Vienna Instrument's Appassionata Strings

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / August 10, 2008

The Vienna Symphonic Library's *Appassionata Strings Collection* is so versatile, it could have been named, the *Vienna Workhorse Strings Library*. MP3 demos don't really do the library complete justice. Only when you hear them on studio monitors can you fully appreciate that VSL has captured the studio sound of a recorded orchestra (but without the reverb and pre-panning, thus giving you the freedom to pick you own).

The Birth of the Appassionata
The collection originally started out as a free violins library for Vienna Pro Edition owners who bought the Symphonic Cube. On release, response on the VSL forum was electric. Many Pro Edition owners encouraged the VSL management to record the rest of the orchestra and to make them available to everyone. Happily, VSL did.

Without Getting Overly Technical…
If you're used to the "pure" Vienna string sound, you'll be shocked when you hear how "detuned" the strings are. If you've been to live concerts or participated in scoring sessions with a full string section, you know that each player is a few milliseconds off from another, and that tuned for a live string section isn't the electronic purity of "tuned" for a sample library. Vienna has captured this "in-concert" sound.

Bottom line – a very strong balanced sound.

Articulation Plan
Here's the overall plan for each section:

01 – SHORT + LONG NOTES (staccato, detache, sustained, pizz and tremolo)
02 – DYNAMICS (crescendos and sfortzandos)
10 – PERF INTERVAL (perf legato)
11 – PERF INTERVAL FAST (legato, spiccato, harsh and marcato fast)
12 – PERF TRILL
13 – PERF REPETITION (legato, portato, spiccato and harsh)
14 – FAST REPETITION (quarter = 150bpm, 160bpm. 170bpm, 180bpm and 190bpm)
15 – EFFECTS (grace runs, grace runs fast, cluster, random spiccato)

With basses, you get SHORT + LONG NOTES and PERF REPETITIONS.

Within each group are a number of patches.

How Appassionata Strings Sound
I used a few quick tricks to tell me how this library would really perform.

All Strings – I tested a variety of open and closed harmony chords. In the low register, I tried Root-Fifth-Third, Root-Fifth-Ninth-Third and other similar voicings. Then I tested in the mid and upper registers triads and 4-part structures. Overall, a great sound, a little thin in the upper register, but for an all-strings program, incredibly useful.

Violins – Warm and full, especially in the upper register. For 3- and 4-part vertical harmony, it's just beautiful.

Violas – A real treat. For me the acid test is the low C of the violas. In some libraries, from low C up, it can have a nasal "honking" sound. Not here. Clean, smooth, blends nicely in a vertical harmony stack.

Cellos – Want 4-part harmony ala Nelson Riddle and others? You got it. Two-part, lovely. A trick I learned from Arthur Morton (who orchestrated for Jerry Goldsmith) was to put a viola lead over divided celli in a pad. Works here. Great sound.

Basses – A little small sounding and not nearly as many articulations as I think they should have, but a great sound, nonetheless.

Pops Arrangements
Let's say you wanted to do an arrangement for a singer where you have violins, violas, cellos and electric bass. Using Spectrasonic's Trilogy, and other programs, you should be able to find a good match. The Appassionata Strings are very blendable that way.

Support to the Max
My only real complaint, and one voiced by a few others, is that for the price, the Appassionata Strings lack the same number of articulations as the other libraries in the collection. However, if you're a registered owner, VSL has come up with a serious customer benefit. You can write silentstage@vsl.co.at and describe the articulation you're trying to achieve for a specific piece. The good folks at VSL will then create a custom preset for you and explain how to use it (see the webcast announcing and enjoy Michael's excellent Vienna rendition of a cover version of Here to Stay by the American band Korn).

One of the articulations I felt was missing was the .5 in the basses, which is a kind of detache that lets you create a legato feel. So I put in my proposal for the suggested bass articulation, and within 48 hours, artistic director Michael Hula came back with a terrific solution.

Documentation and Training
On January 22, 2007 VSL posted a 4-color PDF guide that's enormously useful. You need the manual. That's because VI uses velocity switching to change from say p to mf. You need the manual to show where those changes take place. A program can have from one to four velocity layers. And while the velocity breaks are consistent throughout the library, I prefer to have the manual just because it's right in front of me and because of all the extra information it contains. While you can print it out in B&W, my advice is to get some 3-hole punch paper and print it out in color version. There's a lot going on the color makes a useful difference. Kudos to David Ender who produced it.

Note: The Appassionata Strings manual isn't on the DVD with the other manuals, installer, Syncrosoft center, etc. You have to download it from the Vienna web site in the User Area.

For training, you'll really want to spend time with the training vids on the DVD. Or, before ordering, watching them on the Vienna website.

Demos
Here are two demos to start with. On the Appassionata product page at VSL's website, look for the Audio Player on the left of the page. The first demo is called "Anaheim Appassionata's" by

Christian Kardeis. It's somewhat in the style of Batman Begins. When you hear this, you'll know why I think the Appassionata Strings are a real studio orchestra sound. Be sure to listen to this on good speakers and not your laptop.

The next one is by Guy Bacos, and is called "Sunset, Dreams and Nightmare". Although a couple of places here and there sound a little synthy, listen carefully to how well the Appassionata Strings sound using vertical harmony.

My Final Thoughts
This is a library that's clearly worth the time to learn. If you've never had a Vienna library before, start here.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.