

Getting Started

All About Writing For Strings/LMB

Hi I'm Peter Alexander. Before I begin talking about our new 4th Edition of *Writing for Strings*, I'm first going to define the problems that this Living Music Book solves for talented people, anywhere in the world, whether amateur or professional, who want to improve and enhance their writing skills, at your own pace.

You might be surprised to learn that a majority of music composition majors at the collegiate level, never hear, and never have performed their final orchestration project in their senior year. Even fewer composition majors, get a writing for strings class. And if it is offered, the chances of having the final project performed, are very small.

I speak with authority about this, because I was one of those students back in the '70s. And unfortunately in the early 21st century, the situation remains unchanged for both students and schools.

So, graduation day comes, and suddenly you're on the streets as a newly minted professional writer, having to make a living based on textbook, but not necessarily, experiential knowledge gained from the opportunity of hearing everything you write, recorded.

Now, how does *Writing For Strings* solve this problem? Well, to answer this, I have to speak to four groups of writers.

One group are those who already sequence and record, and have the basic experience of working with samplers and virtual instruments.

The second group, are those whose primary experience in MIDI and sequencing has come mostly from using notation programs.

The third group are those writers or parents of talented children, who have limited computer experience and haven't used any software programs to create music all.

The fourth group are those talented folk who don't read music but have a desire to grow and learn, and already have some MIDI gear.

So first, I'll address those of you who have experience sequencing and doing some MIDI recording.

For Those Who Sequence

If you're already sequencing, and *if* you follow the instructions, everything you write you'll record using first, our Rimsky Korsakov Student Strings Quartet.

This group of four solo strings is in GigaStudio format, and because it's only one layer per articulation, loads easily into EXS24, Kontakt, Mach 5, and HALion 2.0. This means you combine string writing, with MIDI editing and effective recording techniques to learn how to produce a quality professional sound.

Writing For Strings/LMB covers these MIDI editing techniques, and panning and recording to create a natural sounding string section.

Second, for qualified learners who want to go to the next step, Alexander Publishing has a separate mentoring package with professionals who have all kinds of practical experience writing, scoring and conducting for TV shows, concerts, chorales, record dates and much more. Within a defined period of weeks, your mentor reviews and critiques your work.

Now, I want to go back and discuss in more detail, about the solo string samples and sample libraries in general.

Solo Strings

Having the Rimsky-Korsakov Student Strings Quartet available is a continued feature for the Fourth Edition of *Writing For Strings*, especially if you lack a solo strings package. Here's why I added it.

If you're working with synths or samplers to hear your string parts, you're getting a sound that's bigger than most of the string ensembles you'll actually get to write for in real life. What happens is that your ear adapts to this big lush sound. Then one day, you get to write for a set of strings and instead of having a violin section based on 10-14 violins, maybe you get 3-5 violinists. Or if you're really lucky, maybe you get to write for an ensemble of 5 first-violins, 5 second-violins, 4 violas, 3-4 cellos, and 1-2 basses.

Let's compare that to the world's largest orchestral sample library – The Vienna Symphonic Library. Whether you use the smaller OPUS 1, or the full Pro Edition, the section sounds were created with 14 violins. That's a 300% increase over what you may actually get to write for.

So what you hear in your home studio and what you hear live, are just poles apart.

To put a dollar value on this, a friend of mine wanting to create his demo tape, saved up and spent about \$1500 to have 15 minutes of time with this sized ensemble plus some woodwinds, brass and percussion. He was shocked to discover that what he had written and what sounded so great in his studio, was totally out of balance with the ensemble in front of him.

Result, he had to completely re-orchestrate his demo, and then spend another \$1500 to record it a second time.

That was a very expensive lesson to learn, that I want you to avoid. That's why you start off with the solo strings, and *then* record your examples with the larger string ensemble samples.

Now, there's one other thing I do to help you avoid this problem, and that's spending time with Mozart. Mozart was a violinist. He had small ensembles to write for. And then as now, producers want a BIG sound, with a teeny tiny budget.

All the Mozart scores you need, you can download. I also have referenced several videos that you can either buy, or rent from a company called Netflix, so that you can see and hear, how these ensembles sound, and equally as important, to see how string bowings really work.

And for those who already have a solo strings package, I still recommend you get the Rimsky Korsakov Student String Quartet for this reason – you only have 4-5 articulations per instrument to work with, instead of hundreds. This means a simpler and a quicker start for you.

For Those Who Use Notation Programs

Now I want to address those of you whose primary experience is with a notation program, and not sequencing. I get several letters and calls a year, from folks who want a better recorded sound of their work who only use notation programs.

If you want to get that professional sound, you have to learn how to sequence.

In the past year, some of this has changed. At this writing, both Finale and Sibelius come with smaller orchestral packages for enhanced playback. There's Notion from Notion Music, and Overture 4, which has been featured with the Garritan Personal Orchestral.

But even with these advances with notation programs, there's still no way around your needing to learn to sequence as part of your career goal. And that's because sample libraries are designed to work with sequencing programs and samplers. What this means for you is that there is some re-work involved. You create the score, print it out, and then you have to sequence it, edit it, record it, and mix it.

This brings up another problem that *Writing For Strings* solves. In school, as a composition major, you probably didn't take any recording classes. So now you have to learn a whole new set of skills, along with a whole new language. And that takes time. *Writing For Strings* covers the basics of this.

Unfortunately, I know this isn't what you want to hear. It's a CLIFF of a learning curve, and frankly, I'm still going through it. But at the end of the day, I don't have a shelf of scores gathering dust that I've never heard. And for choral writing, there's the excellent Quantum Leap Symphonic Choirs which even has a separate software package enabling you to program lyrics the choir "sings."

Now if your primary experience is with notation programs, or you've never worked with computers for music, or you're thinking about music for a talented child, where do you begin?

Possible Starting Packages

For absolute beginners, a great starting point is Notion from Notion Music which comes with its own notation package and built-in orchestral library featuring sounds from the London Symphony Orchestra. It works on both the PC and Mac and has the shortest learning curve of any program. The Modern Symphony Orchestra from E-MU comes with audio card, Overture 4, Cubase LE and a complete orchestral sample library for \$399, but it's only on the PC at this writing. Operating on both the PC and Mac from EastWest is the QLSO Silver and QLSO Silver Bundle.

I have all of this covered on our web site, www.truespec.com. On the left side of the screen, just look for Samples: followed by the company name.

More Advanced Packages

If you're already sequencing, whether Mac or PC, a great package is EastWest Quantum Leap Symphonic Orchestra Gold, and if you can afford it, the Gold XP upgrade.

The key advantages of QLSO are:

- It's ready to go right out of the box (short learning curve)
- It's prepanned
- It's already EQ'ed
- Just adjust the volume levels
- Symphonic Choirs recorded in same hall and works flawlessly with QLSO thus offering a complete production package.

QLSO is used in hundreds of movies and TV programs. It's in wide use because it's such a time saver, letting the composer focus on the music.

Regarding the Vienna libraries, depending on your budget, I would advise getting Vienna in Kontakt format as this eliminates the need for the Performance Tool.

Sonic Implants has excellent libraries. But unless you want to dedicate an entire system to GigaStudio, then you should consider looking at GVI which operates within the sequencing computer or on another system with other VSTi plug-ins.

I have all the major libraries. If you have questions about this, you can post questions at <http://www.alexuniv.com/forum/>. I check the forum several times a week.

For Those Who Don't Read Music

Now, what about if you're motivated but you don't read music. Should you order the *Writing For Strings* materials?

My answer is this: it depends.

If you're really motivated and prepared to be really stretched and challenged, I'd say, "go for it."

But on a more realistic basis, my suggestion is to order one of the starting packages I suggested (or Finale/Sibelius with GPO Lite) and my Applied Professional Harmony 101 book which is also available as a PDF download. The APH series is a songwriter's approach to harmony, so everything you write, you also record.

Or, if you already have a really great keyboard like the Korg Triton, or Karma, or a Roland keyboard where you can add in the Orchestra

card at your leisure, just get Applied Professional Harmony and start there.

The point is this: Bloom where you are, work with what you have, but get going in the process. Don't wait until everything is 100% before you start.

Content

First we'll start with Professional Orchestration. Professional Orchestration is based on Rimsky-Korsakov's *Principles of Orchestration*. The course is based on Volume 1. Volume 2 ships in October of 2006. Volumes 3 and 4 ship in 2007. It's not mandatory that you get all the volumes.

Each book focuses on one of the eight keys of learning professional orchestration. Volume 1 covers Solo Instruments and Instrument Notes, while Volume 2 covers Orchestrating the Melody Within Each Orchestral Section.

Volume 1 is a complete overhaul of the first 30 pages of Rimsky's book, written to fulfill Rimsky-Korsakov's desire to have both an instrumentation section, and examples from other composers. It's 845 pages and is the only orchestration book so far to be recommended by Academy and Emmy award winning composers.

Originally, it had been Rimsky-Korsakov's desire to have an instrumentation section. However, after several tries, he gave up on this because the rapidly changing technology of the day, was changing musical instruments so quickly, that whatever he would write, was soon obsolete.

That Rimsky-Korsakov abandoned this approach because of rapidly changing technology turned out to be a great blessing for the rest of us, because Rimsky-Korsakov ended up creating an ear training approach to orchestration that's still valid today.

Professional Orchestration supports this by including a one-year renewable subscription to the Naxos Music Library. Here, nearly all of the book's examples are set up in a playlist. And you get access to over 150,000 streaming audio tracks 24/7. It's an amazing resource, and unlike other orchestration books where you're charged for the audio package, this comes free with the book.

Following Rimsky-Korsakov's approach, I codified instrument ranges by low, medium, high and very high breaks. This simple approach lets you quickly go through scores to see where composers write, and don't write for specific instruments within an orchestral setting. So for MIDI mock-ups, using this material, within minutes you can check

your samples to make sure they're going to give you the sound you want for the piece you're writing.

Secondly, Rimsky-Korsakov organized on paper a list of orchestral doubles and combinations based on orchestrating the melodic line. Let me put this into a context for you. When I was a jazz major, we learned all kinds of doubles and combinations like trumpet in a harmony with a flute an octave higher, the "gazelle" sound which is an ensemble made up of the alto sax, tenor sax, trombone and baritone sax, and dozens of others. As a result, when I went to write an arrangement, I had instrumental combinations to pick from. The end result was that there was no mystery. You knew the sound and the combination you wanted, and you wrote for it.

Sounds pretty simple. Well, it is. And that's what Rimsky-Korsakov did for orchestration, he made it simple by taking out the mystery of understanding instrumental combinations, what works and where. So for strings and woodwinds combinations, you'll get a document outlining the most common techniques. This way, as you do your assignments, you have starting points from which to work, along with a method to really help you get the most out of score reading.

Thus, each of the 8 Keys is its own volume focusing on a specific group of techniques. And with the Naxos Music Library, you get to hear them any time you want.

To put this into a context, I had the opportunity once to speak with the late Herb Spencer, who for many years was John Williams' orchestrator. In speaking about these combinations, Herb said that to be successful as a writer you needed to know about a thousand devices. I'm excited to tell you that writing for strings is the first step in learning these career important combinations and bringing them to life by writing and recording with them.

But what about the instrumentation notes that Rimsky-Korsakov wanted to include but didn't?

Well, true to his original wishes, I put them in. But let me tell you the source for them. In my reading of composer biographies, one on Maurice Ravel noted that whenever Ravel went to the country to write music he always took a copy of Strauss' *Til Eulenspiegels Merry Pranks* and *Technique of the Modern Orchestra* by Widor.

In the pursuit of developing this revised version of the Rimsky book, I was in the home of a composer and found on his bookshelf, an English translation of the Widor book. Talk about finding gold at the end of the rainbow.

However, as excited as I was, I wanted to make sure that the information in the book was still accurate and correct for today. And in that process, God opened the most incredible door for me, because over a period of months, starting with the Mel Gibson movie, *Forever Young*, I was given the incredible opportunity of going on the scoring stage with Jerry Goldsmith. And during breaks, I met with the leaders of each orchestral section, and had the players review the book and the techniques. As a result, all of the updates and corrections came from the best musicians in the world who sit on the scoring stage daily in Los Angeles.

So this is a really special book. And just to tell you how special it is, about five years ago, a lovely lady working towards her master's degree at Bournemouth University in England, wrote and ordered the book. About a year after she bought it, and after reading my posts in various forums, she e-mailed me and we began writing each other. That was in March 2000. On November 11, 2000, that lovely young woman, the former Caroline J. Whitear, became my wife, Caroline Alexander. So it just doesn't get any more special than that. Now, I can't promise you that if you get this book, you'll find the right wife but I can tell you it's got some really great stuff in it that will be immediately useful to you.

I am asked do I recommend any orchestration books besides my own, and the answer is yes. The first is about \$10, you can get it from Amazon, and it's called *Orchestration* by Cecil Forsythe. Books written by Piston and Adler follow this path. But it's got such useful information in it, I feel it should be in every composer's library. Also, *Sounds and Scores* by the late Henry Mancini, and if you can find it, the late Nelson Riddle also wrote an excellent book on orchestration. Of course, the original Rimsky book, and *Orchestration: A Practical Handbook* which we've re-edited and republished for today.

Having mentioned the name Herb Spencer, the John Williams study scores to get that were originally orchestrated by Herb include *ET: Adventures on Earth*, *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and the *Raiders of the Lost Ark Theme*. And if you'd like to have those scores, you can find them on either the Alexander Publishing or TrueSpec web sites.

The 30 Lessons

Let's talk briefly about the 30 lessons. If you look at the lesson list, you'll see that they're divided into two parts. The first 14 lessons are what I call the facts half. 15-30 are the doing half.

The facts half is more than about acquiring knowledge. It's not a head trip. Rather, the end result of the first half is methodically going

through your sample libraries and learning what you have, what you don't have, what works and what doesn't work by the four range groups of low, medium, high and very high.

IF you follow the assignments to their fullest conclusion, you'll thoroughly review just about every sample in your library.

This is a very important end result because no one string library has all the bowings. No one string library has all the effects. And, all of the libraries are recorded differently. Some are recorded in stereo where you have to do the panning, others are already recorded where the players sit.

Let's say you want to write a piece using double, triple and quadruple stops. Well, there are no recorded versions of those stops. You have to create them manually and perform them manually using the snap roll technique you learn in basic piano.

Suppose you want to have a line with a series of pitches under a single bow.

Which libraries, if any, let you do that without your having to edit to the extreme in your sequencer to get the effect?

Which libraries have muted strings and how do they perform in various harmonic settings?

These are the questions you have to answer preferably before you start recording.

That's because as with live players, you still have to write for what you have, even with samples.

So, by the time you get to lesson 15, not only are you armed with facts, you've already done a lot of analysis, sequencing and recording. If you've gone through the Jeux de vagues material, you're primed to really begin creating some exciting musical exercises for yourself.

For lessons 15 forward, you're picking no more than five songs from five totally different styles with which to apply these compositional techniques. The big lesson that you'll learn from this section is that there's no such thing as THE answer. Rather, you'll find that there are solutions that are stronger than others, and that you have the compositional tools to create those choices, and the sequencing methods to record and hear them, to insure that they work effectively with that song, and that style.

Conclusion

I just want to thank you for sticking with me this far. I know this has been a lot of material for you. And normally, I don't overdose like this, but I'm excited about Writing For Strings/LMB. This is an exciting opportunity to develop and enhance your skills. Everything you write, you record. And like everything else in life you'll get out of Writing For Strings what you put into it. There's no timeline on it at all. But depending on your background, if you schedule yourself, you should be able to complete everything in 2-3 months. If it takes a little longer, no big deal.

The point is to set a pace that not only allows you to enjoy what you're doing, but to reflect on it too. From that will spring the great music you hear in your heart.

To sign up, just call us in the United States at 1-804-733-6122 from 10AM to 4PM Eastern Standard Time, or you can register online at either www.truespec.com or www.alexanderpublishing.com.

Thanks!
Peter Alexander