Insights: Berlin Strings

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / January 21, 2014

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Overall, my view is that Berlin Strings has a beautiful sound that just works right out of the box. You don't have to work to shape it. You don't have to spend a lot of time to get it to sound the way you want it to. It already *does* have that sound. Put simply, you don't have to work to achieve a great sound, you start with it. If you're so inclined, you may want to add your own touch by EQ'ing here and there especially in the *f* and *ff* ranges. But overall, all you need is a covering reverb for the whole ensemble and you should be good to go. Even there, be careful because you don't need much.

Pure and simple, this is a string sound that pulls you in by the heart.

As I hear it, there's little to do except to play, do your MIDI edits, and enjoy the results. All the instruments are recorded in their actual studio position as shown below in this screen capture from the Orchestral Tools YouTube promo video.

The Berlin Template
With the release of Berlin Strings, you can now put together your own Orchestral Tools Teldex Template sans the brass – at least for now. The new Berlin Teldex Template consists of the Berlin Strings, Berlin Woodwinds, The Timpani, The Glock, the Grands, instruments in Symphonic Sphere (Harp, Percussion, and supplemental ensemble programs), and Orchestral String Runs.

Though Berlin Strings demos have included these other programs, some practical instruction from Orchestral Tools as to how to set all their programs up as a single orchestral ensemble is required.

String Section Size
Orchestral Tools has chosen a unique size string ensemble to record. Consequently, if one were to compare it to other string libraries, the only direct comparisons could be to the LASS C sections, and the nearly complete Vienna Dimension Strings. Of the three, only Berlin has recorded an actual second violins section whereas both LASS and Vienna Dimension Strings use what's called the transposition trick to create their second violins. In fact, many demos on the VSL site show the use of a Violins 2 and multiple woodwinds which is made possible by the use of this technique.

Similar to LASS and VSL, I tried several different techniques to try to get the 8 players in Violins 1 to sound like 16. Nary a nudge. Berlin Strings is what it is, but that's no handicap.

Berlin Strings is created from the recorded performances of 28 players:

– 1st Violins: 8 players
– 2nd Violins: 6 players
– Violas: 5 players
– Celli: 5 players
– Basses: 4 players

These are ensembles only, no divisi. As I already mentioned, the second violins are originally recorded with six different players. They were not created using the transposition trick.

There are no muted strings, but there is a button you can depress to simulate muted strings.

So, since Berlin Strings isn't the blockbuster epic almighty ninja sound, what can it really do "film wise" to justify purchase?

Actually, it can do just about everything, just more compactly. Here's why.

Carl Czerny, a student of Beethoven's wrote that the Ninth was designed to work with a string section as small as 66442.

Rimsky-Korsakov wrote that the smallest string section he recommended for symphonic work was 86433.

In his book *The Score, The Orchestra and The Conductor*, conductor Gustav Meier recommends for the works of Haydn and Mozart, a string section of 86542.

The Berlin Strings exceeds expectations from Haydn to Beethoven in that it can handle a symphonic work with a slightly fuller string ensemble of 86554. Go to the Berliner Philharmoniker channel on YouTube and look for their excerpt from the DVD of Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in Mozart's Symphonies Nos. 39-41. This is an example of that string sound with a reduced string section and the inclusion of a small woodwind section (which Berlin Woodwinds can emulate) and two horns (which have to be supplied for now from another library). In listening to these brief examples from each of the three symphonies take note as to how *big* this smaller section sounds.

(Berliner Philharmoniker: Mozart's Symphonies Nos. 39-41 on DVD / Simon Rattle)

And now, from Mozart to Hollywood. Berlin Strings is also capable of executing the so-called "Hollywood sound". Though many will disagree with me (despite my own scoring stage experiences in Los Angeles), I write "so-called" because the Hollywood sound is uniquely a compositional sound with whatever the current Hollywood sound is being determined by leading A-list composers. This sound is always in transition because it's based on how the composer chooses to handle the orchestral ensemble.

Consequently, I think it's more realistic musically to say, that the Berlin Strings will handle most dramatic scoring situations you throw at it, but with a slightly smaller size, as several of the Berlin String demos have ably demonstrated.

For the new *Endeavour* series from ITV, Barrington Pheloung uses a string ensemble of 54332, plus one each of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, two French horns, harp, piano and guitar. Woodwind numbers vary per cue. Go to Andrew Brown's channel on YouTube and look for the video titled "Endeavour." This is an example of what this ensemble sounds like and is another good idea of what you're capable of achieving with the Berlin Strings, Berlin Woodwinds and Orchestral Sphere with The Harp. To achieve this sound, you'll need to carefully select the right covering reverb.

(Andrew Brown: Barrington Pheloung Recording Music for the "Endeavour" TV Series)

As you can hear, this also is a very big sound that can be achieved with Berlin Strings. My point is this: Bigness of sound is in the writing.

String Bowings
Compared to Vienna and the Hollywood Strings, Berlin Strings has the third most number of string bowings. Consequently, you have ample opportunity to be a virtual concertmaster so that you can actually plan the bowing of your piece. Using Violins 1 as our model, let's see how much *Language of The Bow* you have to work with.

On The Bow
Legato (4 types)
Sustain (9 types)
Staccato (2 types)
Portato/Loure Short
Portato/Loure Long
Blurred Portato
Blurred Staccato
Blurred Sustains
Double Strokes Slow
Double Strokes Fast
Triple Strokes Slow
Triple Strokes Fast
True Dynamics
Repetitions 16th Fast/Slow
Repetitions Triplets Fast/Slow

Off The Bow
Spiccato
Spiccatissimo
Blurred Spiccato

Pizzicato
Pizzicato
Pizzicato Perc

Trills/Tremolos
Tremolo (4 types)
Hook Trems
Trills (HT/WT)
Trills (HT/WT) Accented
Hook Trills

Note the absence of special effects bowings which will be presented in Special Bows 1 Expansion A (Violins and Violas) and Special Bows 2 Expansion B (Cellos and Basses). These have been recorded and are in editing now per the Orchestral Tools web site. Bowings covered in these Expansion sets are Sul Ponticello, Sul Tasto/ Flautando, Flageolets/ Harmonics, and Col Legno.

So at this point, looking at the bowings presented, you have more than enough bowings along with the "sordino-maker" to produce very effective string ensemble arrangements.

Updates
As this is v1.0, there are a few bugs and glitches. I've already received the first update, and before the Orchestral Tools team left for the NAMM Show in Anaheim, California, the following was posted at VI-Control:

*Just wanted to keep you updated on Berlin Strings. Today we closed the fixing and bug list for Berlin Strings 1.1. The main issues and features we´ll work on are the artifacts on the runs mode in the 1st violins, the hanging notes issue if the note off statement will not be sended by the sequencer and we would like to improve the sample starts of the legato transitions on the 1st Violins. They are fluid but sometimes it feels like the transition has to much time before the recorded transition really starts. Sometimes that feels like a "pumping" effect. I´m optimistic that we will sort that out, beside some other reported smaller bug fixes. We´ll also add the new **Ostinato Legato patches** and **more playable glissandi patches** for some other sections.*

We schedule the release of 1.1 for the second week in February. So Berlin Strings 1.1 will be the main project for us in the next weeks.

So the company is aware of these issues and is working on them with a printed date of resolution.

This lib takes 10 hours to download and install. And I must say, I'm so glad they're working with Continuata because it really made downloading and installing a very simple affair.

What I Think of Berlin Strings
I know I'm going to get asked this question on FB, VI, my e-mail, et al. So I'll give it my best shot.

I look for those things that give me a writing advantage. The Berlin Strings are a sound I don't currently have for three reasons: the size, the sound, and the bowings available for an ensemble that size which enables me to be a virtual concertmaster. One lesson that has really kept repeating as I've produced both the *Visual Orchestration* and *Scoring Stages courses* is that you don't really learn a library and what it will do for you by playing with it, but rather, by setting aside the time to play and explore the bowings as Thelonious Monk or Bill Evans would do for hours as they'd explore a series of chord changes or the best piano technique to use to bring out this connection they'd made with the music.

And that's what I feel here with Berlin Strings alone, and when combined with the Berlin Woodwinds, The Timpani, and the Harp (and percussion) from Symphonic Sphere you have a *sound* that stands on its own.

For example, when I listen to what Barrington Pheloung does for *Endeavour* and has done for *Morse* and *Lewis* with nearly this sized string ensemble, I'm moved emotionally. At Andrew Brown's YouTube channel you can also find another piece by Barrington Pheloung called "Fugue," from the *Endeavour* series. Listen to it heart open.

(Andrew Brown: "Fugue" by Barrington Pheloung for "Endeavour" TV Series)

Put simply, I can achieve close to this sound with the Berlin Strings (and Woodwinds) because of size, sound, bowings recorded, and the careful selection of a covering reverb. And the reason I say "close" to this sound is because no matter how great the library and regardless what film company accountants think, samples do *not* replace live players.

Consequently, I want the Berlin Strings because it enables me to produce this genre music along with doing all kinds of other writing that I could not do with a larger library because it's too big.

It's not about adding something more to the ole template. It's about developing a new sound with a new template with its own level of expression capable through the Berlin Strings and the other Orchestral Tools libs recorded in Teldex – from Mozart to murder!

I have to be honest. This is an expensive library, especially across "the pond" where we have a weak dollar against the Euro.

The question you have to ask and answer is, "What will Berlin Strings enable me to produce today?" If you look at Berlin Strings from that perspective along with the rest of the libraries they've produced in Teldex, then you should discover that Berlin Strings merits your consideration and a close examination.

Disclaimer – this library was provided for review. It's sold direct at orchestraltools.com

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.