

MUSIC FACTOID!

Traditionally, the string section is found at the front of the orchestra, placed in a semi-circular group with the conductor to the fore and in the middle. You can think of each group filling a quadrant of that space, with first violins on the left, then second violins, violas next, with the cello section placed on the far right.

If you're looking to create as real a string sound as possible, it's worth bearing these positions in mind and replicating them with your pan control. The size of the string orchestra can vary dramatically, depending on the type of sound required and the piece of music being performed. Orchestral string orchestras can feature up to 20 players in the violin sections alone, whereas chamber groups consist of smaller numbers for a much more intimate sound.



Virtual strings

If want to build a convincing string sound but aren't sure where to start, here's **Jono Buchanan's** guide to the best software out there

The moment all record companies dread? One minute, a band on their books is making their first album, which is all live guitars and energetic performances. The next, they've sold a million, have delusions of grandeur and want to put a very expensive string orchestra all over their second magnum opus.

Just what is it about strings that instantly add depth and maturity to a sound? Whether you're talking about The Verve's *Bitter Sweet Symphony*, Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*, Madonna's *Vogue* or Pet Shop Boys' *Left To My Own Devices* – or indeed any one of a thousand other songs – it seems it's as much about the lush string arrangements as it is about the song-writing or the rest of the production.

The sheer sense of romance of having a group of highly-skilled individuals add warmth and sonority to your music is impossible for many to resist. The first thing to say about string arrangements is that they fill out a mix. With cello and double bass at the bottom, viola and second violin parts filling out the middle and firm first violin lines providing melodies and shiny treble, it's perfectly possible to write entire pieces just for this ensemble group, either as instrumentals or as dynamic accompaniments to your songs. However, there's a big difference between writing your arrangement, printing out a score and hiring a string orchestra to play your piece to buying a software package designed to facilitate the same result.

Orchestral players spend years practicing, improving and learning. How one player moves from a B to C# will differ from the person sitting next to him, and so the sound of a string orchestra is really a group of individuals playing the same notes but with infinitesimal performance differences. Factor in that any phrase might start with a note that fades in, stops abruptly, or requires players to pluck their strings (or even play behind the bridge) and you begin to see why sampled libraries have grown to such extraordinary sizes. How do you build a convincing amount of variation, taking all of these factors into account, and provide it in accessible software form?

Well, that's the challenge facing these head-to-head contenders this issue. Over the page, we'll try to sort the men from the boys, but for now, one cautionary note: it doesn't matter how good the package is – if you want an authentic string sound, you'll need to do some research. Try listening to some classical orchestral music or to your favourite film soundtracks and try to tune your ear to hear the subtle playing nuances between the different sections. Do this well, and a convincing string sound can be yours. Don't, and you might as well stick with that JV-1080 strings patch...



Personal Orchestra

Supplier:
Time+Space
Tel:
+44 (0)1837 55200
Web: garritan.com



Miroslav

Supplier:
IK Multimedia
Tel:
+44 (0)1223 234414
Web:
ikmultimedia.com

Garritan Personal Orchestra | £115

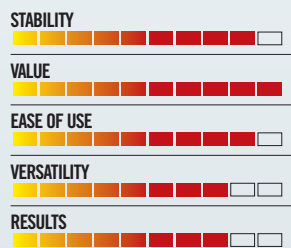
Gary Garritan was perhaps the quickest out of the blocks when large sampled string libraries became a software reality. Released in 2002, Garritan Strings was the first to capitalise on the increased power computers were beginning to offer, along with expanded RAM and ample hard-drive space.

Then, in 2004, came Garritan Personal Orchestra, which boasts a full symphony orchestra for a budget price. The library installs at just 2GB in size, but the clever use of sampled loops means that, for many, this is all the orchestra you'll ever need. For the purpose of this head-to-head, though, we'll just look at the strings.

The emphasis is on providing the user with the likely programs required for most applications, rather than bogging you down with endless rare bow articulations. You get the same programs in each string section, allowing a matched arrangement to be constructed easily. The articulations include long and short

bows, variations like pizzicato and tremolo, and an additional program, 'Lush', that gives you instant romance. This consists of warm, fluffy samples with pleasing amounts of vibrato, lending the result a 'Hollywood' credibility. There's an enthusiastic following for this collection and the website has lots of clips from users, keen to share their offerings with the world. Garritan's new Stradivari Solo Violin looks set to pick up where GPO left off.

FutureMusic VERDICT



You can get lots for your money here; it's so easy to use it's no wonder there's a legion of fans.

IK Multimedia Miroslav Philharmonik | £289

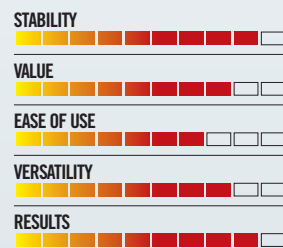
Miroslav Vitrous was another early pioneer of software string libraries, but his sampled sound sets weren't fully consolidated until last year's release of Miroslav Philharmonik. The Czech Philharmonic Orchestra recorded these, and they ooze class. Like GPO, this is a full orchestra in a box, with the added bonus of a full set of choir samples and some other unexpected bonuses too.

Judging it only on its string library, the intuitive interface allows access to a wide range of string programs for each section, including some wonderfully-rounded double bass sounds. The packaged programs include legato strings with vibrato options, muted strings, two staccato programs, two programs of tremolo strings and an extra patch of tremolo strings played over the bridge.

It all sits alongside a generic full strings program, which is a good starting point. The pizzicato patches are warm and twangy, with a nice

dynamic consistency through all the samples. The Philharmonik control panel allows you to tweak EQ settings and incorporate three effects busses, plus offers synthesiser-style control over LFOs and envelopes. Level, pan and output information for all parts is controlled in the main area where 16 instruments can be loaded into a single instance of the plug-in. In the Other Instruments folder, you'll find a smaller ensemble strings group and a string quartet of solo instruments.

FutureMusic VERDICT



A classy sound and packed with a wide range of programs – this is certainly one to Czech out.

EastWest Quantum Leap Symphony Orchestra | from £99

This library was recorded in a pioneering way. During the sessions, microphones were placed in three locations (close, stage and hall), so natural reverb can be opened up on these sounds while they remain, at all times, sample-accurate.

The core library is vast – the full Platinum Professional Expansion (Pro XP) version comes in at 138GB. Like many of the packages here, this is a full orchestra in a box, but again we'll turn our attention to strings.

As you'd expect, a vast range of string programs are available, representing different articulations, ensemble group sizes and the like. The tremolo shimmers away with a sound that's full of intrigue and expectation. The pizzicato patches bounce beautifully and the full string sections, available in a range of player sizes, can add pad-like warmth or articulated precision at a stroke.

What's so nice about the strings on offer is that they require no further work from you, as they just slip

effortlessly into any production you're working on. The orchestra is available in a range of package sizes, with Pro, Platinum, Gold and Silver Editions available, each one with a decreasing number of sample programs.

The ease of use, range and quality on offer has understandably seen a number of high-profile users turn to The EastWest Quantum Leap Symphony Orchestra as their software orchestra of choice for television and film scoring. And we can see why...

FutureMusic

VERDICT

STABILITY

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

This pioneering library of strings (and others) is vast, effortless and reeks of quality...

Vienna Symphonic Library | from £230

Regarded as the most complete orchestral solution on offer, Vienna Symphonic Library offers such a wide range of instruments, your jaw will go slack. Broadly speaking, there are three collections of instruments: Solo Strings gives you a string quartet, whilst Chamber Strings provides an intimate group of six violinists, four viola players, a cello ensemble of three players and a pair of double bassists.

Lastly, the Orchestral libraries are split into two, with volume 1 providing player groups of 14 violinists and ten viola players, whilst volume 2 completes the picture with eight cellists and six on double bass.

Initially, the VSL library was available in various sample formats but last year, Vienna took the decision to homogenise their library into a series of 'Vienna Instruments', which appear with their own new interface. The main reason is that, despite a comprehensive range of samples, stringing a coherent sound together

with VSL wasn't always easy, as different programs needed to be loaded for different articulations. The Performance Tool VSL went some way to rectifying this but Vienna have now taken matters into their own hands.

If you perform a phrase with a Vienna Instrument, your performance is 'assessed' and appropriate programs are loaded automatically to play it back. Bends, portamento sweeps, falls... you name it, VSL will find it, load it, and play it. Awesome.

FutureMusic

VERDICT

STABILITY

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

This is expensive, but it's the closest thing to having a string orchestra at your beck and call.



Quantum Leap
Supplier: Arbiter Music Technology
Tel: +44 (0)20 8970 1909
Web: arbitermt.co.uk



Vienna Symphonic
Supplier: Time+Space
Tel: +44 (0)1837 55200
Web: vsl.co.at





String Essentials

Supplier:
Time+Space
Tel:
+44 (0)1837 55200
Web: timespace.com

Symphonic

Supplier: Musictrack
Tel:
+44 (0) 767 313447
Web: motu.com



Peter Siedlaczek's String Essentials | £232

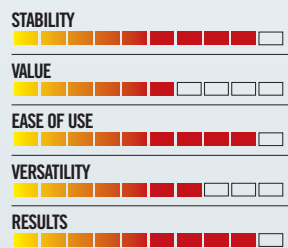
This is the newest kid on the block. Released last month, this collection, like the Garritan Personal Orchestra, relies on the Kontakt Player to provide access to its library. In total, this comes in at 17GB, and is built around a core group of players – 14 violins, ten violas, eight cellos and six double basses. Samples were recorded in Warsaw and all sounds are available in close-recorded format, with natural ambience and with a longer natural reverb from more distant mics.

String Essentials makes use of Kontakt player's ability to set up key switching to provide some very playable patches, as articulation changes can be built into the key-switches, alongside dynamic changes via the modulation wheel. For example, loading Violins Main Setup brings up a number of patches between which you can switch via key presses assigned to your keyboard's lowest octave. Having long bows, short bows, pizzicato, tremolos and

trills all rubbing shoulders in such a straightforward way is great.

The sound is warm and the main string patches provide a competitive sound. With GPO priced below this and offering a full orchestra, String Essentials must be more detailed, and it just about is, with an enhanced dynamic playing interface and wider range of string articulations. But some users might look around at the full orchestra plug-ins and ask some searching questions...

FutureMusic VERDICT



It creates some great string sounds, but you could get more for your money...

MOTU Symphonic Instrument | £209

Motu have developed a taste for software instruments of late. In addition to the bundled suite of synths and samplers they've included with Digital Performer 5, they've also released Ethno and this cross-platform orchestral plug-in.

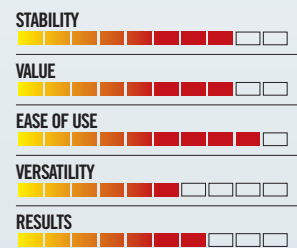
This provides a full orchestra rather than just a string set and the emphasis is on providing the most useful programs rather than every nuance under the sun. That said, you'll find a good range here: the ensemble violins folder alone includes marcato, runs up and down, spiccato, sustains, trills, tremolos and gliss programs. Like Ethno, sound loading takes place via Motu's intuitive browser, which narrows your search until you find what you're looking for.

The 'Tutti' set provides a full string orchestra under one key or chord, all struck with power and precision and is the place to turn if you want instant drama. Elsewhere you'll find the ensemble group folder for all four sections, plus a very

useable set of programs for solo strings. The interface allows synthesiser-style control of amp envelopes, filtering and so on and there's an onboard convolution reverb that lets you blend in the sound of myriad concert halls and performance spaces. All this under an 8GB roof.

This is possible because of clever use of sampled loops for sustained sections of sound, which helps keep the library size down. Inevitably, it slightly compromises the authenticity.

FutureMusic VERDICT



It's not the best in our round-up, but the 'Tutti' set is a nice element, and it's easy to use!