

# L.A. Scoring Strings – Part 1: The NEW Workhorse String Library

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / July 31, 2009

L.A. Scoring Strings is one of the most anticipated sample libraries in the past few years. See why Peter Alexander thinks it's the new workhorse string library.

L.A. Scoring Strings is one of the most anticipated sample libraries in the past few years. It caused an instant sensation when it debuted at the 2009 Winter NAMM Show in Anaheim, California this past January. Composers were struck not just by authenticity, but also by the flexibility of what could be accomplished since LASS (it's acronym) is the first commercial library to be released that's recorded *divisi* strings, the Holy Grail of composers writing orchestrally with sample libraries. It's the Holy Grail because to create a *divisi* passage with current sample libraries requires not just hours, but often, days of work. So anticipation has been high!

On July 24, 2009 it began shipping and on July 28th, our review copy arrived.

Because of the importance of this new library, we'll be doing several reviews on it. In this first part, we'll start by reviewing what orchestral *divisi* is and how Andrew Keresztes, composer/developer/programmer of the library, approached its organization.

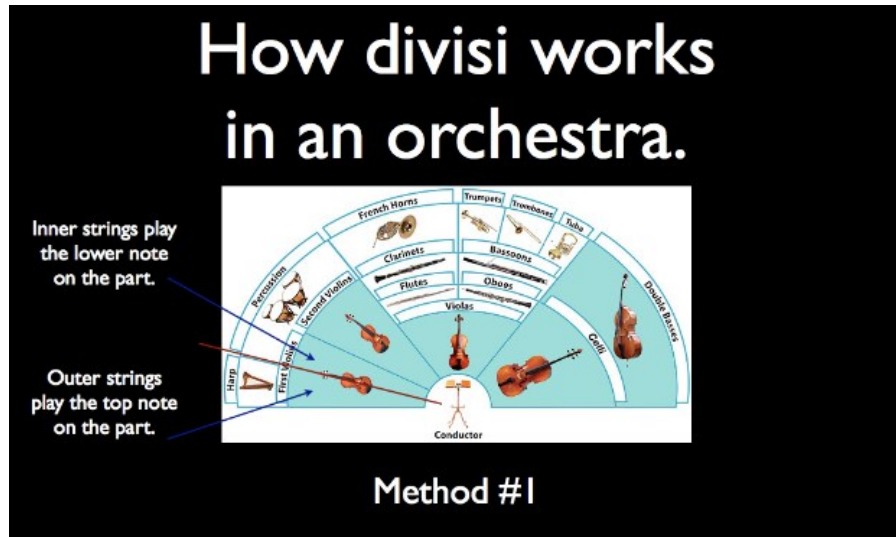
## WHAT'S DIVISI ANYWAY?

*Divisi* is Italian for *divide*. With *divisi*, the strings are divided into smaller sections which allow for both additional vertical harmony parts and coloristic writing, since many orchestral colors are achievable with smaller ensembles within the larger ensemble. Each string section can be divided in two parts (div a 2), three parts (div a three) and four parts (div a four). Of these three techniques, div a 2 is the most common.

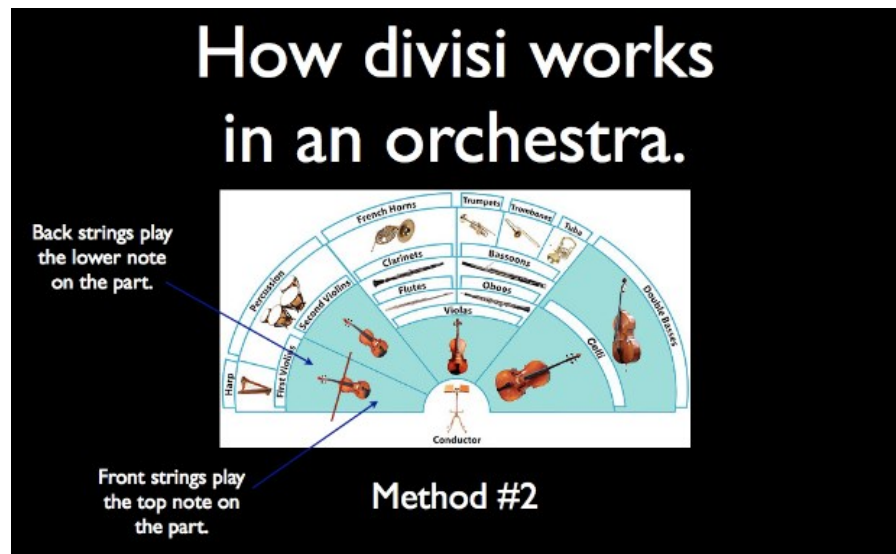
## Two Methods of Dividing the Strings

There are two ways to divide the strings. Let's look at the first method...

Below, the violins are divided in half by left and right. The Left side of the violins (called the outer violins) play one pitch and the violins to the right (called the inner violins) play the second pitch.



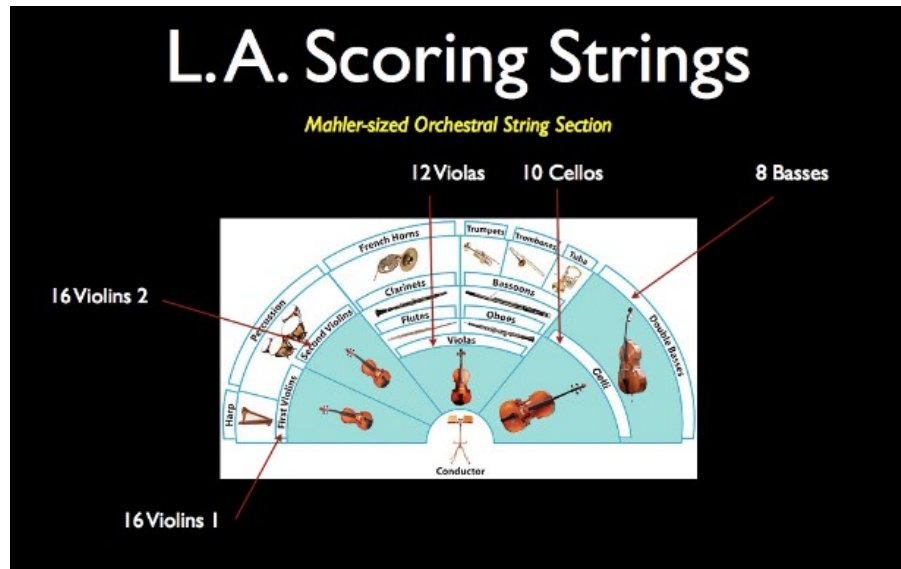
The second method is dividing the strings by front and back. Half the strings in the front play one part and the other half in the back play the second part.



The decision as to how to divide the strings is made by the conductor and the concert master.

## APPLICATION TO L.A. SCORING STRINGS

LASS has been recorded with a large string section. Some will say it's a large "A-list" film orchestra. Others will note that this string section is larger than the standard orchestra string section. From that perspective, I'd define this as a Mahler-sized string section.



Does it make a difference between defining this as a "Mahler-sized" string section vs. film? It does because with such a larger string section, Mahler wrote for:

- 3-4 flutes
- 3-4 oboes
- 3-4 clarinets
- 3-4 oboes (with English horn as a double)
- 2-3 bassoons
- 1 contrabassoon
- 6-7 French horns
- 3-4 trumpets
- 3 trombones and a tuba

Andrew Keresztes recorded LASS using a smaller ensemble within a larger ensemble approach. Because of this, composers, orchestrators, and arrangers can more effectively balance varying sized woodwinds and brass combinations.

The chart on the next page tells the beginning story.

## L.A. Scoring Strings - Divisi Breakdown

	Violins 1	Violins 2	Violas	Cellos	Basses
Full Section	16	16	12	10	8
Div a 2	C-A+B 8-4+4	C-A+B 8-4+4	C-A+B 6-3+3	C-A+B 4+3+3	C-A+B 4+2+2

LASS has three mini-ensembles within the larger section: C,B and A.

The C-Section, with the exception of the Cellos, is that section divided in half. Sections B and A are individually recorded smaller sections with different musicians, so each has its own personality and sound.

For a full unison section sound, you have the option of either recording with the Full Section, or creating a unison over three tracks with C, B, and A.

## L.A. Scoring Strings

### Div a 2 (One Possible Approach)

Full Section → Divided → Full Section

C - takes the top line



A + B (two separate tracks) - takes the lower line



Here's a simple example from Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite, The Fairy Garden*. In the example below, you'll see highlighted three places where Ravel divides the Violins 2 and Violas.

## Simple Example - Ravel Mother Goose Suite - The Fairy Garden

The image displays a musical score for the piece "The Fairy Garden" from Ravel's "Mother Goose Suite". The score is arranged in a system with five staves. The top three staves are for Flute 1 (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Corno (Cora). The bottom two staves are for Violins 2 and Violas. The music is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *pp*, and *fp*. A red line labeled "2nd Violins - Divisi" points to the first two staves of the string section, and another red line labeled "Violas - Divisi" points to the second staff. Three specific notes in the string section are highlighted in yellow, indicating where the parts are divided. A first ending bracket is visible at the top right of the score.

While a simple execution with live players, with electronic scoring, it's not so simple. That's because to create a divisi "sound", the libraries used have to match both sonically and with orchestral weighting so that when going from unison to divided parts back to unison, it sounds like the same string section. This is one of LASS's great benefits. Instead of spending hours or days testing samples and editing to make a simple passage like this work, you just assign the parts across the tracks.

## THE JOY OF CHOICE

Because of how Mr. Keresztes recorded LASS, you have the option of creating five smaller ensembles. It has to be said: for now, LASS is the only single library that enables these scoring opportunities.

## Alternate String Ensembles Possible With LASS

String Quintet	String Quartet	Chamber/ TV	Haydn/ Mozart	“Jazz”
Solo Vn 1	Solo Vn 1	8 Vns 1	4 Vns 1	Violins 1 (4 + 4)
Solo Vn 2	Solo Vn 2	8 Vns 2	4 Vns 2	Violins 2 (4 + 4)
Solo Viola	Solo Viola	6 Vas	3 Vas	3 Vas
Solo Cello	Solo Cello	4 or 6 Cellos	3 Cellos	3 Cellos
Solo Bass		4 Basses	2 Basses	Solo Pizz

These alternate ensembles offer commercial opportunity for those in and out of film scoring. For example, record dates with string ensembles will often use a size similar to jazz. In the jazz world, lots of albums have been recorded with a string quartet. In the theatre, Copland’s original orchestration for *Appalachian Spring* used a double string quartet which can be approximated with LASS. In fact, when LASS is used with the full Kontakt 3.5 program, there are enough instruments licensed from the Vienna Symphonic Library to do a similar sized ensemble. There are also a number of churches that have their own volunteer orchestra with small string section.

Because of how LASS was recorded, a composer can create a realistic sounding track to demonstrate the piece for these smaller ensembles.

## SORDINO (MUTED) STRINGS

With the exception of the first chair player (the soloist), LASS has recorded sustained muted strings for each full section, and A, B and C ensemble sections.

## SO FAR

I’ve started with this musical approach because so often with sample libraries, the tendency is to immediately jump into the more technical knob tweaking/recording issues without first looking as to what can be produced with a specific library, especially outside the world of film/TV and game scoring.

**So let’s start here:** with LASS you can record a lot. I can’t say, “anything you want,” because no library on the planet has that many articulations! What I *can* say is that LASS is not encumbered by the discussion of, “Is LASS for film or is it for classical?”

*LASS is for any genre you want to write in.*

## **HOW IT SOUNDS**

Compared to other libraries, LASS is a little jolting when you first hear it in your project studio. This is because LASS was recorded on a genuine Hollywood scoring stage. So on first listen, it's a dryer sound than what you might expect.

So, add a touch of reverb, or use the basic reverb included with either the Kontakt player or Kontakt itself.

The next step is just going through each of the string sections. You can certainly jump in and grab something for a current project. LASS is very fast that way. But, you will do yourself the greater favor by taking the time to learn the sound of each section's full and smaller ensemble, and then, build some test tracks, in my view, preferably from the symphonic literature and the many John Williams scores out there. The advantage of this more methodical approach is comparing sampled to live, and seeing the changes that come about by manipulating the smaller sections.

This is more than an academic suggestion.

With LASS, you have the genuine opportunity of creating your own string orchestra sound. In other words, a little extra work on your part, and no one is going to listen to your music and say, "Oh, you're using LASS, too, huh?" That's because Andrew Keresztes has developed a specific set of tools and features within either Kontakt or the Kontakt player to enable you to customize your sound. To this you can add effective reverb (Altiverb, Lexicon PCM 90s which you can find on eBay) and custom EQ settings.

A little effort will yield a lot for yourself.

If you have several string libraries, you now have the option with LASS of asking and answering, "What kind of string sound do I want for this project?" That is a very serious scoring advantage.

## **THE MANUAL**

As is often said at a baseball game, "You can't know the players without a program!" This is true for LASS. Mr. Keresztes has created a manual that's actually readable and highly useful. But more than that, it's a mandatory read. To get the most out of LASS, you must work with the manual and the controls.

## **WHAT'S NEXT**

In Part 2, I'll begin benchmarking LASS with specific musical examples from my book *Professional Orchestration Volume 2A: Orchestrating the Melody Within the String Section* and other works.

Because of Sonic Control's "Consumer Reports" approach, where applicable, the same examples used for LASS will be used with other string libraries so that fair comparisons can be made. What we're testing is the out-of-box experience – what you can do now with just what you have in your studio.

## **BUYING LASS**

At present, LASS is sold direct at the Audiobro website.

*This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.*