Insights: L.A. Scoring Strings 2.0

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / August 3, 2012

In this first of a series of articles on LASS 2.0, I'm writing from a particular vantage point as being a LASS user, a teacher of LASS basics via LASS Class, and at one time a LASS dealer (no more since LASS is now sold direct). Taking this triadic view into account, for this first article, I'm looking at LASS 2.0 from a writer's perspective and answering the questions from two perspectives: those of people who write or PM me privately asking for my opinion and for myself to assess how and where I'll use LASS for the kinds of writing projects I have in the fire given the other string libraries I have.

If there's a disclaimer that's required it's that I like writing divisi for some things I do. I also like writing for muted strings and I prefer recorded muted string samples. So for me, LASS and the Vienna Appassionata 2 do the job. My other criteria is that I want the flexibility to write for smaller sized ensembles depending on the work. I don't want to be limited to the Mahler-sized string ensemble, which LASS is, but also isn't thanks to its ensemble approach for creating divisi. Thus, after two years of use, and after going through the update, my personal opinion of LASS 2.0 then and now is that it's a library for all seasons and that it's an excellent career investment.

About a month ago I did a condensed score of Jerry Goldsmith's *Basic Instinct* main theme. Here's a broad summary of the string instrumentation: Violins 1 are divisi. Violins 2 are open non-div. Violas are divisi with mutes. Cellos are divisi no mutes and pizzicato. Basses are open, also pizzicato.

In evaluating the *Prelude to Tristan and Isolde*, there's a short two bar passage with violas div a 2 and cellos div a 2 playing four-part vertical harmony.

And then there's the *Scherzo* in Beethoven's Third Symphony which can easily be performed with a punchy spiccato.

In looking at these three passages, if I wanted to mock one of them up, or just apply these scoring approaches to something I'm wanting to write, is there a single library I can use that has "real" divisi and recorded muted strings?

Or if I wanted to write something that's div a 2 in all sections with recorded muted strings including basses, is there a single library I can use to do what I want to write?

From a compositional perspective the answer is, "yes." There is a single string ensemble library that lets me write div a 2 for all sections and that gives me an upgrade option for legato sordinos which also enables div a 2 legatos for each section.

The one string ensemble library that enables this is still Audiobro's LASS 2.0.

Bowings
The first thing I want to know since I'm the virtual concertmaster of my own works is what bowings are available to me. From a bowing perspective, LASS has the most commonly used bowings found in the literature, concert or film. These are legato, spiccato, staccato, pizzicato,

tremolos, trills, harmonics, snap pizzicato (frequently called Bartok pizz), and now, aleatoric strings. With these bowings you can produce pretty much anything you want.

If you're looking for more string effect bowings, which I do, consider looking at *Symphobia 1* from Project SAM and *Orchestral String Runs* from Orchestral Tools. Composers over time have found these three to work well together.

LASS 2.0 still comes with its First Chair solo strings covering Violins 1, Violins 2, Violas, Cellos and Basses. The addition of these solo instruments, yesterday as today, gives the writer more options within the single library. You can opt to use the First Chairs for layering on top of the ensembles, or individually, as many do.

As an independent ensemble, LASS FC bowings include legato, spiccato, staccato, pizzicato, tremolos, and trills.

RE: LASS Detuning
The next question about LASS 2.0 I'm often asked is about the famous LASS detuning. The detuning is still there, but to my hearing, it's not nearly as intense as it was in LASS 1.0.

The LASS Sound
Now, a few things about the sound from the viewpoint of how it was designed. If you're considering LASS this is important for you to understand when comparing LASS to other libraries that have more ambience to them.

First, LASS was designed primarily for the professional user preferring to shape their string section sound. There's a career reason for this and that is what the late Shirley Walker called the writer's signature sound. The writer's signature sound is that which is achieved by how the composer writes. Next is how the composer shapes their orchestral sample libraries to create the audio signature sound of the work they composed. This enables the client to hear a totally unique compositional final product. But how do you do that if you're not an engineer?

Here are a few things composers I've interviewed have shared with me to pass on.

There are some who use all hardware verbs. One composer, for example, uses two (2) Lexicon PCM90s for the whole mix, not just the strings.

Others use *Altiverb* for the whole mix, while others use Quantum Leap *Spaces*.

Then there is a more hands on approach to using convolution reverb by using the impulse responses (IRs) created originally for LASS 1.0 by Ernest Cholakis of Numerical Sound (in 2.0 these were replaced by the Stage and Color Multis created internally by Audiobro which I'll cover in a future Insight article). In my own earlier tests, I found the original IRs to be utterly transformational, enabling the composer to create a genuinely distinctive signature sound. So much so, that depending on your selection, no one would ever guess that you were using LASS! So if you've updated from 1.0 ot 1.5, you have these to experiment with on your own.

In recent weeks there has been new options opened up with Ircam Tools SPAT.

So in line with its design intent, there are many options for using reverb, convolution and EQ (often at 2k to 3k) for shaping the LASS sound to shape *your* recorded signature sound. In that

regard, I think shaping the LASS sound fits the question a Big 8 accounting firm once asked a prospective employee.

"How much is 2 + 2?" asked the interviewer?

"What do you want it to be?" answered the job candidate.

That's the question you can ask and answer with LASS, "what do you want it to be?" You can't really ask it of library where the sound of the hall or scoring stage is baked in, because in that situation you're getting what you're getting. You can touch the sound up a bit, but shaping it can become more difficult. But with LASS, it's soup to nuts (as with other dryer libraries).

Changing the LASS Sound With LASS' Mini-Ensembles
Below is a LASS class video I did about string ensemble sizes. The discussion continues assuming that you've watched it.

YOUTUBE VIDEO: https://youtu.be/coGYis3ickM

OK, so with LASS there are the ABC ensembles all recorded with different players. C is usually half the section while A and B usually represent 25% each.

Of the three ensembles, A is the most edgy. Drop the A and you're left with your standard orchestra string ensemble. At the Audiobro website, click on the **Demos** tab, find the **LASS Music Demos**, then listen to the demo *She Was a Fair LASS* to hear ensembles both separate and blended.

Then, per the video, you can create a number of smaller sized string ensembles, including one similar in size to that used by Haydn and Mozart.

So from my perspective, you're getting a very large string section whose size works for both film and the concert hall (I've covered this in earlier articles so I refer you to those rather than my repeating myself). And you're enabled by the LASS design to create smaller ensembles as needed by the project. This matches my criteria because it means my time is better managed within the single LASS library.

For completeness, there's one other option I should mention and that's mixing and matching ABC or the full ensemble with other string libraries to create your audio signature sound.

Ensemble Patches
A quick review. At the full ensemble size, the ensemble patches are a great aid featuring gliss programs at various intervals up and down, plus full ensemble patches that span the keyboard for harmonics, pizz, muted strings, spiccato high and low, staccato high and low, tremolos and two sustained (pad) patches, one with three dynamic layers. Project SAM-like programs created with the same program and recorded in the same space. So when I do go to Project SAM *Symphobia 1*, my focus is with those unique string effects they so excellently recorded.

Auto Arranger
If you have decent keyboard chops, one of the great innovations of LASS starting in v1.5 was the inclusion of the Auto Arranger which, once you've mastered it, enables you to create instant divisi as you play. I can't really comment on this feature too much as I've had such a bad time with tendonitis the last year or so, my keyboard skills aren't in a place to give you my experience with it.

Repeated Notes
In string writing, repeated notes are a fact of writing life, but in MIDIland producing lines with repeated notes can be Heartburn Valley because of the editing needed to make them sound as natural as possible. To get around this, Audiobro created what they call AMG which stands for anti-machine gun effect. In performance, AMG triggers alternate samples to avoid sample repetition.

But…

I do have one issue with LASS that I'd like to see addressed in a future update.

If you listen to John Williams' *Duel of the Fates* (from Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace) at about 30 seconds in, there's a soli string line.

To do this line with LASS takes two tracks, editing, plus cutting and pasting. I would like to see a series of patches using the mod wheel organized with legato/staccato/spiccato so that you can have a more linear approach in crafting out a string line.

When reading this for technical accuracy, Sebastian Katz at Audiobro suggested the possibility of switching rapidly between leg/stac/spic with Key-switching and/or program-changes with ARC (Audiobro Remote Control) and alter the stac and spiccato length via CC. I was also asked for more detail in what I'd like to see.

So this leads me, I suppose, to my "fantasy virtual instrument" moment. I'm not the only one to suggest this, but for those developers using Kontakt, I'd like to see more Vienna Instrument-type features that enable you to organize a group of bowing choices within a single instance/single track implementation of Kontakt. For me, this would make for much faster production time overall. Musically it would allow for a more natural flowing linear theme and ease in production when you want to write an ostinato figure as used in *Duel of The Fates*

Support
I'm often asked how good LASS customer support is, and frankly, while it may sound like a blazing sales term, "exceptional" is a good word to describe it. To my surprise, I've gotten

answers back to questions as late as midnight East Coast time. The forum is first rate with no nonsense answers. And with growth, Audiobro has increased their training stance with many tutorials available on their website under the **Demos** tab, as seen in the screen capture below.

LASS is Vast!
At this point, I've only looked at LASS 2.0 from a writer's perspective because to know how you can write with a library is to know what you can produce musically. And you can produce a lot. So many features were added with this update that the learning curve did lengthen. And that's been a pretty standard observation in the forums. But I think that if you look at learning LASS from a writer's perspective first, you'll discover soon enough the mighty library you have to produce with.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.