

Ten Tips for Mariachi Instructors



by Curtis Tredway

Not that long ago, I was asked to take over the mariachi program at the University of Texas at El Paso. While I have had a long career as a high school and college band director, I had no experience with mariachi music whatsoever, and I don't speak Spanish (with the possible exception of a few phrases learned from my students that are likely unfit for publication). Despite that background, I have really enjoyed this new experience, and have grown both as a musician and an educator in the process. I teach exceptional students who help me select repertoire and who frequently correct my Spanish pronunciation. The program has grown rapidly, and we were even able to perform at the 2016 TMEA Clinic/Convention.

Having learned while doing, I offer the following tips for anyone who is in the early phases of or considering starting a mariachi program in their school. These have been integral in my work helping our mariachi develop.

Expand Your Repertoire: Sometimes mariachi ensembles fall into the trap of playing the same tunes over and over. Within the genre there are several musical styles, such as *sones*, *rancheras*, ballads, *boleros*, *huapangos*, polkas, and marches. Also, some non-traditional styles, such as pop and rock songs, have worked their way into the mariachi literature. The mariachi program should contain selections representing numerous styles.

Something Old, Something New: At one end of the spec-

trum, much of the mariachi genre is based on a tradition of folk music, so the repertoire should represent this literature well. It is important that we pay tribute to the origins of our ensemble. At the other end of the spectrum, mariachi music often embraces compositions from the '70s-'90s and beyond. These newer pieces allow our body of literature to continue to grow. Performing selections from across the spectrum will help improve student and audience engagement.

Mariachi music offers a great opportunity to expose students to social, political, geographical, and cultural influences that shape artistic expression.

Do Your Homework: For each tune, listen to numerous recordings—old and modern recordings, small and large groups, etc. You can find many mariachi recordings on the Internet. Listening to a variety of settings and interpretations will help you expand the artistic depth of your ensemble. Pay special attention to patterns played by the *armonía* (guitar, *vihuela*, and *guitarrón*). These patterns are important characteristics of various mariachi styles and genres.

Write It Down: As a folk-based genre, mariachi music has a long aural/oral tradition. Much of the music isn't written down (or is only in rough sketch), and the music is often learned through rote teaching. This approach can often introduce subtle (or not so subtle) changes into the tunes. It also makes it difficult to re-teach the tune to the next generation of performers. As music educators, written arrangements can be used to develop note-reading skills which, in turn, facilitates learning new selections.

Be Prepared to Make Edits:

Numerous mariachi arrangements are based on interpretations by particular artists. Some selections are transcriptions of specific recordings. These arrangements/transcriptions are often written by avid amateurs or semiprofessionals. As such, they may contain errors in pitch, rhythm, or standard notation practices. Don't be afraid to make edits or corrections.

Everybody Sings, Everybody Plays:

Many musicians tend to think of themselves as either instrumentalists or vocalists. Mariachi ensembles require members

to be both. Encouraging everyone in the ensemble to sing is a great way to develop musicianship and add variety to the performance. Many mariachi tunes call for group singing, usually in two- or three-part harmony. Songs that call for vocal soloists can generate additional excitement by having different members sing each verse or having these soloists also harmonize on choruses or other appropriate spots.

Perform a Show, Not Just a Concert:

Careful attention to staging, performance attitude, choreography, flow, and audience

interaction can be the difference between an acceptable performance and a memorable event. A strong performance is both an aural and a visual experience.

Maintain Rehearsal Standards:

Mariachi has a long tradition of amateur participation. Sometimes this is interpreted as accepting poor intonation or tone production. We should insist on the best musicianship our students can produce. This means performing with characteristic instrumental tone and proper vocal production that is compatible with the mariachi style. Intonation, balance, blend, phrasing, articulations, and diction are just as important in mariachi as in any other ensemble.

Teach Beyond the Notes: Mariachi music offers a great opportunity to expose students to social, political, geographical, and cultural influences that shape artistic expression. Too often students perform selections without any exposure to these elements. Make sure your students have a strong understanding of forces and events that influenced the development of many of the songs and traditions. Further, the genre has its own giants of composition and performance who should be studied. Go beyond the notes.

Ask For Help: Mariachi ensembles require pedagogical knowledge that is seldom part of traditional music education training. In addition to teaching non-Western European instruments such as the *guitarrón* and the *vihuela*, instructors must be able to address issues related to bowed strings, fretted strings, brass winds, and vocal production. Further, the genre often calls for performance practices that are not always notated. It is rare that an instructor has a thorough background in each of these areas. Seek out those who have experience in these areas. The best instructors are the ones who improve their knowledge by capitalizing on the strengths of others.

As you work to start or improve a mariachi program at your school, I hope these ideas that have helped me along the way will also help you build a successful program through which your students can experience this rich cultural and musical tradition.



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