



Baylor University
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Musicianship Through Mariachi: Introducing Latin-American Music in Theory Curriculum

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Introduction: Why Mariachi?

The diversity and breadth of Latin-American Music challenges instructors to select their approach to introduce the region in a reasonably comprehensive and culturally responsible manner. Given the historical and modern-day climate of tension between the United States and nations such as Mexico and Panama, connection with music of Latin-American cultures can break down perceptions of “otherness” and invite cultural understanding. As the demand for culturally representative music increases in public education, the educators of tomorrow will need the competency to authentically approach more ensembles such as the Mariachi, which are rapidly increasing in popularity.

The author proposes the introduction of Mariachi repertoire as one possible route of many to integrate exploration of Latin American traditions in the undergraduate core outside of a dedicated world music course. The approaches presented may be applied to a variety of genres and cultural regions.

Objectives

Design models of practical application in the music theory classroom through lesson plans and activities.

Integrate non-Eurocentric genres into current curriculum and practices in a culturally competent manner that enriches students’ world perspectives.

Pedagogical Frameworks

Drawing on the Comparative Music Model (CCM) discussed by Molly Reed and proposed by Juliet Hess for elementary music education, examples are provided for exercises that connect Mariachi music to western traits of tonality, establish cultural context for the genre, and enable students to analyze the interaction and exchange of Mariachi with other traditions.

Applied Exercises and Concepts

Fig. 1: Tonic-Dominant Analysis Activity with “La Raspa” Theme A

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Do or Ti	Do	Do	Do->Ti		Ti		Ti->Do	
Harmony	I	I	I	V	V	V	V	I
Function	Tonic	Tonic	Tonic	Dominant	Dominant		Dominant	Tonic

Fig. 2: Harmonic Reduction Activity with “La Raspa” Theme B

I V V I I V V I

Fig. 3: Comparison Activity of Mariachi and Western Swing

In 1938, Cliff Bruner and the Texas Wanderers began playing *Jesusita en Chihuahua* with the name “Jessie Polka”. By that point, it had transformed over time in Texas. Students listen to a video comparing the versions, then discuss questions such as: What is similar or different about the two songs (playing style, articulation, techniques, rhythm, meter, melody, etc.)? What from the mariachi version was removed, added, or modified? What was retained? What other songs/artists near this time were similarly influenced by Latino music?



A group of mariachis demonstrate *Jesusita en Chihuahua*.*



Members of a Western Swing band demonstrate *Jesse Polka*.*

*Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAU3dDKV_s4

Accessing Scores

Most of the major mariachi repertoire was created or modified by wrote, then transcribed/arranged by enthusiasts, other mariachis, or educators. It may be a challenge to obtain arrangements for little or no cost, but select free arrangements are available at mariachisheetmusic.com. Mariachi methods books are also lucrative, as they can provide several scores of essential repertoire for a one-time investment. One may also consider supporting the arrangers that have worked to make repertoire accessible in notation.

Cultural Considerations

The Mariachi ensemble covers a variety of styles and Mexican musics using a common set of instrumentation. To best prepare students for cultural understanding and humility, and to engage in critical analysis, it is recommended to include the following in teaching:

- Origins and history, including influential artists and ensembles both past and present
- Ensemble instrumentation and functions
- Genres and terminology, such as *ranchera*, *bolero*, *huapango*, *corridos*, *son*, and *Cajon* (canon of repertoire)
- Address common misconceptions- the modern Mariachi (since the 50s) has numerous differences from its earlier forms.

Future Research

Future research may include further exploration of theory concepts that can be connected to Mariachi repertoire, including the concept of *schema* exemplified through sound events in the *ranchera* genre. More Latin American genres can be reviewed for methods to implement them in theory curriculum. A survey of influential Latin American composers can open dialogue into the cultural exchanges between South American, Afro-Cuban, and Western styles in classical music.

References & Resources

