

Insights: Albion

By Peter Alexander / February 22, 2012

Albion. noun. Entered the English language in approximately the 12th Century. Archaic or poetic name for England. Pronounced al-bee-un.

Albion is the newest orchestral brainchild from Spitfire Audio, headquartered in Great Britain. It follows the path of Symphobia 1, Hollywoodwinds, and Symphobia 2 by being a problem/solution orchestral module that does not compete directly with full fledged orchestral libraries from EastWest, SONiVOX, or the Vienna Symphonic Library.

Following the advice of Sun Tzu given in *The Art of War*, it attacks from the side, and at this point, based on the orchestration decisions made before recording, has no direct competitor. It is, in fact, overtly difficult to compare it directly with Symphobia 2, its nearest “direct” competitor.

The “attack” is both subtle and skilful since Albion has recorded things not recorded by the other larger orchestral libraries, namely, advanced orchestration combinations that are time consuming and difficult as dogs to get right in a MIDI mock-up.

This, then, sets Albion apart from their direct and indirect competitors. And, it could also form the framework of a future product strategy which, like VSL’s Vienna Special Edition, treats Albion like a core module, and builds around it with subsequent releases.

Spitfire may not have thought that far ahead, but that is certainly Albion’s long term sales potential.

By advanced combinations, I’m talking about those I’ve documented in my books *Professional Orchestration Volume 2A: Orchestrating the Melody Within the String Section* and *Volume 2B: Orchestrating the Melody Within the Woodwinds and Brass* (see alexanderpublishing.com). It’s these types of combinations that make up the entire Albion orchestral sound.

Albion was recorded in Air Lyndhurst studios in the UK. And everything was recorded direct to analog tape and from there, edited.

The result is a warm, slightly dark, luxurious sound.

Note:

All of the combinations were recorded as combinations. None of the instruments, nor sections, were recorded independently and then programmed.

Orchestra Size

The following setup came from Spitfire's Paul Thomson.

Violins 1 = 11

Violins 2 = 9

Violas = 7

Cellos = 6

Basses = 4

French Horns = 4

Trumpets = 3

Tenor Trombones = 2

Bass Trombone = 1

Tuba = 1

Flutes = 2 (one doubling piccolo)

Oboe = 1

Clarinet = 1

Bassoons = 2

Bass Clarinet = 1

Contrabassoon = 1

String Combinations (+ indicates unison, - indicates octave)

High String Unisons: Vls 1 + Vls 2 + Vlas (27 strings)

High String Octaves: Vls 1 - Vls 2 (20 violins)

Low String Unisons: Cellos + Basses (10 strings)

Low String Octaves: Cellos - Basses (10 strings)

High String Unisons: Vls 1 + Vls 2 + Vlas: This is a big dramatic Hollywood sound. Adding the violas to the unison, especially in the upper register, makes for a creamy string sound.

High String Octaves: Vls 1 - Vls 2: This is a big sound that's been used for hundreds of years. Can be hard to achieve "realistically" in a MIDI mock-up depending on the library used. Here, being recorded makes all the difference.

Low String Unisons: Cellos + Basses: An excellent color combination adding strength and punch to a bass line. Mahler made good use of it in *Adagietto* from *Symphony #5*.

Low String Octaves: Cellos - Basses: Used thousands of times. But again, being recorded makes it much easier to use than trying to recreate it in a MIDI mock-up.

High Woodwind Combinations

The Woodwind High Combinations are all unison. They have a more flutey quality with the combination of 2 flutes (or 1 flute + 1 piccolo) + clarinet + oboe. The oboe adds just a tinge of darkness.

Low Woodwind Combinations

While unmarked, it is a unison. Use of the Bass Clarinet rounds out the color from the more double reed sound.

Brass High and Low Combinations

All of the brass combinations are in octaves.

3 trumpets - 4 French horns

2 tenor trombones - 1 bass trombone + 1 tuba

SHORTS

All of the sections have “short” articulations and the Ostinatum allows for repeated note patterns.

BEGINNING WRITING CONSIDERATIONS

You can write unison lines in the Hi Strings, Low Strings, Hi Woodwinds and Low Woodwinds. The Brass, Hi and Low, are all in octaves. Because of the ensemble size, in the low Strings, you can write open three-part harmony with bass-cello-cello. You can also do two cello parts to one bass part.

All of these considerations I've given you are based on orchestration principles. You can completely ignore these and do what you want! And of course, I haven't written about all the great effects and percussion available within Albion.

What you need to be aware of is that you have very elegant scoring colors, very elegantly recorded.

BLENDING ALBION AND OTHER STRING LIBRARIES

Given the size of the Albion Strings (11.9.7.6.4) there are two libraries size-wise that you can use with Albion. The first is released, the second is about to be released.

The first string library to work with Albion is LASS. And here you'll work with the C and B groups. The second library, not being released until early Q4 is the newly redesigned Miroslav Vitous *String Ensembles 2.0: Composer's Dream*. I have an early pre-review version and it has a chamber/small studio group of strings about the same size as Albion's.

With Albion, you'll need at first to work with its mic position selections to get it to “match space” with either of these libraries.

TRUE LEGATO

The phrase “true legato” has the same definition as that of Vienna or LASS. It does *not* mean that lines have to be performed at a slower tempo. Albion true legatos are beautiful liquid and free flowing.

BUYING RECOMMENDATION

Because of its orchestration design, Albion is a potent addition to any composer's palette providing combinations and colors, again, not easily achieved in a MIDI mock-up without a lot of work. In this sense, separate from gorgeous colors, Albion is a real time saver, and therefore worth the money.

I do think that the folks at Spitfire Audio should seriously consider releasing a series of modules starting with the standard Violins 1, Violins 2, etc., and a recording of the unison Violins 1 + Violins 2, as this is one of the big string combinations used in Hollywood scores.

The sound achieved is quite excellent. And unique. The string section size is that of a small studio orchestra while other libraries on the market are Mahler-sized starting with 16 Violins 1.

And so at some point, if a follow-up module was made available with basic strings, solo flute, and oboe, that would be ideal. Equally great would be having recorded versions of the big sound combinations of Violins 1 - Violins 2 - Violas in octaves, along with Violins 1 - Violins 2 - Violas - Cellos in octaves. Both of these are big combinations used in film and concert work, but very difficult to work out and edit effectively in a MIDI mock-up. Whereas when recorded, they work fantastically, as the recorded combinations across the sections in Albion so ably demonstrate.

At this point in my exploration of Albion, I have only have two negatives.

The first is the exchange rate of the US dollar vs. the British Pound Sterling. In the UK, the price of 349GBP is a TOTAL no brainer price. Don't even think about it. Just get it. By comparison in the U.S., it's \$551.98. And at that price point, there's some competition. So I would encourage those composers "across the pond" to spend some time with the Albion demos to hear what's achievable with it.

This leads to my second critique – the demos. Specifically, **the demo page** on the Spitfire Audio website. Sometimes one can be too clever with tongue-in-cheek and as a result, lose clarity. Only the first four demos are clearly labeled as Albion. What are the other demos? Are prospective customers to assume these are Albion? Give a Yank a break, Mate! Label 'em better!

Conclusion

With its advanced orchestration colors and combinations, I can summarize Albion in a single word – *exquisite*.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.