



Review by David Etheridge

Electric Light Orchestra

Ted Brewer Vivo 2 Five-string Electric Violin

Last year I looked at a radical new approach to electric violins, in the form of Ted Brewer's Vivo 2. Whereas most electric violin manufacturers take a traditional approach, even down to a classic finish, Ted Brewer's approach is completely hi-tech, letting form follow function. As the instrument is electric in concept you don't need a traditional body, and you can look at new ways of providing a secure and rigid platform for the neck and fingerboard without sacrificing weight, size or playability. Vanessa Mae was one of Ted's first major customers, with a custom Crossbow model way back in 2001. Now, in 2007, Ted Brewer has done it again with a five-string version, adding a low viola 'C' string to the Vivo 2 range.

Famous Five

The Vivo five-string takes the same approach as the four-string models. The acrylic body is a one-piece mould comprising neck and two flaring sidepieces that wrap around and join at the bottom end (ie. the bit that goes under your chin). There's a bridge-shaped section that goes under the upper part of the ebony fingerboard, which braces it when playing in higher positions, while in the centre there's

When you are reinventing the violin as an exclusively electric instrument few of the traditional design principles apply, but Ted Brewer's futuristic creation is as easy to play as it is easy on the eye.

a chamber that holds the piezo pickup and electronics module. There's a protruding arm at the base of the neck joint that corresponds to the edge of a traditional body, helping the player to get comfortable with this new instrument compared to the acoustic variety. A pair of protruding wings at the bottom of the body serves the same purpose, and allows for some bracing against the shoulder. In short, you should have no problems relating to this violin when trying it for the first time.

The carbon-fibre bridge is indestructible, and it sits on the two contact points for the piezo pickup. The chin rest, like the fingerboard, is ebony, but the tailpiece, which accommodates the fine tuners, is painted aluminium. The only giveaway when compared to the ebony bits is that it feels cold to the touch.

Tuners are Grovers, which work very smoothly compared to traditional pegs. On this five-string model, the tuners aren't arranged in the way you might expect. Here, the low 'C' tuner is at the furthest end of the pegbox, allowing a straight run through the top nut slot to the tuners. If the low 'C' had been mounted in the traditional way for five-string instruments, the angles and stresses could have led to string breakage, so this is a wise move and you soon get used to it. The strings themselves are the superb Thomastik Dominants once again, although you can substitute these with strings of your own preference if needed.

Compared to a four-string violin the neck and fingerboard is slightly wider, as you would expect, but it's done very well and you should have no problems adjusting. This is

helped in part by the superb fingerboard and bridge curve — if you're new to five-string instruments, you'll be comfortable with this violin in just a few minutes.

Electric Warrior

The secret of the Vivo's sound is in the electronics package. The piezos, controlled by a microprocessor and powered by a PP3 battery, are Ted's own design. Importantly, all your custom settings are remembered by the microprocessor even when the battery is removed. The processor uses just four tear-shaped buttons for everything — touch the Volume Up button for two seconds to switch it on, and it switches off automatically after three minutes if you're not playing. The two rear buttons adjust the tone, and LEDs to the left and right of the processor module show the tone and volume settings, respectively. If you touch the two Tone buttons together for

a few seconds, an audible Concert 'A' tone (440Hz) will sound through both the instrument and headphone output jacks. And lastly, touching both the volume buttons together switches on the 'sound to light' feature, where the LEDs light up in response to your playing style. There's a battery indicator LED under the bridge, and when battery power is low, this will change from green to red and the sound to light features are switched off, conserving available battery power.

Performance

No matter how futuristic the approach is to an instrument, at the end of the day it all comes down to how it plays, and how good it sounds. In both respects, the Vivo 2 five-string

is remarkable. Thanks to its lightweight body, it compares favourably in feel to a four-string violin, and is absurdly easy to play. The electronics are very responsive, and also give a wonderfully natural sound with a flat EQ setting. Play with the EQ, however, and things get even better — the high end offers presence and sparkle without the harshness that you can find on some electric violins, while the bottom end adds warmth to an already warm sound. The low viola 'C' string offers speaker-shuddering transients, and there is a very healthy level from the output. When playing in high positions on the 'C' string, you also have the added benefit of the extra tone from the thicker string, which is a subtle but very recognisable effect. After a while you soon get used to the fact that this is an instrument you don't have to fight to produce volume and tone, so your playing style will change to a much lighter and less tiring approach.

Conclusion

I was delighted to try the original Vivo 2 last year, and the five-string model has all the attributes of the original. The combination of futuristic and distinctive design, superb responsiveness and outstanding electronics is sure to be a winner once again.

The sound is peerless and the onboard light show is always bound to provoke attention from onlookers. According to Ted himself, distributors were

practically queuing up at the recent Frankfurt Trade Show to express interest, so the whole Vivo range looks set to have a much higher profile in the coming months. This violin may not be for traditionally-minded players, or those who think all bowed string instruments should only have four strings, but for players who enjoy the freedom of the extended range offered by five strings, who like an instrument that's tailor made for electric usage, or who just like the whole unique and hi-tech approach, the Vivo 2 five-string fits the bill just perfectly, and at a very competitive price for an instrument of the highest quality. 

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Ted Brewer Vivo 2 £950

Key Notes

- Monocoque advanced polymer construction.
- Ebony fingerboard and chin rest.
- Grover tuners.
- Fine-tuning adjusters in aluminium tailpiece.
- Thomastik Dominant strings as standard.
- Carbon-fibre bridge.
- Piezo pickup.
- Digitally controlled analogue charge amplifier.
- Touch controls for volume, tone, lights and tuning.
- Onboard tuning reference tone (Concert 'A', 440Hz).
- Auto power-off.
- Available in clear, blue, purple and ice pink.

High Notes

- Practically bombproof construction, but very light to play.
- Superb and responsive sound, with bags of level through both the main output and headphone jacks.
- 'Light To Sound' feature is terrific fun!
- Superb electronics give a highly flexible but acoustically faithful sound.

Low Notes

- The five-string version may not suit everyone, but for the imaginative muso, it offers a lot.

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