

Discussion of background and rationale for AA and Certificate of Achievement in Mariachi

Mariachi music is currently at a point within its evolution where it is becoming widely recognized as a “parallel art music”—parallel to the other great art musics of the world, such as European art music (“classical music”), East Indian Classical Music, jazz and others—as opposed to its former designation as a so-called “folk” music. This distinction is important, since it implies a greater degree of sophistication, artistic merit, longevity, respect, and broader *importance* in this world.

Consider the analogy of jazz music: 100 years ago jazz was in its infancy, rooted in the American Negro spirituals, work songs and certain regional (i.e. isolated) popular musical forms. Through the first half of the 20th Century jazz grew in popularity and spread across the country, with a number of immensely popular performers and composers writing and performing in a number of different “styles” of jazz (such as swing, rag time, be-bop, etc.). Classical composers such as George Gershwin and Darius Mihaud borrowed from jazz rhythms, harmonies, melodic styles and created new classical music—though based on jazz.

And yet still, up until perhaps the 1970’s, jazz music itself was widely considered by the musical establishment as “informal” or un-structured, people quipped that much of it is “made up” (i.e. improvised), it is performed mainly in bars or night-clubs, many jazz musicians were not “classically trained”, etc. This was hardly a music considered worthy of “serious” study or being taught in school, but by the 1970’s the academic community slowly did begin to recognize and appreciate that jazz had indeed become a musical art-form unto itself, with its own history, performance practices (jazz improvisation is a remarkably complex and involved skill to master), repertoire, major influences, a large body of performers both professional and amateur, many widely recognized “virtuoso” performers, and a huge audience base that extended now far beyond the United States’ borders. Today, most colleges and high schools with a strong music program offer jazz band in addition to more “traditional” American music ensembles (concert band, orchestra, choir), while many colleges such as the University of Southern California have several full-time jazz faculty members and offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in various aspects of jazz music (jazz instrumental or vocal performance, jazz composition, jazz education, etc.).

Mariachi music today is at a very similar point in its evolution to jazz music 30 years ago. While still generally regarded as purely “folk” music, many scholars, musicians, students and mariachi enthusiasts have grown to respect the rich and diverse history of mariachi, have embraced the large number musical forms that are found within mariachi (huapango, son jarocho, son jalisciense, ranchera, classical, etc.), appreciate the unique musical style and performance practices that have developed into the modern mariachi, and have recognized a large number of “virtuoso” performers and immensely important composers who have shaped this tradition. Many classical-music composers, as diverse as Aaron Copland and Silvestre Revueltas, have drawn upon mariachi music as inspiration for their new classical-music—orchestral and chamber-music—compositions. A number of books have been written about mariachi in both English and Spanish, countless newspaper articles have appeared, mariachi bands exist in many countries

around the globe and on at least 4 continents, and an enormous body of young students across mainly the Southwestern United States have begun studying mariachi music as part of their primary, secondary and university education.

The logical next step is the creation of higher-education degrees in mariachi music. The level of musicianship amongst professional mariachis has grown considerably over the past 30 years to the point that formal training is necessary to fulfill the need of qualified mariachis in the job market. As one respondent to a survey put it, the number of schools across this country that are offering mariachi classes has created a demand for qualified, credentialed mariachi teachers far ahead of the supply.

Attached to this document are a number of testimonials and responses to questionnaires concerning the state of the mariachi performance and education job markets across the United States. Every person who addressed the situation of the level of performance of professional mariachi musicians stated that highly skilled musicians are in great demand and very difficult to find. Every person who addressed the state of school-based mariachi classes stated that, by far, most classes are being taught by either mariachi musicians who never completed college, or credentialed “traditional music” teachers who know very little about mariachi music—rarely is the combination of a fully-credentialed mariachi professional encountered.

Clearly, the need for highly skilled, trained mariachi professionals and teachers exists throughout the American Southwest and in the San Diego region in particular. Jobs are being filled by less-than-qualified applicants, and many young people who feel drawn to this musical genre find college education without the possibility of receiving a mariachi degree or certificate, to state it simply, irrelevant. A Certificate of Achievement in Mariachi will allow “traditional music” teachers to become certified and qualified to teach mariachi music and will give performers the basic skills necessary to find simple, part-time employment as a mariachi musician. An Associate in Arts Degree in Music with a Mariachi Specialization will shuttle mariachi students straight from high school, through Southwestern College, and on to a 4-year university to complete their degrees in Music Education, Ethnomusicology or Performance and make them perhaps the most qualified mariachi instructors in the country. This degree will also train mariachi professionals to be among the best mariachi performers in the country.

According to the attached testimonials from Arizona, Texas, and Northern and Southern California (including Chula Vista), many jobs across the country are currently being filled by less than qualified applicants because fully-qualified teachers and performers are rare. The proposed degree and certificate would go a long way towards rectifying this problem.

- 3 mariachi teachers are non-credentialed, non-college-educated mariachi musicians.
- 1 teacher is credentialed, has a Master's Degree in Ethnomusicology, and has been a mariachi expert for at least 30 years – he the only “fully qualified” mariachi teacher in the district.
- Salaries range from \$35,000—40,000 per year for non-credentialed teachers (paid hourly) and \$45,000—70,000 per year for credentialed teachers.
- The nearly one year-long search for 3 new mariachi teachers who began teaching Fall 2001 ranged from Washington State, throughout Northern and Southern California, to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Tijuana. The jobs were filled by one person from Washington, one from New Mexico, and one from Tijuana.

other folks. If I can be of further assistance, drop me a line at this e-mail address or give me a call.

Dan

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1. Roughly how many schools in your area < including elementary, high school, college, university (itemized if you can) < have mariachi programs? Can you estimate the total number of mariachi students in all of them combined?

- Both the University of Arizona and Pima College have had mariachi programs. UA's had to fold this year because of budget cuts but there's a strong movement afoot to get it back in order by January. I'd guess there are between 20 and 30 elementary and high schools with serious mariachi programs (and close to the same number of folklórico programs). There are also at least five youth mariachi programs in Tucson ranging from the Changuitos (which started the whole youth mariachi in America) and folklórico choreographer Julie Gallego's new mariachi school to several church groups. I have no idea the total number of students but I'd estimate over 1,000.

2. Would you say that the number of mariachi school programs in your area is growing, declining or staying the same?

- Either staying the same or growing slightly, this due more to school budget problems than interest.

3. Could you briefly describe the need for qualified mariachi teachers in your area < for example, are traditional-music teachers (3non-mariachis2)teaching mariachi, or are life-long yet 3under-educated2 (non-credentialed) mariachis teaching in the absence of 3fully-qualified2 teachers?

- I think there's a place for both. Anymore the serious mariachi student needs to be a good sight reader, and standard academia can give a player technical advantages. That said, there's no substitute for living it. Unfortunately it's taking educational administrators too long to grasp the notion, and they're so protective of their territory they'll do anything to keep from changing. But I think a mix of both serves the kids best. And administrators need to realize that those "non-degreed specialists" are every bit the musicians their degreed staff are, and should be paid accordingly.

4. Do you have any experience with or knowledge of a search for mariachi teachers in your area? Please describe the search < was the job(s) filled easily by a qualified person in your area or did you have to search across your state or the nation (or into Mexico) to find qualified applicants? How were you satisfied with the pool of applicants?

- UA has struggled with that for a long time, and while they've eventually found people with degrees in some instances, I wouldn't say they were the best qualified applicants. Consequently UA's program has never really gotten off the ground.

5. Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.

- I wish I knew. Not enough - any of them - but the grumbling I hear from those non-degreed folks who do most of the work, they're the ones who are most often given the shaft, or, as in the W.C. Field film 'The Bank Dick,' "a hearty handclasp."

6. Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?

- We need qualified mariachi educators who ARE steeped in that tradition. There is a demand well in excess of supply. Rob Cutietta's book "Raising Musical Kids" devotes a chapter to the youth mariachi movement as a significant trend in music education. These programs do more than teach music. They instill pride and change lives. But the way to beat the battles with the bureaucrats is to infiltrate them and prove their old ideas long. That's why it's even more crucial to bridge this educational divide.

John Rialson Questionnaire Response

Synopsis:

John Rialson is a long-time mariachi musician and for 7 years has been the Mariachi Youth Program Coordinator for the Mexican Heritage Corporation in San Jose, CA. He raises private money to supplement the amount that school districts will pay mariachi musicians to go into their schools and team-teach mariachi, along with one credentialed music teacher always (paid by the district). This program seems to be working very well: non-credentialed instructors are paid very well here compared to other locations around the country, and John has developed a group of 15 mariachis who have taught in this program for an extended period of time.

While he acknowledges that credentialed mariachi instructors would probably be better, he states that his program is working quite well as-is, the instructors and schools are happy, and in fact he doubts that any of his current instructors would consider returning to school to acquire a mariachi degree even if one were available. However, private donations have recently declined and he is having difficulty funding all of the schools that want to participate in his programs.

In spite of the fact that his teachers are happy and paid quite well (notwithstanding that the standard of living in San Jose is considerably higher than other parts of the country) and that the teaching ratio of 4 teachers per classroom of 35-50 students is ideal, one cannot overlook the fact that a great deal of private funding and extra school expense is needed to support these programs. With four teachers in the classroom at all times, each earning \$50 per hour, this is at least a \$200-per-hour class. It would be quite difficult, I imagine, to replicate the success of these programs in other parts of the country.

I am hesitant to say this, but if the credentialed teacher were also a mariachi expert then there would not be the need for so many (or any?) assistant instructors. While admittedly this result would be less beneficial to the student (1:10 teaching ratio is difficult to compete with), stated differently, this would allow the money raised by MHC to pay the same teachers to reach more schools. Perhaps the waiting list for schools could be eliminated. At the very least, school budget cuts and drops in private funding would be less likely to negatively impact programs if they were being taught by credentialed, tenured, qualified mariachi teachers as opposed to privately funded, extra-curricular “guest” instructors.

Highlights:

- “I currently [coordinate] mariachi classes in 8 schools”, involving approximately 700 students total.
- “[Mariachi programs in San Jose are] definitely growing.... I do have a waiting list of schools that want the program.”

We also have a mariachi workshop every Tuesday evening from 7:00 to 9:00 PM. here at the Mexican Heritage Plaza. Five teachers work with about 50 students that range in age from 9 to 80 years old. We do 12 week sessions where the students learn about 8 new songs from sones, rancheras, boleros, huapangos, pasodobles and valsas. It's a popular class. The fee is \$120 for 12 weeks. That breaks down to \$5.00 per hour.

Stanford University has a mariachi workshop once a week. I believe they have about 30 students participating.

They have a terrific performing group.

2. Would you say that the number of mariachi school programs in your area is growing, declining or staying the same?

It is definitely growing. It has been difficult this year because of funding and the economy. I could have done more if the sponsors and grants were coming in like they used too. I do have a waiting list of schools that want the program.

3. Could you briefly describe the need for qualified mariachi teachers in your area — for example, are traditional-music teachers (“non-mariachis”) teaching mariachi, or are life-long yet “under-educated” (non-credentialed) mariachis teaching in the absence of “fully-qualified” teachers?

I have been using the same teachers for years. I have fifteen mariachi teachers that go to the schools. I always have a least three teachers in each school. One to teach violin, one for trumpet, and one that teaches guitar, vihuela and guitarron. We sometimes send a voice teacher and someone that is good with music theory. All of the teachers are professional mariachis, but over the years they have learned to teach very well. We always have a certified teacher in the class room with the mariachi teacher to help with discipline, etc. Our teachers learn a lot from the certified teachers. We have regular meetings to discuss curriculum and teaching ideas.

At two of our schools, the orchestra teachers have become very good mariachi players and do teach mariachi style violin to the students. Over the years I have found non-mariachi teachers can't do the job. The music sounds very naive. It is so important to know what notes need to be played short, long, slurred, played with vibrato or played straight, and how to phrase the eight notes, and where to catch a breath. This sounds simple enough but without actual mariachi experience, non mariachis can't do it. I have never found a band teacher who can properly write out the ending to a ranchera in just two part harmony for trumpet or violin much less three part harmony. It takes a professional mariachi to understand how any song needs to be played.

All of our teachers have been fingerprinted with FBI checks in order to work in the schools. They have all had their TB tests. The schools are getting stricter about security.

4. Do you have any experience with or knowledge of a search for mariachi teachers in your area? Please describe the search — was the job(s) filled easily by a qualified person in your area or did you have to search across your state or the nation (or into

Mexico) to find qualified applicants? How were you satisfied with the pool of applicants?

San Jose has some very good mariachis. I have been a professional mariachi since 1972 so I know all the mariachis in the area. It was easy for me to find the musicians I needed to fill the jobs. I also wanted musicians that live here so it would be stable and not have to find new teachers all the time. I have used artists in residence from Mexico several times. We had Miguel Martinez, the famous trumpet player, come and work with some of the students for several months. It was very rewarding for all of us. Nati Cano from the Los Camperos has come and worked with the students also at Hoover.

5. Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.

We pay our teachers \$50 per hour. Most of the teachers are able to teach about 8 hours a week. It has been at this rate for a number of years. I would like to see it go up soon. it is expensive living in this area. I understand for mariachi consultants in Denver, the rate is \$75 per hour. The rate is not based on education, etc. Most of the mariachis have spent most of their lives learning and perfecting their craft. I feel strongly that needs to be respected. Being a mariachi is not just the music, it is also a discipline, an attitude and a way of life. So being credentialed vs. non-credentialed, I don't think I would pay the instructors differently. I would have to think more about that.

6. Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?

I have never thought about a degree in mariachi music. It sounds like a good idea. I teach band for the San Jose Unified School District in the morning before I go to work at the Mexican Heritage Corporation. I'm not credentialed so I work as an Artist In Residence at the high school. I have seriously thought about getting my teaching credential soon. I think I would be interested in a degree in mariachi. I have taught mariachi for about ten years. Do you know Mark Fogelquist? He wrote his theses on mariachi. Jon Clark and I have been working together for about 30 years playing mariachi for a living and sharing the history of the music.

Sinceramente,

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[follow-up questions and responses:]

Subject: Re: Mariachi Stats

Date: Wednesday, October 16, 2002 2:30 PM

From: John Rialson <mariachijr@mhciviva.org>

To: Jeff Nevin/Mariachi Champaña Neví n <jeff@virtuosomariachi.com>

Hi John,

Thanks so much for your detailed responses this is exactly what I need. I do have a couple follow-up questions or two for you if I may:

Concerning the situation you described of sending mariachis into schools to teach along side a credentialed teacher, are the mariachis paid by the school district, by a private foundation (you mentioned the Mexican Heritage Corporation do they [you] raise funds to pay these teachers?), by the classes themselves (students fundraising on their own through performances, selling candy, etc.), a combination of these, or how?

The school district pays for half the cost of the program. The Mexican Heritage Corporation pays the other half. MHC actually writes the checks to pay the mariachi teachers and we bill the schools. MHC is part of the Smithsonian Institution and we receive funds from many sources for the Arts. MHC has many sponsors and we apply for grants. The students also receive donations for their performances and that money goes into an account at whatever school they go to. That money helps to pay for trajes, supplies, instruments, trips and food for parties for the students for a job well done. In some cases the students have raised money to go to mariachi conferences by selling various items like coffee drinks.

MHC provides the curriculum, hires the teachers, finds the instruments, and sets up the classes. We do all the detail and foot work. MHC owns more than a hundred instruments that are checked out to the students free of charge. We provide vihuelas and guitarrones. I also have some trumpets and a lot of guitars. Other instruments are rented and usually the school pays for the rental. Two music stores in our area have greatly helped the program by renting excellent instruments at a very low rate. In rare cases the students themselves have bought or rented instruments.

We have had mariachi classes in six different schools districts; San Jose Unified School District, Alum Rock, Mount Pleasant, Luther Burbank, Franklin-McKinley, and East Side Union High School District.

The hourly rate you stated, \$50-75 per hour, is higher than I am aware of anyone paying down here in San Diego -- this is good :-). I assume this is because of the cost of living in San Jose being a bit higher than San Diego(?). I am curious, though... credentialed teachers down here are paid considerably more than non-credentialed, teachers teaching the same classes. These people are given what is called an emergency credential until they complete their degree, or I think there is some provision for hiring non-credentialed experts for certain sorts of classes where professional expertise can serve as ample qualification, but in both of these instances the base salary is lower than that for more educated teachers (there is a spread-sheet of salaries with each column representing a level of education and each row representing years of experience, and hourly teacher

rates are generally lower than full-time salary rates for classes). Is this different in San Jose? For example, if one of your mariachis were to get his degree and California teaching credential, wouldn't he then be able to take the place of the credentialed teacher already in the classroom, perhaps teach several classes at one or more schools to become full-time, and then receive a higher salary and even full benefits package (including tenure)?

I believe in San Jose the hourly rate is a bit higher than full-time salary rates for most teachers. For teachers with lots of years of experience and education are paid higher. I'm paid as an Artist in Residence \$50 an hour to teach band. I only teach several hours a day. I understand subs are paid very well hourly. Of course subs usually don't get to work everyday.

Yes, I would think if a mariachi teacher was to receive a teaching credential he could do very well. I only know of one full time teacher in San Jose who went back to school to get his degree and credential and is also an excellent mariachi, Jose Guererro, originally from Guadalajara. He's the leader of a very successful group in San Jose. But he's not teaching mariachi in school. He did set up a special class at his home where he teaches young students mariachi for free. He says he is giving back to the community. He is a very special fellow. Mark Fogelquist is another very special teacher. Mark got me playing mariachi back in the early seventies. He has touched a lot of lives.

Im not intending to suggest that there is anything wrong with the way you are running the programs, or that my idea is in any way better than what you're doing, I just want to have a full understanding of how its working if I may. There are certainly benefits to having one supervising teacher together with 3 specialists in the room together -- this is actually IDEAL in my opinion -- but it seems that there might be other benefits to having credentialed teachers who ARE the experts... Im actually just thinking out loud right now! :-)

We always have at least three rooms for sectionals. We also have group rehearsals or a theory class for everyone.

It would be great to have credentialed mariachi teachers. All of my teachers are from Mexico and most have not had a lot of education. All of them are excellent musicians and are very good at teaching music but most don't seem to have the time or think they could go back to school and work for a teaching credential. Jose Guererro is an exception.

I couldn't agree more with you that non-mariachi teachers really don't have much of a clue teaching this music alone, and I think it is really a shame that so many WONDERFUL mariachi musicians who are great teachers are being paid on a different pay schedule than credentialed teachers (here at least) who really can't get the job done as well. I'm hoping to help some non-mariachis get a clue about this music and also encourage some real mariachis to go to school to get some job equity.

I would be very happy to pass on any information to the mariachi teachers and get them thinking about this possibility.

Oh, and yes, I know Mark -- he's teaching down here now. I haven't asked him but I assume he's pretty high on the pay scale because of his experience and education. He's teaching at a Jr. High and High School, so he will be with the same students for up to 6 years straight, until they (hopefully) come to my college!

Mark is very high on the pay scale. They are very lucky to have him. I was asked a few years ago to move down there and teach but I was not offered enough to make a living. They offered Mark a lot more. I am very happy working for MHC. It is very rewarding watching the students grow and learn to play.

Thanks again for your response and candor -- I'll be happy to send you a copy of the responses in a few weeks, after I have had a chance to collect them and put everything together. Take care,

-Jeff

in your area or did you have to search across your state or the nation (or into Mexico) to find qualified applicants? How were you satisfied with the pool of applicants?

n/a

5. Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.

Privately, about \$50/hr. In the schools, my salary ranged from \$29-85.00/hr.

6. Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?

This is way overdue.

>3. Could you briefly describe the need for qualified mariachi teachers in your area - for example, are traditional-music teachers ("non-mariachis") teaching mariachi, or are life-long yet "under-educated" (non-credentialed) mariachis teaching in the absence of "fully-qualified" teachers?

I can definitely say that there is a need for qualified mariachi teachers. I am currently experiencing this process. I have been given the opportunity to work at an elementary school because of my mariachi background. The elementary is currently in Huntington Park and has a mariachi program through the help of the principal and the music teacher who does not have the potential mariachi experience that I have. What stops me is that I am currently just getting my B.A and do not have a credential, still have to take the CBEST. So, I can very much say that this is just one experience at this school. I have also experienced this at my old elementary school where I have initially started my mariachi experience with Laura Sobrino. The elementary is called North Ranchito in Pico Rivera. It is currently running a music program but it lacks teachers and professional mariachi musician teachers.

>4. Do you have any experience with or knowledge of a search for mariachi teachers in your area? Please describe the search - was the job(s) filled easily by a qualified person in your area or did you have to search across your state or the nation (or into Mexico) to find qualified applicants? How were you satisfied with the pool of applicants?

I think that there are a lot of qualified mariachis in my area. However, they may be qualified in their profession but do not obtain degrees such as B.A's or Ph.D's

>5. Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.

I know 3 teachers who are mariachi musicians. Two teach special E.D, the other high school and make around 40,000-58,000 a year (estimating).

>6. Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?

I think it is an excellent idea and it should be done because like I said before, there are many who know and have knowledge about music, but mariachi music is a totally different KIND of music that people should learn first, therefore, through some type of degree stating that you are qualified should prepare you to teach the music. I also think that someone who knows about mariachi music very well should teach the courses, not just any music major because personally those degrees are not the same thing. I would like to see a degree made up for mariachi musicians in the near future. There are many children who are learning more and more on music and they NEED some type of

instructional mariachi background first. That is why the need for a degree to give teachers is an excellent idea to excel.

community based organizations that offer mariachi instrumentation/vocal instruction. There are at least 2,000 student mariachi musicians in Texas.

2. Would you say that the number of mariachi school programs in your area is growing, declining or staying the same?

There has been a significant increase of mariachi music programs since MPR brought back the Mariachi Vargas to South Texas in 1995. Ford Motor Company's funding of mariachi music programs in markets such as San Antonio, McAllen, Houston and Atlanta, Georgia have had a significant impact on the growth of the overall mariachi music industry and MPR's aggressive work in securing corporate dollars has resulted in growth of the industry in these markets. The mariachi music vocal and group competitions held in San Antonio as part of the annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza nurtures the enthusiasm young students have for mariachi music.

3. Could you briefly describe the need for qualified mariachi teachers in your area — for example, are traditional-music teachers (“non-mariachis”) teaching mariachi, or are life-long yet “under-educated” (non-credentialed) mariachis teaching in the absence of “fully-qualified” teachers?

There is a combination of both traditional music teachers and professional mariachi musicians who are teaching in schools and there is certainly a great need for more instructors as programs continue to grow throughout the country. Somehow, there needs to be credit given to professional mariachi musicians who do not necessarily have "formal degrees" but have 10-40 years of experience in playing mariachi music. The best mariachi instructors are not necessarily degreed. We also need to find a way to support many of the best mariachi musicians who come to the U.S. from Mexico and are in need of work Visas. People like former Mariachi Vargas musician Manual Vargas and Javier Martinez are two fabulous instructors, musicians and vocalist who currently reside in San Antonio but are not employed by the many school programs that offer mariachi music because they do not have work visas.

4. Do you have any experience with or knowledge of a search for mariachi teachers in your area? Please describe the search — was the job(s) filled easily by a qualified person in your area or did you have to search across your state or the nation (or into Mexico) to find qualified applicants? How were you satisfied with the pool of applicants?

Because of the many colleges/universities that offer mariachi music programs in Texas, there is pool of many students who qualify to be instructors. The fact that through Ford & Lincoln Mercury's Mariachi Extravaganza, great emphasis is put towards college/university involvement, many young high school students are attending colleges/universities w/ mariachi music programs which result in students graduating w/ degrees and experience in mariachi music. The University of Texas Pan Am in Edinburg, Texas A&M University in Kingsville and Laredo and the University of Texas at San Antonio are among more than 10 universities that will be participating in this year's

Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza in San Antonio and are those schools which are delivering qualified instructors.

Overall, the combination of formal instructors with degrees and traditional mariachi musicians with experience is greatly needed to build the best mariachi music programs in our schools. On a scale of 1-10, in San Antonio, I would rate overall instruction at about 5. In Texas- 7+. It could be better.

5. Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.

Good question. I think it ranges anywhere from \$20,000 - \$60,000 in Texas.

6. Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?

Jeff, please feel free to distribute these questions at the conference this year. I would also be very interested in learning the results. Email this questionnaire to Jose Nino at jan_mariachi@yahoo.com who is a mariachi instructor in Houston. He may have some good insights to share with you.

----- End of Forwarded Message

both---qualified teachers are drastically needed

>4. *Do you have any experience with or knowledge of a search for mariachi teachers in your area? Please describe the search - was the job(s) filled easily by a qualified person in your area or did you have to search across your state or the nation (or into Mexico) to find qualified applicants? How were you satisfied with the pool of applicants?*

n/a

>5. *Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.*

student teachers \$25 per hour twice a week with two students per school
faculty associates from 1000 - 4000 per semester

>6. *Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?*

certificate, yes; degree NO.

[follow-up question]

>Thanks, Rich, I appreciate it. By the way, we are going forward with a certificate of achievement in mariachi right away and hoping to have a degree (Associate's Degree) in a year or so. The 2-year degree would be a sub-specialization under our Music degree, so it should transfer and substitute as the first 2 years of a 4-year degree for those interested in teaching mariachi, and I hope that (with better students coming every year) I can start to "put out there" more well-trained mariachis, people who can play in tune, who know how to transpose, who know something about the history, etc.... Don't interpret this as a lack of respect for the "common" mariachis, to the contrary I have nothing but the highest respect for people who can play this music so well, I want to help make more! :-)

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>Just to clarify your last answer, when you said:

>>

>> certificate, yes; degree NO.

>

>did you mean that you have contemplated (or are working on) a certificate in mariachi but not a degree, or that you think it's a good idea for us to strive for a certificate but not a degree? My "defense" in the first paragraph was in response to my interpreting your comment as the latter... I

>just realized I might have misinterpreted it... Which is it?

Neither. It's just that there is not a university with at least four full time mariachi professionals who could staff a DEGREE program.

That would be my requirement. How can you offer a mariachi degree without instructors in trumpet, violin, guitarron, and vihuela to say nothing of music history and theory? For a degree, especially a teaching degree, students would have to spend at least one semester playing on each of the main instruments as well as four years playing on their main instrument and studying theory from the mariachi perspective, etc., etc. Just my point of view. Even for a two year certificate I would think that some of the above would need to be incorporated.

Oh, sure, I intend to. I am building into the requirement for the 2-year Associate of Arts Degree that students spend at least 2 semesters studying privately on their "primary" instrument (it should be 4, but there are limits to the total credits I can require them to take... they add up quickly), plus at least 2 semesters of "minor" instrument lessons -- so a trumpet player may take 2 semesters of trumpet, one semester of violin and one of vihuela. They will be required to take 4 semesters of mariachi ensemble, a 1-semester "Development of Mariachi" course (3-unit lecture), and complete the basic music theory/ear training sequence. We don't have a full-time string or guitar teacher, but we do have full-time voice, theory, brass/mariachi/mariachi history (me). The string and guitar classes are taught by adjunct faculty. Mariachi music theory is different from our traditional music theory, but there are enough over-laps that I feel confident I can "fill in the gaps" during my ensemble classes.

None of the faculty besides me are dedicated "mariachi" teachers, but with me at the point of this apex -- or, with we mariachis on one spoke of the whole, interconnected Music Department wheel -- everything seems to be covered.... hope it works... :-)

==

J. Richard Haefler, ASU Mariachi Program

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==

A. D. MMII

N/A

5. Roughly how much do mariachi teachers in your area make? Please state a range of income based on education, experience, credentialed vs. non-credentialed, etc.

N/A

6. *Please add any comments you may have concerning a degree in mariachi music: need, timeliness, have you contemplated this yourself, are you working towards it, what do you think?*

I think that there should be degree programs in mariachi music in the schools of education and in the schools of music. We are in the SW US and Mexican music is internationally known and you do not have to be Mexican to participate in these bands. In our case, we have Chicanos, Native Americans, Vietnamese, Euro-Americans, El Salvadorans, Foreign exchange students (e.g., German and French students), African Americans, etc. So another way of promoting mariachis is that they are for all cultures...todos aficionados de la música mejicana.

--

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community where I have played or visited, aspire to the same artistic standards to which we generally characterize classical musicians aspiring. This is somewhat frustrating for many of us who find ourselves nevertheless performing with players who do not engender these same artistic standards, but it is wonderful when we have the opportunity to perform with like-minded and like-talented players.

As the leader of Mariachi Champaña Nevín, I have found it quite difficult to find people who are up to the challenge of performing the great variety of tasks I present my players at the artistic level that I require. We have performed 12 concerts as soloists with the San Diego Symphony in the past 5 years, 3 with the San Diego Chamber Orchestra and 4 with the Orquesta de Baja California – the only 3 major professional orchestras in this region. We have performed numerous high-profile benefit concerts, commanding high fees, and have recorded 4 complete compact discs. I require my players to perform not only traditional mariachi music to the highest degree of accuracy and authenticity, but also to perform my transcriptions of European classical music – including Bach, Vivaldi, Verdi, Puccini, Satie and others – to the same degree of accuracy and authenticity... authenticity within the classical-music tradition! And we have been tested in these arenas: we performed for nearly 10,000 mariachi-lovers at a mariachi conference in Fresno, while in December 2001 we performed 3 consecutive concerts at Copley Symphony Hall, for a total of nearly 7,500 symphony patrons —and received standing ovations at all of these performances.

I have managed to find a core of 7 players locally (San Diego and Tijuana), most of whom are leaders of their own mariachi bands – the top bands in this area -- who are capable of performing this music at this level, but the size of my mariachi can be as large as 15 players. There simply are not any other mariachi musicians in this area who can do what I ask of my players at the level at which I require. Furthermore, Guadalupe Gonzalez, former member of Mariachi Los Camperos and current member of both Mariachi Sol de Mexico and Mariachi, stated candidly to me following a recent performance of ours that there is not another mariachi in the world today who can perform the music that we currently are performing.

My solution has been to develop a larger “pool” of musicians, in the neighborhood of 25 players total, who have some of the talents I require, and to form the ensemble from within this group of players based on the music that we will be performing. For example, when we performed a 1-hour concert for the National Association of Teachers of Singing in June 2002 with no rehearsal, I formed the group of the 8 best “100%-mariachi” who also had the best voices. When we played a concert of mainly instrumental music as soloists with the San Diego Symphony, I formed the group using the 8 best “100%-mariachi” players, not necessarily the best singers. When we played for the American Heart Association’s annual Royal Heart Ball, I brought a total of 15 players including 7 “100%-mariachis” with the best voices and 8 “100%-classical” musicians (from the San Diego Symphony and other orchestras) in order to be able to perform all of the music we did that evening at the level I required.

This is obviously not an ideal situation. I should be able to find 15 mariachi musicians, with good voices, who can read music at a reasonable level, with instrumental technique sufficient to play this music, but not enough of them exist.

For my concerts I pay anywhere from \$100 (for a single performance and no rehearsal) to \$500 (for a single performance out of town requiring at least one night staying away from home). The average mariachi musician in this area makes \$35 per hour, with a 2-hour minimum for performances, and is working every weekend of the year and many weekdays as well, for a total of \$20-25,000 per year—below-average players work and earn less. The best mariachi musicians, with a larger repertoire of songs, the ability to sing many songs and play different instruments, can make as much as \$50 per hour with a 2-hour minimum for performances, and will work considerably more than the average player – including teaching informally during the week and making recordings several times per month -- earning approximately \$35-45,000 per year. Some local mariachi s have begun teaching at local schools full-time, though without teaching credentials, and make \$50-60,000 per year from all of their mariachi-related activities combined.

experience with mariachi music—and are therefore essentially useless in a mariachi such as Sol de México.

Hernández told the story of a young man from Texas who had recently gone to Los Angeles to audition for Mariachi Sol de México and, while he had a wonderful tenor voice that would have been a perfect addition to the group, he was very sub-par as a violinist and consequently did not receive the job. “I wish there were more qualified, professional, committed mariachi musicians around.... You find so many mariachis [like this one from Texas] who have one strength, but it is rare to find a well-rounded musician.”

José has often come to San Diego and Tijuana to find new players for his groups. Since, as he stated, well-rounded players are so rare, he admits that—even at his level, literally at the top of the mariachi world—he must spend rehearsal time teaching his players techniques and aspects of musicianship that they should have learned while growing up. Two of the most recent additions to his groups, one to Sol de México and the other to Reyna de Los Angeles, were Sweetwater Union High School District students who learned mariachi in our local mariachi programs. Their secondary-school mariachi education helped them develop to the point that they deserved the invitation to perform, but the limits to their education and experience has forced José to view them as “prospects” that he must continue to develop over time before they can become permanent, full-time members of his groups. More formal, higher education mariachi training would clearly aid in better preparing these and other students for work with José’s groups. This would benefit local students by better-qualifying them to receive positions such as these, and it would benefit employers such as José Hernández by enlarging the pool of qualified musicians from which he could select new members.

“Every mariachi [band] does have a different style, [a different way of playing the same songs and different sorts of songs that they like to play,] so I will always have to train my players to play the way I want them to—different from what they may have done before—but in order to play for me someone has to have the basic foundation of mariachi skills and education.... What you need to do, [Jeff,] is develop a program where you can give students the tools that every mariachi in this world needs, give them a sense and respect for the essence of mariachi, its history, the culture that surrounds the music, respect for the older players and the traditions of mariachi.... That’s what I look for in my players, and there should be a place that a young person can go to receive that kind of education.”

Full-time players in Mariachi Sol de México earn between \$37,000 and \$43,000 per year directly from the group, while their performance and rehearsal schedule provides ample time for players with additional—or more highly developed—skills to find extra work. Players who have a better understanding of mariachi music as a whole, who have had more formal training in all of the different mariachi instruments, or who have completed college degrees can readily obtain additional income teaching mariachi in schools (during the school day or in after-school programs), in community centers or privately. Players who read music exceptionally well can easily find extra work with record producers who

need masterful, literate players who can enter a recording studio and perform original music and/or arrangements flawlessly and as quickly as possible. Players who have a complete understanding of music theory and can write music well can obtain additional income writing original arrangements for clients or by selling their arrangements and transcriptions to those interested in learning mariachi songs. With all or some of these skills, a member of Mariachi Sol de México can easily boost his total annual income to well over \$50,000.

Suzanne Garcia Testimonial

Synopsis:

Suzanne Garcia is a counselor at Mount San Antonio Community College in Walnut, CA, and a professional mariachi musician. She very eloquently describes the need for qualified teachers (modestly re-telling a story of a school that was so “desperate” for a mariachi teacher that they actually hired *her!*), and more uniquely the need for a higher-education facilities to develop programs such as an AA in the music of mariachi to attract young mariachi students who are not currently pursuing their education past high school. At the very least, she states, it would prepare students more formally in their musical field, “as well as give them a general education that could end up as a bridge to transfer” to a 4-year school.

-JN

Highlights:

- “Most of the mariachis that are teaching in the public elementary and jr. high schools, to my knowledge, do not have bachelor's degrees much less any type of teaching credential.”
- “I actually taught a Mariachi class in Whittier about 3 years ago and was hired by someone that was **desperate** to find someone to teach their children in an after-school program. I do not consider myself qualified by any means, and only took the job as a favor to the children and the advisor of the program.”
- “I even took "Music of Mexico" at UCLA which was taught by Nati Cano's crew while I was a student there. The only thing I learned from those classes was more repertoire.”
- “I feel that we have done many of our children a disservice by teaching them an art and skill that they can't take farther than the restaurants, bars, and backyard parties of Los Angeles... They have never pursued an education nor a specific career because they will never be able to make \$50.00/ hr in any other job with the experience they have. Ironically, many of these same young adults are those teaching in today's elementary schools.”
- “I love the idea of an AA degree- it at least would prepare students more formally in the field of music as well as give them a general education that could end up as a bridge to transfer.”

Subject: mariachi AA

Date: Tuesday, October 29, 2002 2:53 PM

From: Suzanne Garcia <sgarcia@mtsac.edu>

To: <jeff@virtuosomariachi.com>

Jeff:

My name is Suzanne Garcia and I am a counselor at Mount San Antonio Community College in Walnut, CA. I also happen to be a Mariachi in the Los Angeles area. I currently play with a group called Mariachi Divas. In response to your questions regarding qualified Mariachi instructors ... It depends on what you consider "qualified" Most of the mariachis that are teaching in the public elementary and jr. high schools, to my knowledge, do not have bachelor's degrees much less any type of teaching credential. Moreover, to my knowledge, they are not what most musicians consider to be "trained" musically. As you know, Mariachi music is something that has been passed down from many generations and many of us here in LA, including myself, have only learned from what we see and hear, not from what we read and study. I actually taught a Mariachi class in Whittier about 3 years ago and was hired by someone that was **desperate** to find someone to teach their children in an afterschool program. I do not consider myself qualified by any means, and only took the job as a favor to the children and the advisor of the program. As a music professor, you know the importance of the "basics" of music. When I was 12 years old, I used to go the Mariachi Class at Cerritos and Rio Hondo College- I even took "Music of Mexico" at UCLA which was taught by Nati Cano's crew while I was a student there. The only thing I learned from those classes was more repetoire. I now am a part of a Mariachi Group where musicianship is very important and taken very seriously due to the experience and musical knowledge of our director. Knowing the "basics" of music is so important and understanding its structure is something that Mariachi classes have been missing for a long time. So much of Mariachi music is the culture, the tradition, and the ability to improvise and memorize, but the other part of it, at least for the children, is the ability to build a talent into more than an easy \$50 per hour. I feel that we have done many of our children a disservice by teaching them an art and skill that they can't take farther than the restaurants, bars, and backyard parties of Los Angeles. I know many young adults that were products of Mariachi Schools like Roosevelt High School that still rely on Mariachi (not music) as their main source of income. They have never pursued an education nor a specific career because they will never be able to make \$50.00/ hr in any other job with the experience they have. Ironically, many of these same young adults are those teaching in todays elementary schools. I am not saying that they are not good at what they do, I just would like to make sure that the virtuoso mariachi children that they are teaching are not pigeonholed itno one genre of music. I love the idea of an AA degree- it at least would prepare students more formally in the field of music as well as give them a general education that could end up as a bridge to transfer. Obviously, I am very passionate about the field of education. I also love my work as a Mariachi, unfortunately, I am only now learning what it takes to be a true musician. Please send me any more information on this AA degree whenever possible and if I can be of any help to you, please contact me at this e-mail address or at (909) 662-8921. Thank you. Suzanne Garcia

The changing face of mariachi
Mexico's music enchants a new generation, inspiring new traditions
By, Peter Hartlaub
From the San Francisco Chronicle
Sunday, May 5 2002

Synopsis:

Mariachi performance and education is thriving in the San Francisco Bay area. Many schools have mariachi classes both as after-school “clubs” and more and more as a part of the school curriculum: classes taken for credit and grades during the school day. Professional mariachis are busy and making a decent living. Student mariachi classes are being taught primarily, it seems, by professional mariachis – not by credentialed teachers. The music seems to be growing from the grass-roots upwards: students want to learn mariachi so they create their own classes, find their own teachers, and eventually achieve “institutional support”, which is happening more and more lately.

-JN

Highlights:

- “The mariachi music scene has been thriving in the Bay Area [of San Francisco], particularly the South Bay, as the best traditions are being passed on in local grade schools, colleges and community centers.”
- “the growing interest in Mexican music has allowed Bay Area mariachis -- including many women -- opportunities to play for a career.”
- "It's probably one of the few music jobs where if you're not famous, you can still make a living," said John Rialson, a former professional mariachi who organizes a mariachi youth program in San Jose.
- 400 enthusiastic kids are learning the mariachi tradition in seven local schools. A decade ago, mariachi was at most an after- school hobby.
- When Robert Lucero got to Stanford as a student in 1994, he was disappointed to find there was no on-campus mariachi band. In 1994, Lucero and several other students formed Mariachi Cardenal. A few years ago, the club became a class, taught by Lucero and offered by the university as Music 157: Introduction to the Mariachi Ensemble.
- The teachers of Mariachi Cardenal are people from local mariachi bands.
- Many of the Mexican students see mariachi classes as a way to reconnect to roots from which they are a generation or two removed.
- A mariachi with a steady gig makes the equivalent of a teacher's salary -- \$30,000 or more per year. Some of the players supplement their income with [mariachi] teaching jobs and non-musician jobs.

-JN

In the age of radio early last century, Mexico City became the mariachi capital of the world. Modern groups have expanded to include trumpets, the guitarron (a large bass guitar with a bulging back) and the vihuela (a small five-string guitar).

The Chronicle followed mariachis who played with several South Bay groups, focusing on four types of participants in the new mariachi culture -- the organizers, the teachers, the professionals and the prodigies.

THE ORGANIZER -- JOHN RIALSON

Cesar Chavez once led a boycott of a Safeway on 1700 Alum Rock Road in San Jose. The grocery store is long gone, and in 1999 the Mexican Heritage Plaza was built in its place.

As the site's mariachi youth program coordinator, John Rialson was rewarded with a small double cubicle in the sprawling structure, which he keeps filled with clippings of all things mariachi.

Want to know about the history of the plaza? Rialson dives into a filing cabinet. Want to know the role of the flute in mariachi music? He's got an article already photocopied and stapled.

As excited as he gets about mariachi's rich past, his passion is the future -- the 400 enthusiastic kids who are learning the mariachi tradition in seven local schools. He said that a decade ago, mariachi was at most an after-school hobby.

Now it is fast becoming a regular part of local school music classes, where some kids get a grade for mariachi.

After the schools program got off the ground a few years ago, Rialson and others started a night class for community members, teaching everyone from an 80-year-old woman to kids such as Angel Mendez how to play the traditional music.

Rialson said that as mariachi music was starting to wane in Mexico in the early 1980s, it started to boom in the United States with the release of Linda Ronstadt's popular "Canciones de Mi Padre" reords.

In the same way that the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack released two years ago has spurred widespread interest in bluegrass, Ronstadt brought mariachi music to the masses.

"That really inspired all of the kids here, who wanted to sing like Linda," Rialson said.

Now, Rialson said, mariachi music festivals take place throughout the country.

"It kind of started down in Texas and Arizona, (but) it's really been spreading across the country," he said. "Even Detroit did one a few years ago."

And the music only has room to grow, with a baby boom of students learning by classroom instruction. Rialson said thousands of students are learning mariachi in places such as Los Angeles and Tucson, Ariz.

THE TEACHER -- ROBERTO LUCERO

Roberto Lucero's father was a high school band director who started a mariachi program at his son's school in New Mexico.

But when Lucero got to Stanford as a student in 1994, he was disappointed to find there was no on-campus mariachi band.

In 1994, Lucero and several other students formed Mariachi Cardenal. They weren't trying to start a movement, just a place for a few friends to hang out, play music and party a little.

"It was just kind of like a club. We were a little rowdy," Lucero says.

Whether it was the party atmosphere, the allure of playing traditional Mexican music or a little of both, the "club" grew from a few friends to dozens.

A few years ago, the club became a class, taught by Lucero and offered by the university as Music 157: Introduction to the Mariachi Ensemble. The best musicians play as an ensemble for on-campus events, local weddings and other celebrations.

Lucero graduated from Stanford a few years ago and started a doctorate program in anthropology at the university. But he has put it on hold to teach and play full-time with Mariachi Santa Cecilia, a San Jose group.

The average two-hour class starts with a couple dozen students listening to four teachers - one each for violins, trumpets, guitar and bass. Instructors teach one song per day, first playing it together, then breaking up into groups to teach the young musicians one on one.

At the end of the day, everyone comes together as a class and plays the song.

Mariachi instruction can be a chaotic experience to watch.

At a recent Music 157 class, the trumpet, guitar and bass students were all practicing different parts of the song in the same room -- with the resulting racket sounding like anything but music.

But at the end of the day, when everyone was on the same page, the transformation was almost magical. The newest students played what notes they could and the experienced students played the loudest, producing a song close to performance level.

The teachers are people Lucero knows from local mariachi bands, and the favored language in class is Spanish, although several students are non-Spanish-speaking. Lucero and one of his friends, Eric Parra, said many of the Mexican students see mariachi classes as a way to reconnect to roots from which they are a generation or two removed.

THE PROFESSIONAL -- BARBARA PEREZ-DIAZ

Barbara Perez-Diaz's family has hired mariachis for parties at their Campbell home for as long as she can remember.

As a fourth-grader, she decided to do more than watch the musicians -- she wanted to join. She picked up a violin and learned from her schoolteachers and other mariachis and by listening to records.

After playing with a series of groups in the 1970s and 1980s, and still living in Campbell, Perez-Diaz founded Mariachi Santa Cecilia.

There are no resumes in mariachi, so she recruited people she knew -- relatives, former band mates and old friends ("It's all by word of mouth," Perez-Diaz said). They played their first gig in 1995 at the San Jose Flea Market, where they've been playing a few times per week since.

Juan Fernandez, 72, is one of the group's senior members. Diaz-Perez said she has some scratchy film of him from 1968, playing at a family party. Another mariachi in the group, Suzano Lozano, has also been playing for decades.

Mariachi Santa Cecilia performed at the flea market on a recent Saturday with six men and five women, including Lucero, Parra and Perez-Diaz's daughter, Carla, who plays violin and sings.

The crowd of about 50 was passive but appreciative. Many people were eating at benches in front of the stage, but no one was impolite, except for a drunken guy who occasionally joined in a verse or two, slurring the words but still getting them right.

Mariachi Santa Cecilia, in contrast, was belting out tunes as if it were playing in the largest stadium in Mexico City.

The guitar and bass play almost constantly, like a rhythm section, with the horns and violins providing short dashes of color. Lucero, Lozano and Carla Perez trade vocals, straining to sing with all their heart but never overshadowing the rest of the band.

Carla's father is also a mariachi, leading Mariachi Azteca at a jumping San Jose restaurant called Tacos al Carbon.

"She's essentially grown up around mariachi," Perez-Diaz said. "I always tell people it's like the Suzuki method in Japan. She was listening to mariachi music before she was born."

Almost none of the members of Mariachi Santa Cecilia and Mariachi Azteca have day jobs.

Lucero and trumpet player Eric Parra graduated from Stanford but are making their money as mariachis.

"Right now, it pays my bills," said Parra, who graduated as an economics major and plans to start a job next month at an options trading firm.

Lucero said a mariachi with a steady gig makes the equivalent of a teacher's salary -- \$30,000 or more per year. Some of the players supplement their income with teaching jobs and non-musician jobs.

Perez-Diaz said she's one of the few mariachis with a 9-to-5 job. She works for Santa Clara County in a medical facility, less for the money than for the benefits.

"In the mariachi world, where do you find a mariachi with a medical plan?" she said.

THE PRODIGY -- ANGEL MENDEZ

Maria Mendez apologizes, suggesting that her English is poor.

Then, in 25 words that couldn't have been chosen better, she explains her son's gift for playing the violin.

"I think he does it because my father was a very good mariachi," she explains. "He never listened to my father. The music is in the blood."

Maria Mendez had five kids and lived in poverty in San Jose, but took two jobs, as a baker and a hotel room cleaner, so she could sign up her children for music lessons -- both to reconnect them with their roots and to keep them off the street.

Angel's mentor is Juan Jose Diaz, a professional mariachi from San Jose who teaches at the Mexican Heritage Plaza.

Maria Mendez said when Angel's not at the Plaza or at school, he's home listening to Mexican music on the radio.

"Every single day when he's done with his homework, he's working on his music," Maria Mendez said. "When I come home from my job, he's listening to music, and he tries to do the same thing."

Angel said he plays for the fun of it, although a future as a musician wouldn't be bad.

"I like to play the violin, and I want to be rich because my family is poor," he said.

Angel's interest goes against everything music distributors are pushing on kids these days.

Mariachi is nothing like pop music and rap, where the spotlight shines on the stars such as J.Lo and Ja Rule. In most mariachi bands, there are no stars, only contributors, and the group is only as good as its weakest member.

Mariachis also have to study. Lucero said most groups know hundreds of songs. Some of mariachi's greatest heroes put modern songwriters such as Elton John and Billy Joel to shame.

"The most prolific songwriter was Jose Alfredo Jimenez," Lucero said. "They say he wrote more than 1,000 songs."

Angel doesn't know that many yet, but he's on his way. He said he wants to go to college and play mariachi music for a living, and doesn't seem to care about the location.

Asked where he'd most like to play in the world, he answered, "Great America."

Angel's little brother wants to start playing the trumpet. His older brothers already know guitar. Maybe they will be another mariachi family. And if they aren't successful, maybe their grandchildren will be.

The music is in the blood.

Email Peter Hartlaub at phartlaub@sfchronicle.com.

Occupying an unused textile factory, the academy, which keeps the cost of classes at just 15 cents an hour thanks to a City Hall subsidy, lies at the heart of the sprawling capital's tough downtown Lagunilla neighborhood.

Blocks away, costumed mariachis strum bathtub-sized guitars in Garibaldi plaza, the traditional place for city dwellers to celebrate engagements or lament break-ups while swigging tequilas.

"I'm learning so I can play with my dad," said Jesus Alvarado, a 20-year-old mariachi student studying a five-stringed Mexican lute called the vihuela, explaining that his father earns his living in the nearby plaza.

MORE THAN MARIACHIS

Throughout Latin America, popular genres like Brazilian samba and Cuban son are complex potpourris of influences from indigenous peoples, European conquerors, African slaves and later waves of immigrants.

Think Mexican music and most think mariachi, a style of music which spread to Mexican restaurants across the world from western Jalisco state.

But classes at the school, which has its own museum displaying replicas of pre-Hispanic flutes and drums found after the Spanish conquest, reflect one of the continent's most diverse musical tapestries.

In the musically rich Gulf Coast state of Veracruz, Spanish flamenco-style foot stamping and wailing mark melodious "son jarocho" music, believed to have blossomed when African slaves plucked out drum rhythms on conquerors' harps and lutes.

Marimba music, associated with heavily Mayan southern Chiapas state bordering on Guatemala, is also taught.

Students drum out rhythms on a type of wooden xylophone which has close cousins in Senegal and Uganda, among other African countries.

Staccato "norteno" rhythms played on accordions and double basses in northern Mexico were borrowed from central and eastern European polkas and waltzes.

Even urban genres are studied, including the risqué songs of Salvador "Chava" Flores, whose tales of corner shops and taco stands are a chronicle of modern Mexico City street life.

And students play instruments made to fit Mexican needs. The hulking "guitarron" acoustic mariachi bass was reputedly invented when minstrels in the central Bajío region

tired of lugging double basses from pueblo to pueblo, so they slapped straps on the instruments to carry them on their backs.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

At the music academy, the newfound interest in all things Mexican has had an unlikely focus: the salterio -- the 120-stringed Mexican lap harp that was fast disappearing.

Said to have originated in the Middle East and plucked with both hands using steel nail extensions, it was the Mexican elite's instrument of choice during the pre-revolutionary dictatorship of Gen. Porfirio Diaz.

"It's different, it's beautiful and it's Mexican," said 14-year-old student Berenice Aceves as her classmates played a ghostly, tinkling melody in the background. The classical cello student said she joined the school to learn about her roots.

The academy offers a three-year degree course in which students can also learn about the origins of their country's music while getting up to scratch playing it.

And it has invented its own method for teaching music theory. One page of the school manual teaches the complicated concept of triplet notes using a phrase from crooner's favorite "Besame Mucho" ("Kiss me a lot")

During an interview at his desk flanked by a marimba and an electric piano, Garcia, a man with slicked back hair and thick-framed glasses, called the cacophony of sounds drifting in from the corridor his "gentle chaos."

"In music school, students are taught to scorn popular music," he said. "But where did Tchaikovsky and Beethoven get their inspiration? From peasant music," he answered.