



## **Mariachi in the Band Program: The Pros and Cons**

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***“Discussing the Pros and Cons of Mariachi within the Band Program”***

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## **Overview: Mariachi in Music Education**

José R. Torres-Ramos, Moderator

Mariachi as with most forms of music and art, has different meanings amongst its practitioners and connoisseurs. In its most basic understanding, mariachi is a folk music form indigenous to Central Mexico. Its commercialization has made it a world symbol of Mexican national identity and heritage. Although, a Mexican music style, it is popularly performed and consumed throughout Latin America and the world. The demographic shift within the United States and the prevalence of Latino populations has supported a boom in the popularity of mariachi, particularly in secondary schools and universities. It remains marginalized within music education despite its overwhelming support among parents, school boards, and the general public. In 2011, the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO), added mariachi music to the organization's list of intangible cultural patrimony. This appointment gives mariachi profound significance as representative art and culture. Music education is currently at a crossroads with looming budget cuts, standardized testing, and the desire within the discipline to remain relevant and progressive. Mariachi is a polarizing antagonist for how music education is perceived. Much of the debate centers on the traditional ways of music learning and teacher preparation that do not adequately support “other” forms outside of the “trilogy” of band, orchestra, and choir. When “other” music forms are taught, they are often reflected through the lens of the trilogy. Thus their authenticity and diversity is dampened and not allowed to flourish. This presentation discusses the overwhelming benefits, contrasting the popular concerns of inclusion of mariachi ensembles within the band program, the dominant gatekeeper of music education in Texas. As both band and mariachi directors, the presenters enrich the discussion, providing a unique insight bridging the teaching methods of these two contrasting styles. This supplementary handout provides anecdotal participant observations and opinions. It is not summary and does not include all information discussed in the presentation.

## **The Benefits of Student Involvement**

Rolando Molina

Having a mariachi program in your school is an added opportunity for students to learn and perform on a different musical instrument other than their primary band instrument. Studying a secondary musical instrument is very helpful in the development of a musician. Learning a different instrument will develop additional motor skills that will help make them better musicians. Some students find a great musical satisfaction by playing guitar for an hour every day. In this program they will learn basic chords and strumming techniques at the beginning. As the year progresses they will learn more advanced chords and strumming techniques. Studying all of the chords of a song make us more aware of the music theory involved in a musical selection. Students will also have the opportunity to learn an orchestral instrument like the violin. The violin will require much more individual instruction than the guitar. It is very helpful to have a violin method book with pictures on how to hold the violin and the bow. It is also very helpful if

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you can have an accomplished violinist to come and demonstrate for the students at the early stages of their development. It is also recommended that we use recordings and videos of professionals playing and modeling for our students. Students will also have the opportunity to study the *guitarrón*, the bass instrument in the mariachi ensemble. It is likewise very helpful to provide the students with a method book on *guitarrón* and also an accomplished musician to come show the students how to get started on the instrument. Videos and recordings are also recommended.

In Kingsville we were very fortunate to be able to buy a harp from a dealer in Texas. Many groups have to buy these harps from Mexico and Paraguay etc. I made a deal with my student’s parents. I told them I would buy the harp, which cost \$1,000.00 if they would pay for the daughter’s harp lessons with a professional harp player in Laredo. They agreed and the rest is history. Now that my student is a proficient player, she can teach another young student to play harp.

Having a mariachi in our program affords our trumpet players the opportunity to play 2 hours a day rather than just one if they are in band. Playing trumpet 2 hours a day will help develop a very good tone. Most high school students in small schools are involved in after school activities such as tennis, student council, etc. Having them playing their trumpet for 2 hours during their school day allows them the opportunity to participate in other extra-curricular activities. Some directors think that mariachi playing will ruin trumpet players. We teach our trumpet players to play with mariachi style in mariachi class only and with a concert band style in concert band. We have done this for many years and it has not ruined any trumpet players. This is a definite benefit!

The use of vocals in mariachi offers another benefit as band students get to use their voice in a musical experience on a daily basis. One good thing about mariachi is that it affords students the opportunity to sing chorus singing in most of our mariachi songs. It teaches them to become a more complete musician by having to use their voice as a musical instrument. They also learn to sing in harmony. Of course, only a few will become accomplished vocalists but the majority will have the joy of singing the chorus parts.

Students get a sense of belonging to a group that receives much attention from the general public. Students that used to be loners finally feel included because there is now something they can do that others appreciate. They are now developing more friendships than before. They take this class because they like it. They are not here because someone forced them to take this class. They love this class! Our students are fortunate because we have a television station near Kingsville that likes to feature student mariachi groups. Our students have come out on regional television programs 3 times this year. This gives them almost “Rock Star” status on campus. Mariachi helps students feel good about who they are.

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Mariachi students learn the importance of the meaning of a song rather than just playing their 3rd part on a certain instrumental composition. They learn the words to a composition and they know what the song means when they perform it for an audience. They also know by the reaction of the audience whether they delivered their message or not. When a singer comes up to a lady in the audience and sings, “*Te quiero por bonita...*” they will know by the blushing of the recipient if they did a good job of interpreting the song.

Students gain musical independence because of the nature of the make up of a mariachi group. There are only two trumpets in a mariachi. There is no one else playing your part. You must be able to nail your part on every song for an entire gig. In a band you can take a break when you are tired or take turns playing. You don't have that luxury in a mariachi. There are fewer players per part in mariachi groups. Therefore, you must be able to play your parts independently!

Students learn about musical showmanship and stage presence. Mariachi groups have a tradition of being entertainers. They practice the art of bringing a smile to their audience. They add *gritos* (yells) and stomps to their music. They dance and play on certain songs. They even tell jokes in between songs. It has been said that, “You can feel the room light up when the mariachi music starts playing!” Having a Mariachi in your school exposes your students to three different musical families in one class. They learn brass techniques, vocal techniques, and string techniques.

Having a mariachi in your school helps students learn about cultural diversity. Mariachi is not for Mexicans only. In Kingsville we have Anglo students that play in the mariachi by choice. We also have Asian students in the group. Sometimes people get freaked out when they see our diverse group. However, after seeing how well they interpret the songs, they accept it.

### **Alternative Concern: Financing**

It will take money to add a Mariachi program in your school. The number one expense is *trajes* (uniforms). Most of these are made in Mexico but there are Texas companies that are making them now. There are companies in San Antonio, San Marcos, and El Paso that will sell you *trajes*. The price ranges are from \$250 to \$550 depending on how much luxury you want or can afford. The men have a pant, jacket, vest, *botines* (boots), bow tie, a belt, and a sombrero. The ladies have the skirt, jacket, vest, *botines* (boots), belt, *moño* for the hair, bow tie, and very big earrings.

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Additional expenses will be incurred in purchasing instruments. Guitars will cost from \$120.00 to 199.00 each, beginner violins will cost from \$150.00 to \$230.00, *viuelas* will cost from \$400 to \$600 each, *guitarrones* will run from \$650 to \$850, *guitarra de golpe* will cost from \$400 to \$600.

You will also have to finance the cost of a certified teacher for the class and also the cost of techs to come teach whatever instrument the teacher cannot teach. There is also the cost of an additional classroom or hall for the class. You must also figure in the cost of registration fees for mariachi festivals and contests. Then there is the cost of musical arrangements that will have to be budgeted. We must also remember meals and travel – more money!

### **Alternative Concern: Resources**

This is a very real situation. Mariachi can take away students from jazz band. I have a colleague that used to have a very strong jazz band. After 5 years of a very successful run with their Mariachi, he is now scrambling to get students in his jazz band. Jazz band used to be the most popular second music course to take. Now mariachi has taken that place in his school. People in the community ask for the jazz band to play at different functions and he had to ask college kids to fill in vacant spots in the jazz band. You have to ask yourself, “Did Mariachi do this or did teaching methods do this?” A similar story just happened in a choir. There is a choir director accusing the Mariachi director of stealing her students. Again we need to ask ourselves, “Did Mariachi do this or did teaching methods do this?” Students are going to go where there are good opportunities for them to excel.

Is there a possibility that Mariachi could take away students from your band program? Are you willing to allow non-band students into the Mariachi program? Are you willing to let the Mariachi be its own entity? If the choir is allowed to be its own entity why can't the Mariachi be its own entity? Can a student be in orchestra and not in band? What is the difference? Having a Mariachi in your school can have many pros. However, you must seriously consider pluses and the minuses. You must be willing to support it if you are going to have it.

## **The Benefits of Promotion for the School and Music Program**

Ramon Niño

*“What can the creation of a mariachi do for our band program?”*

In some parts of Texas, mariachi music has spread like wildfire. People are looking for mariachi groups to help them celebrate special occasions, holidays or perhaps just to entertain an audience. Either way, mariachi is becoming more popular in many communities. With this popularity, a new outlet has been created to help promote school music programs. Many times the athletics teams in public schools are the groups that get the most support and funding, but in some school districts in Texas the mariachi programs are looked at as the champions of the school.

1. Refer other music groups at NSHS to fit the appropriateness of the event.
  - Choir
  - Drum line for pep rallies
  - Band for parades
2. Refer students to perform in professional organizations.
  - Youth Orchestras
  - Community Orchestras
  - Professional Mariachi Ensembles
3. Promote school and school district to professional organizations.
  - TMEA
  - TBA
  - CEDFA
  - TASB
4. Donations from business and community members.
  - Instruments
  - Trajes
  - Music
  - Travel
5. Positive promotion of school within district
  - Superintendent
  - School Board
  - Principal
  - Colleagues

**Alternative Concern:** Added Teaching Responsibility (Pedagogy and Curriculum, Planning and Extra

Performance Events)

*"What if I don't know anything about mariachi music?"*

It is often difficult to find a certified music teacher that has mariachi experience, whether as a performer or teacher. It is because of this, that many school districts in Texas do not continue their pursuit of starting a mariachi program. If a program is started at a school, it is almost immediate that the person in charge realizes how much work is involved in this venture.

There are many mariachi resources that can be accessed by anyone. The National Association for Music Education, formerly MENC, has a full mariachi curriculum available for anyone. This curriculum was created with the Clark County School District as they began their mariachi programs. There are many publications available for purchase, which can help with the beginning process and establish a strong beginning program. There is also a National Mariachi Workshop for Educators that was created to provide educators new or seasoned with curriculum, repertoire and ideas for any mariachi program.

As with all successful programs, the mariachi program will need to be thought of with all aspects in mind including instruments, repertoire, and recordings. Planning will need to be very detailed, as to make sure that all instrument technique is taught correct, before music can be learned. An experienced mariachi musician can be brought in to help with this process.

Once the mariachi is established, the community will begin to request public performances. Many times the group is asked to perform whether they are ready to or not. It is the teacher's choice at this point, but the students must have a positive experience to ensure their interest in the future. Each performance that is accepted will take much time away from the daily responsibilities of the students and the teacher.

As with all performance-based groups, there are many bits of information that must be pieced together to create a positive, successful outcome. Much of the pressures associated with the group will fall on the instructor. It is imperative that the instructor take into consideration all of the time that will be needed to create this additional group. If the instructor is accepting of these factors and necessities, then the mariachi group should be headed in the right direction. There are much more resources than realized for beginning mariachi groups in the public school setting. With the help and support of some professional organizations such as NAFME, TMEA, and TBA, mariachi education can be more successful in the public school setting. Planning and event participation is at the sole discretion of the instructor. The mariachi group can be as successful or busy with performances as the instructor sets them up to be.



## **The Benefits of Musicality through Mariachi Performance**

José R. Torres-Ramos

Performance in a mariachi ensemble can be one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences for a musician. Of course depending on which performance context is used will also determine the challenges. As has been written in previous research, there are two distinguishable overarching contexts for mariachi performance. The "show" and "working" mariachi, both of which have distinct and overlapping skill sets. Without getting into much detail, the "show" mariachi is the more Western oriented context for mariachi performance and the one that prevails in Texas' competition-oriented music programs. This is the context I was first taught and the one easiest for traditional trilogy music teachers to acclimate. It usually involves a very small set of repertoire that is rehearsed to the highest level of precision and performed in a concert-type environment. Music reading is the preferred method of transmission as the repertoire involves sophisticated arrangements intended to highlight the virtuosity of the musicians and ensemble. As with most Western classical performances, there is a "separation" between the performer and the audience as participant in the performance. This is not typical of 90% of practitioners who perform mariachi with the active participation of the audience. However the experience is still very rewarding through many of the overlapping elements that tie the two contexts together.

A mariachi ensemble promotes musical independence, as it is a smaller ensemble emphasizing the individuality of each participant not just as a musician but a performer. Each member of the mariachi is an individual artist with the opportunity and expectation to lead the ensemble's performance as both an instrumental and vocal soloist. This benefits and strengthens the individual musician, building confidence and a poise not always apparent in band performance. Likewise because of the prevalence of the string instruments, which are more refined and whose sonority is sharper (clarity), intonation and listening skills are enhanced, with the latter being of most importance and benefit. When effective teaching is occurring, student musicians enhance skills that they utilize in the trilogy, however in my opinion, because of the difference in context, more impactful.

This is especially true in the case of music leadership. A mariachi performance is self-guided without assistance of a conductor or written music. Therefore the performance has more freedom for interpretation but also more possibilities for non-cohesion. Therefore listening dominates and the visual sense is dampened or at least should be in order for the musicians to maximize the cohesive impact of the performance. This is different than a self-guided chamber ensemble, as the presence of a vocalist(s) opens another layer of interpretation and the necessity for listening and feeling. I feel mariachi performance maximizes the potential for musical thinking and learning. Some of the stereotypes that exist in mariachi in certain perceptions have an air of truth, but in reality are representative of the foundations of musical awareness.

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Finally the dramatic performance of mariachi ties all the musical skills together into visual imagery. The *gritos* and energy produced on stage is overwhelming and certainly not typical in reserved classical performances. Richard Wagner believed in the absolute oneness of drama and music. He felt the drama and music were organically connected expressions of a single dramatic idea. He called this *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total or collective artwork). In one of his essays he suggested the phrase “acts of music made visible.” A mariachi performance embraces this goal and with the inclusion of dance, which is married to the music makes this all the more true. Mariachi shapes musicians to become interpreters of art. This idea is at the core of understanding mariachi teaching.

### **Alternative Consideration: Detrimental Music Technique for Mariachi Students**

*“Mariachi will ruin my students musical technique and abilities.”*

I think this has been the number one concern among formal Western European trained musicians. Mariachi requires a different skill set and approach to playing that will be very different from that used in band. The argument that musicians will be ruined usually goes as follows:

Trumpet players will play with a wide vibrato and a bright sound. The stop tongue technique is totally incorrect and inappropriate for band musicians. Mariachi trumpet players execute with a heavy tongue articulation and only one dynamic level. They play with more pressure on the embouchure resulting in a very thin sound. The timbre and color will change over time to a point that the musician will no longer be able to produce a quality sound. Furthermore, mariachi musicians do not read music (the hallmark of music literacy) and play everything by ear. Because of this, mariachi musicians have very limited reading skills.

It is true that the interpretive style of mariachi is very different from band. For me this has a positive benefit for students to learn contrasting styles of playing. This is also a requirement on the TEKS. With regards to trumpet playing, it is important that students of any musical style learn the appropriate characteristic interpretation. Classical music is filled with differing styles. Even within band itself, it is a very different style of playing during marching season than concert. For any trumpet player, good embouchure formation, air support and quality sound are essential whether in mariachi or band. Mariachi trumpet students will need to use vibrato that is wide and characteristic. The tonguing technique will also need to be adjusted to the stop-tongue “*thah*” articulation. However, this does not have to be a hindrance, but a compliment to the diverse tools any trumpet player should aspire to as versatile musicians. The teacher is responsible for helping the student to learn proper fundamentals and how best to appropriately use them. My college trumpet instructor was a commercial musician and always made it a point to teach me to work in both styles. He recognized that aspiring musicians that wish to make a living or a supplemental income through music would need to have various skills in order to get a gig. Every musician has the potential ability to play with a different color or timbre. What is at issue is if you do this

over time you will be stuck. That would be like saying a football player will never be able to play any other sport once they get on the football field. That may be true for some, but there are a great many athletes who have been able to excel at a great many sports and at very high levels of achievement. Ultimately it is the effective teacher-student collaboration that will ensure success.

## Summary

José R. Torres-Ramos

Incorporating mariachi into the band program is most definitely an opportunity with as many challenges as benefits. Ultimately the decision rests with the goals of your music program. If as a teacher, you believe in offering students diverse opportunities within the field of music and are willing to put forth the requisite effort, then this would definitely be a strong option. The world of music exists far beyond the borders of Western European sensibilities. Therefore to assume that band is the one size fits all answer to music education, for me is a little unrealistic. At the same time, any commitment to teaching requires a logical decision followed by the initiatives to make that decision a successful reality. In the entire span of human history, we are more connected to each other than ever and the technological advances will continue to bring us closer. It is mind boggling how fast this is occurring. It would seem logical and rational to start introducing students to other musical ideas. This really shouldn't be about teaching a one particular style of music versus another. More so it should be about introducing diverse ideas and concepts that enhance and enrich the life experiences of our students. Hopefully this discussion will be a starting point in that direction.