is involved for smaller companies, especially when "customers" who need their creativity, cannibalize these entrepreneurs through piracy.

What's not so obvious is that this innovation is global. You find it in Australia (Cinematic Strings), Germany (Orchestral Tools), the Netherlands (Project SAM), the United Kingdom (Spitfire Audio), and the United States (Audiobro and Cinesamples).

This brings us to four immediate buying considerations.

First, many of these products are priced in the currency of the native country. So they may be more expensive/less expensive then you planned depending upon the exchange rate and where you live.

Second, with the exception of Project SAM who is sold through retail and downloads, all others are sold direct. So no bundle pricing for a complete sample library orchestra. From my perspective, the only two companies who *can* put together significant bundles within their own product family are Cinesamples and Spitfire Audio.

Third, depending on the host country, customer service response time may take 1-2 calendar days longer because of time zones, not sloppy service.

Fourth, you'll need a fast Internet connection since most of these entrepreneurs are now distributing by way of digital download.

Customer Training

The only thing consistent with all these companies is that they're using Kontakt. All similarities end after that. Since Kontakt is so customizable, every design approach is different, every GUI is different, and every learning curve is radically different.

With some orchestral libraries, you largely learn the interface once, and you're done.

But with all these other Kontakt-based virtual instruments, your learning results will vary. Out of many 11-13 page PDF manuals, two maybe three pages, will actually be about customer training. The exception is the Audiobro manual for LASS which is uber complete.

So just because a library is in Kontakt doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be better, faster, easier to learn. So plan extra time.

Recording Considerations

Some libraries are recorded in a pre-panned position while others you'll have to spatially position. Some libraries are dry while others are slightly ambient. The reality is that no developer, at least so far, has demonstrated how to mix their library with another company's. So aside from needing the right tool to help with this (Ircam Tools SPAT might be worth looking at), until a template is formed, mixing will be trial and success initially.

Conclusion

The desire of many a composer has been to have a block of libraries that enable and empower them to write for samples as they would for live players in virtually any genre. Well, it looks like that time may well be here.

Disclaimer: Alexander Publishing is a dealer for Project SAM. All other products listed are sold direct by each respective company as digital downloads.

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