

# LA MÚSICA DEL MARIACHI: CONSERVATOR OF MEXICAN CULTURE AND HERITAGE<sup>1</sup>

## *LA MÚSICA DEL MARIACHI: CONSERVADOR DE LA CULTURA Y LA HERENCIA MEJICANA*

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### **Resumen:**

La música de los mariachis, sus textos profundos, ritmos y mestizaje mantienen la cultura mejicana y su herencia. La música de los mariachis es un sinónimo de Méjico. Nacidos ambos de un comienzo violento de forzosa asimilación y mestizaje, el mariachi es uno de los símbolos principales de orgullo nacional.

Las letras y los ritmos de la música mariachi comparten y preservan una historia de supervivencia acunan epistemologías ancestrales, todo lo que es Méjico: sus raíces indígenas, españolas y africanas así como su historia pre y post 1821. Tal y como el estudio de cualquier otra música, lengua o cultura es relevante que traducciones literales precisas de música mariachi se conviertan en accesibles para todos los descendientes de mejicanos, especialmente estudiantes chicanxs y sus instructores. Un currículo relevante culturalmente fomenta la identidad y la inclusividad a la vez que promueve el éxito académico.

Sin embargo, en lo que respecta a la educación musical, la historia, teoría, notación musical y práctica de la música de Europa occidental domina la escena. Con más de 62 millones de hispanos viviendo en los Estados Unidos, un 62% de ascendencia mejicana, es urgente crear espacios musicales decolonizados que ofrezcan más de una sola narrativa. Dentro de estos espacios, es crucial que se proporcionen recursos de calidad de manera equitativa. Gracias a su popularidad y adopción en el currículo básico de escuelas en los Estados Unidos, resulta fundamental acumular recursos educativos de calidad, partituras y otros materiales curriculares de música mariachi. En este artículo, describo formas de canciones mariachi populares, su región de origen, métrica, estructura textual y ofrezco análisis de ritmo, así como ejemplos de cómo hacer las notaciones musicales.

**Palabras clave:** Mariachi, herencia mejicana, espacios musicales decolonizados, cultura, identidad

### **Abstract:**

Mariachi music, its profound texts, rhythms, and mestizaje (racial mixture) preserve Mexican culture and heritage. Mariachi music is synonymous with Mexico. Both birthed through a violent beginning of forced

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assimilation and mestizaje, mariachi is one of the foremost symbols of Mexican national pride. Mariachi's lyrics and distinctive rhythms, share and preserve a story of survival, cradle ancestral epistemologies, all that is Mexico, its Indigenous, Spanish, and African roots and history pre and post 1821. And just as in the study of any other music, language, or culture, it is consequential that precise, literal, translations (scores) of mariachi music, research, and other scholarly, cultivated resources are accessible to all Mexican descent people, especially Chicana/x/o students and those who teach them. Culturally relevant curriculum fosters identity and inclusivity and promotes academic success. However, as it pertains to music education, western European music history, theory, notation, and praxes dominate. With over 62 million Hispanics living in the United States, 62% of Mexican descent, it is dire to create decolonized music spaces that offer more than a single narrative. And within these spaces, it is crucial that quality resources are provided equitably. Because of its popularity and adoption as core curriculum in schools around the United States, amassing quality mariachi educational resources, musical scores and transcriptions, and other curricular materials is central to Mexican descent student success. In this article, I describe common mariachi song forms, their region of origin, meter, text structure and offer rhythmic analyses and examples for notating them.

**Keywords:** Mariachi Music, Mexican Heritage, Decolonized Music Spaces, Culture and Identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Mariachi is a conservator of Mexican history. Mariachi music's profound texts, rhythms, and mestizaje (racial mixture) preserve Mexican culture and heritage. Mariachi is synonymous with Mexico. It is one of the foremost symbols of Mexican national pride as it encompasses all that is Mexico, its Indigenous, Spanish, and African roots and history pre and post 1821. And just as in the study of any other music, language, or culture, it is consequential that precise, literal, translations (scores) of mariachi music, research, and other scholarly, cultivated work is accessible to all Mexican descent people. Mariachi music is an international phenomenon that on any given day can be heard in a multitude of venues ranging from world-class theatres and middle and high school auditoriums to local restaurants and backyard fiestas. Because of its popularity and adoption as core curriculum in secondary schools around the United States, it is integral that musical scores, research, and other salient resources are prevalent, available, and notated--rhythmically and melodically precise, and cultivated by Mexican music scholars. A notated mariachi song should sound absolute, verifiably mariachi, regardless of who or what ensemble type interprets the composition. However, composers and transcribers of mariachi music are just as diverse in their formal, western music level of education and respective abilities to notate mariachi music as is mariachi music itself. And when they do notate their work, they do not always agree how to notate mariachi rhythms to the same musical or audible end. In fact, the work of notating mariachi music has multifarious shorthand notations for both rhythms and melodies that can range from lines of letters on a page with no indication of rhythm, to rhythms notated with letters written below or above indicating pitch, but not octave to just lyrics with guitar chords written above. The least offensive being lyrics written in the form of the song. For instance, multiple stanzas of an equal number of lines might indicate a corrido or a bolero, significantly narrowing the field of possible song styles. In these situations, one must be taught by someone who is a mariachi specialist, someone who knows mariachi music, its intricacies, and

nuances. A music educator unfamiliar with mariachi repertoire, regardless of their level of virtuosity, would be hard-pressed to teach the music; it would be impossible without knowing the rhythm or the melody of a particular song. In this article, I describe common mariachi song forms and meters and offer rhythmic analyses and examples for notating them in the western tradition so when realized by any ensemble, the resulting sound is autochthonous to Mexico; it sounds like mariachi whether it is taught and/or played by learned mariachis or not.

Mariachi music is multidimensional. Its instrumentation allows the ensemble to realize music from the most subtle and romantic to the most poignant, virtuosic, and technically demanding. The mariachi has the potential to sound like a symphony. This is what attracted my younger brother, at the time concert master for the Jr. Mid-Texas Symphony, to mariachi music. He heard Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán (arguable the best mariachi in the world) performing Rossini's "William Tell Overture" and exclaimed "They sound like a symphony!" So why is it, in their infinite capacity to cross genres of music, have mariachis only recently begun adding classical, even jazz, and other instrumental music to their repertoire? Is it not mariachi music if it is performed using mariachi instrumentation and musicians?

Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic Period musicians began experimenting with abstract forms of instrumental music. This abstract music was called "absolute" music--absolute because it was thought to be the purest form of music. Instrumental music, it was believed, left the meaning of the composition to the imagination of the listener. The composer wrote music for art's sake, music that pleased the ear and not necessarily the mind or the heart. There was no preconceived meaning behind the music and because of this, many romantic philosophers believed instrumental music to be far superior to music with words. This was a concept with which many composers quite verbally disagreed, including Wagner who debunked the idea using Beethoven's Symphony #9 as a definitive argument. The fourth movement of Symphony #9, for the first time within a symphonic piece, incorporated the use of text and voices, a choral setting of Friedrich Schiller's poem "Ode to Joy." Wagner was quoted as saying, "'where music can no farther, there comes the word' (the word stands higher than the tone)." (Goehr, p. 112) Words carry meaning, preserve culture and heritage, conocimiento, passion and pain, heartache, and struggle; they tell the story of a people. And when words are supported by music, the two coalesce into impassioned speech—a tumultuous expression of feelings whatever they may be, romantic, political, sentimental, or sorrowful.

Mariachi ensembles can have the same virtuosic ability and even more dexterity than a symphony, however, mariachi music is antithetical to western European music like that of Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven. Mariachi music is the product of colonialism: racial, cultural, instrumental, melodic, and rhythmic mestizaje. Mexico's history of colonization gives mariachi a distinct musical character, its own language, and colloquialisms. Mariachi music epitomizes the concept of "musical mestizaje" --a hybrid music created through cultural and racial mixture; a fusion of indigenous, European, and African (Asian and Middle Eastern) musical elements. In 1519, Spanish

conquistador Hernán Cortés first made contact in what, after 300 years of Spanish rule, would become Mexico in 1821. From the occupation of Spaniards, who brought with them African slaves (amongst them other Indigenous captives and immigrants), their music, instruments, customs, was born the mariachi. Built on the foundation of the Spanish Theatrical Orchestra of harps, guitars, and violins, the mariachi evolved into the ensemble with which we have become familiar. Throughout its lifespan, the mariachi expanded its instrumentation. It included instruments indigenous to Mexico, the guitarrón (more portable than a harp), guitarra de golpe, and the vihuela, and in the 1930's, the sound of the modern trumpet playing in close harmony (3rds) became undeniably mariachi. As a result of this broad instrumentation, the mariachi ensemble can assume innumerable musical identities; it has the capacity to realize almost any type of music, quite literally genres from Bach (classical music) to rock (popular music).

Mariachi is a consummate ensemble because of its heterogeneity, *mestizaje*. Albeit "...Spanish colonialists, disturbed by a growing population composed of offspring from relations between Spaniards, Africans and Indigenous people in colonial Mexico, developed a complex set of rules creating a race-like caste system with a distinct anti-black bias..." (Banks, p. 204) in this article, I use the term "*mestizaje*" as one that recognizes and celebrates all racial, ethnic, and cultural influences that comprise Mexico and its music. There are many different themes and narratives, meters and rhythms, and tempos heard in traditional mariachi music, but the music itself is most comparable to African origin music, where rhythms are intricately tied to the footwork of dancers. In mariachi, like African music, it is "...unrealistic to separate music from dance or from bodily movement." (Gorlinski, n.d., para. 1) Mariachi music is polyrhythmic, intricate, syncopated, and coincides with the patterns found in regional folkloric dances. Its region of origin in Mexico, the people who inhabit the region regardless of their race, gender, or ethnicity, meter (how the beat is divided) and rhythm make the sound of mariachi music patently mariachi. The sound of the music is not what makes mariachi distinctly mariachi, however. Mariachi music is not absolute music or music written for art's sake. Its purpose is not background music for dinners or fiestas or easy listening. Mariachi music is the guardian of Mexican culture and heritage. There was no Mexico prior to 1821. Mariachi, an ensemble born from *mestizaje*, is a living expression of Mexican identity. The words tell the story, the history of Mexico, the Indigenous, Spaniards, and Africans from whence it came. In the gritos, we hear the pain, suffering, and struggle and the celebration and the joy. This is why mariachi is a part of everyday life for Mexicans and Chicano's alike, every holiday, milestone – mariachi is our origin story albeit bittersweet. And just like translating languages, considering regional dialects, when notating mariachi music into the musical language of western Europe, much can be lost in translation. Mariachi music resounds racial mixture as an aesthetic ideal, a tangible reality; it preserves the history of people. It is so much more than merely transcribing folk tunes; accordingly, much regard must be taken when preserving the music of the Mariachi.

## 2. MARIACHI METERS AND RHYTHMS

### *Corrido/Ranchera 2/4*

The corrido could be referred to as the Mexican Pony Express as it was one of the only sources of news and information that reached rural and secluded areas. The news and information provided in corrido storytelling was usually based on factual events and real people; tales about heroes, people who might have been wrongfully accused of crimes and who escaped the law, and sometimes epic love stories with both happy and disastrous endings. Although, like in the telling of any good story, it is likely some of the historical facts and miraculous feats were embellished to say the least. Corridos were a powerful tool used for resistance and protest to government inequities. “The corrido is considered one of the foremost folk expressions of Mexico’s rural, working-class culture.... Emerging as an art from during a tumultuous century marked by war and revolution, corridos often provided an eyewitness to historic events in Mexico and helped define its modern, national identity. The corrido captures Mexican values and ideals through the actions of the genre’s epic protagonists....” (Gurza, paras. 2-3)

The corrido is a literary ballad that lends itself to the strophic song form, a song structure where all the verses are sung to the same music. Most corridos were written in a common poetic meter, four-line stanzas (quatrains) of six to eight syllable (iambic) lines. Each corrido could have anywhere from four to twenty stanzas or quatrains, there were no established rules for this type of informal songwriting. The rationale for the simple poetic structure was so the stories could be taught and shared easily in the oral tradition, without the use of musical notation. In other words, the songs were kept simple so that they could be easily memorized, and history preserved and easily recounted in song.

A popular example of the corrido is El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez. A trovador (singer and guitarist), who witnessed what transpired, recounted the story from village to village in song. As the story evolved, so did the corrido into a twenty-verse composition about Gregorio, a man wrongfully accused of having stolen and sold a male horse. Apparently, the whole incident was a misunderstanding. Gregorio had indeed sold a horse; a “yegua,” which is a mare or female horse. The stolen horse was a “caballo,” a male horse. When questioned by the sheriff about whether he had stolen and sold a caballo, a male horse, Gregorio answered “no.” He said that he had not sold a male horse, which was the truth; he sold a female horse. The sheriff, believing that Gregorio was lying, drew his weapon. The sheriff shot and wounded Gregorio’s brother and Gregorio in turn, shot and killed the sheriff. Gregorio’s actions were in defense of himself and his brother, however because he was Mexican, he ran for his life. Although Gregorio was eventually apprehended and prosecuted, he became a folk hero. The chase became legendary and the story of how the Texas Rangers hunted him became a tale of epic adventure with Gregorio accomplishing miraculous triumphs in the days it took (as the story is told) over 300 hundred Texas Rangers to capture him. The Corrido of Gregorio Cortez lives on to this day and recordings are plentiful. Why

is it the corrido (song form) was and still is so popular and why did Gregorio have so many supporters when the incident transpired? The Mexican/Chicano people needed a hero, a champion, someone who stood up for themselves and their people win-or-lose. Gregorio did this. The corrido is a song form that emerged out of necessity; it was a tool for uniting people in a common cause, in their fight against subjugation and oppression, against corruption and injustice. What follows is only part of the story, eight of the twenty verses that tell the story of Gregorio Cortez.

### **El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez (composer: unknown guitarrero)**

[Written in 2/4 meter; 20 strophic verses of 8-syllable iambic quatrains.]

En el condado del Carmen	Venían los americanos
Miren lo que ha sucedido:	Que por el viento volaban
Murió el Cherife Mayor	Porque se iban a ganar
Quedando Román herido	Tres mil pesos que les daban

Otro día por la mañana	Tiró con rumbo a González
Cuando la gente llegó	Varios cherifes lo vieron
Unos a los otros dicen:	No lo quisieron seguir
“No saben quien lo mató”	Porque le tuvieron miedo

Anduvieron informando	Venían los perros jaunes
Como tres horas después	Venían sobre la huella
Supieron que el malhechor	Pero alcanzar a Cortez
Era Gregorio Cortez	Era alcanzar a una estrella

Decía Gregorio Cortez	Decía Gregorio Cortez
Con su pistola en la mano:	Con su pistola en la mano:
“No siento haberlo matado	“No corran rinces cobardes
Al que siento es a mi hermano”	Con un solo mexicano”

Decía Gregorio Cortez	Ya con esta ahí me despido
Con su alma muy encendida:	Con la sombra de un Ciprés
“No siento haberlo matado	Aquí se acaba cantando
La defensa es permitida”	La tragedia

Meter in music, is different than poetic meter. Poetic meter speaks to the number of syllables and how the syllables are divided in a line of text and musical meter denotes the division of the beat; how the beat is divided within a measure. In the corrido, there are two beats per measure, the first beat of each measure is the strong beat, therefore, the corrido is notated in 2/4 meter. The word “corrido” literally means “running.”

Therefore, as the term denotes, corridos are usually performed at a lively tempo that might compel one to dance. In this case, the score might be labeled “polkeado,” to be played like polka. [The polka originated in Czechoslovakia and Poland and was later introduced in Mexico, a product of colonialization (musical mestizaje). The Mexican polka proliferated in Northern Mexico; it is commonly referred to as the “Polka Norteña.” The term polka has evolved overtime and become synonymous with the Conjunto Norteño and the Texas-Mexican border conjunto.] The time signature defines the meter, not the tempo; therefore, the corrido can be played at a variety of tempos depending on the subject matter of the text. In the following example, I have notated the armonia (harmony) parts: guitarrón and vihuela. The armonia or rhythm section of the mariachi carries the meter, keeps the beat. The guitarrón (the heartbeat of the mariachi, a large round-backed bass guitar like instrument with six-strings; indigenous to Mexico) plays on the downbeats (beats one and two) and the vihuela (a small round-backed guitar like instrument with 5 strings; indigenous to Mexico) on the up-beats or the “ands” of the beats; the resulting sound, “one-and-two-and” with one (the first beat played by the guitarrón) always being the strong beat.

[The guitarrón and the vihuela, because they are the two instruments that are indigenous to Mexico are what make the mariachi distinctly “mariachi.” To be an authentic mariachi, the ensemble must include a guitarrón and a vihuela.]

Ranchera 2/4  
↓ = Down Strum

Example A

Vihuela

Guitarrón

### Ranchera

Music and art reflect the spirit of the times, and ranchera music is no exception. The Canción Ranchera, literally “country song,” was born as a reaction against Mexico’s upper-class. The music originated in Mexico’s rural areas and like the corrido, song lyrics speak about politics and patriotism, opinions about pre- and post-Revolutionary Mexico and the lifestyles of hard-working country folk, vaqueros, and farmers. However, the rancheras I am particularly drawn to are the ones that speak about unrequited love, that topic that floats through every genre, every culture and language; even in purely instrumental music, it can be heard.

Music has the power to alter affections. It is called “The Doctrine of the Affections” or “The Power of the Affections”; music’s ability to reach into the soul and evoke feelings and emotions. When speaking of the Power of the Affections, one is referring to musical modes Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian,

and Locrian that each provoke a different emotion, feeling, or reaction. Today, primarily Major (Ionian) mode, and Minor (Aeolian) modes are used; evoking feelings of happiness and sadness respectively. Ranchera songs sometimes incorporate mode mixture, meaning they combine modes. The effect of combining modes creates sounds that are seductive. Imagine trumpet and violin introductions and fills coupled with heart wrenching lyrics and vocal melodies (sometimes sung by untrained voices that only add more *sentimiento*) that sound like that kind of weeping that only comes from an unmendable affliction. This is music's power to alter the affections when the energy provoked by bewitching combination of lyrics and music must be released finally and completely in a "grito" – the ultimate expression of all that is inexpressible. Ranchera music is the music of the mariachi. It speaks to relationships between lovers and sometimes even between a person and their animal companion that just cannot be compared. It speaks words and puts sound to raw, naked emotions; puts them on display for the world to hear, words one dare say, much less brazenly sing – not without the support of the music, the grandeur and majesty of an ensemble of brown people standing erect and sheathed in *trajes de charro*.

The ranchera (country song) can be notated in 2/4 meter, as in the previous example, or in 3/4 meter. Played slowly (not like a *Corrido*) in 2/4, it would be called a *Ranchera Lenta*, which literally translates to "slow ranchera." It is, however, more commonly played in 3/4 meter. Depending on the song, it is sometimes called a "vals" or waltz because it sounds like a traditional waltz with the repeating "one-two-three" and the *guitarrón* playing the strong beat on the one. The vals, can be played the tempo that best suits the subject of the text. The ranchera is one of the song forms most closely associated with the mariachi.

Ranchera 3/4  
↓ = Down Strum  
C

Example B

Vihuela

Guitarrón

"Drawing on rural traditional folk music, the ranchera developed as a symbol of a new national consciousness in reaction to the aristocratic tastes of the period." (Eberhart, para. 1) Ranchera music is truly folk music, music of the working-class. Like country music in the United States, ranchera music covers a variety of topics: love, usually unrequited, horses and chickens, death, etc. I would be remiss not to mention the most prolific composer of ranchera music, José Alfredo Jiménez, whose sultry, intoxicating lyrics made him composer of some of the most well-recognized rancheras, like *El Rey* and *Hermoso Cariño*. Rancheras are usually written in the following song form: instrumental introduction-verse-verse-chorus (repeat), and ends with the *cajón*,



a short instrumental ending. There is a formula to the cajón; it can be a full scale or only two notes – mariachis learn cajónes in every key. Musically speaking, the form of the ranchera typically looks like this: A-A-B-A-A-B; verses repeat the same melody (A) and then the chorus (B) has its own melody. The instrumental introduction is usually a variation of the chorus section and makes the song recognizable from the very beginning. Some might include a bridge or short deviation in the repeat section that happens immediately before the chorus, otherwise, the form is fairly consistent. Note the example below.

**El Rey (composer: José Alfredo Jiménez)**

[Written in 3/4 meter; Song form: instrumental introduction-verse-verse-chorus (repeat) and cajón (short instrumental ending).]

Instrumental Introduction

Verse (A)

Yo sé bien que estoy afuera  
Pero el día que yo me muera  
Sé que tendrás que llorar

Verse (A)

Una piedra en el camino  
Me enseñó que mi destino  
Era rodar y rodar

Verse (A)

Dirás que no me quisiste  
Pero vas a estar muy triste  
Y así te me vas a quedar

Verse (A)

También me dijo un arriero  
Que no hay que llegar primero  
Pero hay que saber llegar

Chorus (B)

Con dinero y sin dinero  
Yo hago siempre lo que quiero  
Y mi palabra es la ley  
No tengo trono ni reina  
Ni nadie que me comprenda  
Pero sigo siendo el rey

Chorus (B)

Con dinero y sin dinero  
Yo hago siempre lo que quiero  
Y mi palabra es la ley  
No tengo trono ni reina  
Ni nadie que me comprenda  
Pero sigo siendo el rey  
cajón

*Bolero: 4/4 Meter*

The bolero is a song form that originated in Cuba in the 19th century. The first of the genre, it is believed, is a work entitled “Tristezas” written by José “Pepe” Sanchez. “Tristezas” typifies the bolero song form: a song in two parts that each have sixteen measures/bars (not including the introduction and ending. Although the bolero originated as a song form in Cuba, it was Mexico and the Golden Age of Cinema that popularized ranchera music and bolero all around the world. “It came

into its own after mostly Mexican composers, working in the 1940s, wrote songs that became popular throughout the Spanish-speaking world. The lyrics often reflect themes of bittersweet, unrequited, betrayed, or eternal love.” (Contreras, 2008, para. 1) Composers such as Agustín Lara and Consuelo Velásquez, wrote boleros that were embraced by musicians ranging from Trio’s to Big Band orchestras and quite literally the Beatles who did a rendition of Velásquez’s *Besame Mucho* on their album “At the Cavern Club: Anthology 1.” Mariachis in their infinite capacity have some of the most beautiful and seductive arrangements of boleros.

Bolero 4/4  
↓ = Down Strum

Example C

Vihuela

Guitarrón

The bolero is notated in 4/4 (four beats per measure, quarter note gets the beat) meter as illustrated above and incorporates a couple of recurring harmonic progressions that while not unique to the genre, are frequently used. While harmonic progressions do not pertain to the subject matter of this paper, I find it important, especially for educators, to note that there are harmonic formulas common to mariachi music and that learning these formulas in all common keys (A-B-C-D-E-F-G) is a good method for teaching mariachi alongside western music theory and ear training: I-ii-iii-biii-ii-V7-I and I-iv-ii-V7-I. [It’s all notated in my book, *The Art of Mariachi: a Curriculum Guide.*]

### Si Nos Dejan (composer: José Alfredo Jiménez)

Instrumental Introduction: I-vi-ii-V7-I

<p>(A) Si nos dejan Nos vamos a querer toda la vida (4 bars)</p>	<p>(B: I-ii-iii-biii-ii-V7-I) Yo creo podemos ver el nuevo amanecer De un nuevo día Yo pienso que tú y yo Podemos ser felices, todavía (8 bars)</p>
<p>(A) Si nos dejan Nos vamos a vivir a un mundo nuevo (4 bars)</p>	

(A)	Será lo que soñamos
Si nos dejan	Si nos dejan, te llevo de la
Buscamos un rincón cerca del	mano, corazón
cielo (4 bars)	Y ahí nos vamos (8 bars)
(A')	Repeat: Instrumental
Si nos dejan	Introduction through D
Haremos con las nubes	
terciopelo (4 bars)	(D)
(C)	Si nos dejan, Si nos dejan, ¡Si
Y, ahí, juntitos los dos,	nos dejan!
cerquita de Dios	

The bolero is not so much defined by the song form, but rather the romantic sentiment of the lyrics. And although there may be a form to the poetry as mentioned above, what makes bolero discernably bolero are the musical devices used to support the romantic nature of the texts. There are well established harmonic progressions, mode mixture, shifting from the minor mode to the major mode, and other musical trademarks of bolero that build suspense, tension, and romance. And, the 4/4 meter divided into eighth notes propelled by the bass ostinato of the guitarrón sounding on beats 1, 3, and four drives the music through its climax and resolution.

### *Son Jaliscience: 3/4 Meter*

Mariachi originated in Cocula, Jalisco (known as “The Cradle of mariachi”) and its signature song type or “son,” the son jaliscience. The term “son,” literally means sound or song. There are many different types of sones, each defined by their region of origin. For instance, son jaliscience was born in the state of Jalisco and named accordingly. The most well-known arrangement of son jaliscience, “El Son de La Negra,” is accredited to composers Sylvestre Vargas and Ruben Fuentes (the authorship of the piece has been questioned), two of the most prolific composers of mariachi music. It is more likely that the piece was composed, “...in the late 1800’s (Estrada- Barrera, 2000). Enrique Estrada Barrera writes in his book titled *De Cocula Es El Mariachi, De Tecalitlan Los Sones* ‘...around 1890, the Mariachi of Cocula, performed for the first time in that same town (Cocula) El Son De La Negra, composed supposedly by the director of the group named Salvador Flores...’ (Estrada-Barrera, 2000) ...” (Serrano, C, 2023, para.5.) However, performed in the style of the Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, the world’s most renown mariachi, “El Son de La Negra” is considered by many the second National Anthem of Mexico. Why is this? Because the son embraces the concept of mestizaje; it combines Indigenous, Spanish, and African elements in both the music

and the lyrics. In this son, the composer writes about the teasing nature of a black woman--literally titles the son "Song of the Black Girl." The lyrics are few, only four, four-line stanzas, each line eight syllables long -- 3 quatrains of iambic tetrameter (the third quatrain is repeated): 1. Black girl of my sorrows, paper eyes flying; 2. You say "yes" to everyone, but you never tell them when; that's what you said to me and that's why I live in pain; 3. When you bring me my black girl, I want to see her here wearing the silk shawl that I brought her from Tepic.

**El Son de La Negra (arranged by Sylvestre Vargas and Ruben Fuentés )**

[Written in 3/4 meter; 3 verses of iambic tetrameter.]

Negrita de mis pesares	¿Cuándo me traes a mi Negra
Ojos de papel volando	Que la quiero ver aquí?
Negrita de mis pesares	Con su rebozo de seda
Ojos de papel volando	Que le traje de Tepic

A todos diles que sí  
Pero no les digas cuándo  
Así me dijiste a mí  
Por eso vivo penando

Son jaliscience, is defined by its meter, the rhythm carried through the manicos or strumming patterns of the armonia (guitarrón, vihuela, guitarra de golpe, guitar) section of the mariachi. The overlying meter of the son jaliscience is 3/4. There are sections that should be notated with fermatas (used to sustain or elongate notes) and rubato (allows for slowing and quickening of tempo for the purpose of expression) markings; however, especially for pedagogical purposes, the meter does not shift. Son jaliscience is a two-measure pattern that introduces more complex manicos or strumming patterns than the previously mentioned rhythms [This rhythm could arguably be notated in 6/4, as you will see when we get to the son huasteco. The pattern of the manicos or strumming patterns in the armonia fall into 6 equal beats.]. It begins in the first measure with a down strum, followed by a redoble (a fast turn), and then a down strum followed by a quick up strum (eighth notes). In the second measure comes a down-down-up, down-down-up maniqueo in the armonía. This is the disputed measure some mistake for a hemiola (shift in meter to 6/8). Son jaliscience has been notated by some in 6/8 meter (six beats per measure, eighth note gets the beat). 6/8 meter is a compound duple meter, meaning the division of the beat is in two--two big beats per measure each divided into three beats. It sounds like "one-two-three two-two-three," with the strong beats on one and two. This is not what son jaliscience sounds like. Son jaliscience is incontrovertibly in either 3/4 or 6/4 meter. If one shifts the meter at this point and not the tempo, it simply doesn't work. The result without a drastic tempo shift is a 3/4 measure followed by a 6/8 measure that is double

the speed of the 3/4 measure. Keeping a consistent tempo in 3/4 is pedagogically and methodologically more sound, especially for young musicians.

Son Jalisciense 3/4  
 ↓ = Down Strum  
 ↑ = Up Strum

Example D

Vihuela

Guitarrón

(Redoble)

### *Son Huasteco, Huapango: 6/4 Meter*

Son huasteco is from the Huasteca region of Northeast Mexico. This is not a mistake in spelling. When speaking of the region, the word is feminine and ends with an 'a.' When speaking of the type of son, it is masculine and ends with an 'o.' Son huasteco, is influenced by Indigenous, Spanish, and African descent people. Its traditional instrumentation includes violin accompanied by jarana (5 course, double stringed instrument) and guitarra huapanguera (5 course, eight stringed instrument). When notated, son huasteco and huapango look the same. Although, while the meter and manicos (strumming patterns) are the same, they are two different song types. The Son huasteco is more of an upbeat dance song that incorporates virtuosic violin parts, improvised lyrics, and falsetto (a vocal technique created by falling-off support of the breath to create a thin, high-pitched, whistle like sound). Huapango is slower and its subject matter romantic love, requited and unrequited. Like son huasteco, one will also hear falsetto, dramatizing the sentiment of the song. One of the most popular examples of a huapango is "La Malagueña." It is attributed to Elpidio Ramirez and Pedro Galindo; albeit its true authorship is unknown. There is a poetic structure to this particular song, quatrains of iambic tetrameter, with the second and third lines of each stanza repeated verbatim. However, the poetic structure of the lyrics is not consistent from one song to another.

### **La Malagueña** (attributed to Elpidio Ramirez and Pedro Galindo)

[Huapango Written in 6/4 meter; Quatrains of iambic tetrameter.]

Que bonitos ojos tienes	Debajo de esas dos cejas
Debajo de esas dos cejas	Que bonitos ojos tienes

Ellos me quieren mirar	Eres linda y hechicera
Pero si tu no los dejas	Como el candor de una rosa
Pero si tu no los dejas	
Ni siquiera parpadear	Si por pobre me desprecias
	Yo te concedo razón
Malagueña salerosa	Yo te concedo razón
Besar tus labios quisiera	Si por pobre me desprecias
Besar tus labios quisiera	
Malagueña salerosa	Yo no te ofrezco riquezas
	Te ofrezco mi corazón
Y decirte niña hermosa	Te ofrezco mi corazón
Y eres linda y hechicera	A cambio de mi pobreza

The son huasteco and the huapango both incorporate manicos used in Spanish guitar and Flamenco guitar playing. Those techniques are rasgueado or abanico, a strumming technique where all the fingers of the strumming hand are drawn across the strings in a fan like pattern, and apagón or quedo, a technique where the strings are muted, and the fingernails of the strumming hand continue across the strings creating a percussive effect.

The son huasteco is in 6/4 meter (six beats per measure, quarter note gets the beat). Analyzing the manicos or strumming patterns in the armonia, it is evident the rhythm includes six equal beats per measure, the first beat, the downbeat, being the strong beat. Notating the meter any other way divides the huasteco/huapango pattern (into two parts), potentially creating unnecessary confusion, especially for musicians who are not mariachi specialists.

Son Huasteco/Huapango 6/4  
 ↓ = Down Strum                      ↓ = Rasgueado or Abanico  
 ↑ = Up Strum                         X = Apagón or Quedo

Example E

The musical notation for Example E consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Vihuela, written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/4 time signature. It begins with a chord diagram for Em (E2, G2, B2) and follows with a series of chords and strumming patterns. The strumming patterns are indicated by arrows (downward for down strum, upward for up strum) and 'X' marks (representing apagón or quedo). The bottom staff is for the Guitarrón, written in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. It features a bass line with quarter notes and rests, providing a harmonic accompaniment to the Vihuela.

As mentioned previously concerning the son jalisciense, so are the son huasteco and huapango often notated as 6/8 meter (a compound-duple meter that divides the rhythmic pattern into two strong beats, dotted-quarters, subdivided into groups of three eighth notes), or 3/4 meter (one strong down-beat in each measure of three beats). These two notations incorrectly divide the six-beat rhythmic pattern.

*Son Jarocho: Fluid Meter*

“The rapid decimation of the Indigenous population due to epidemics and inhumane labor practices had created a need for an alternative labor source.” (Díaz-Sánchez & Hernández, 2013, p. 188) African slaves were brought into Mexico during this period through the Port of Veracruz, many of whom escaped and formed cimarrones, hidden communities off the route from Veracruz to Mexico City. It was in the cimarrones where son jarocho proliferated. Son jarocho, closely related to African descent people, is fluid in meter, which means it makes use of multiple and shifting meters. It commonly employs 3/4 and 4/4 meters (simple meters), as well as 3/8 and 6/8 meters (compound-duple meters). The music can be riddled with hemiolas, short shifts in meter. For instance, it can shift into 9/8 meter (a compound-triple meter) for a couple of measures and then back again to 6/8 meter. “Rhythm in son jarocho is fluid rather than fixed. The dominant meter in the tradition is 6/8, and there are two common ways of counting it (2 groups of 3, and 3 groups of 2). It is the rhythmic tension between the two counting methods, and the variety of ways to mark the rhythm, that define son jarocho. This tension is where the sense of “feel” comes into play and why fixed and formulaic rhythmic concepts are not true to the style. In the context of a fandango, the play of rhythmic subdivision is often remarkably demonstrated by the dancers on the tarima, an aspect that reveals the deep connections between the style and the dancing that accompanies it.” (Levy & Azcona, 2010, p.52) The example below in 4/4 meter is an illustration of how the mariachi rhythm section would play, “La Bamba.” “La Bamba” is one of the most well-known son jarochos since Ritchie Valens’s rock-and-roll style recording was released in 1958, sounding little like an authentic son jarocho.

Son Jarocho 4/4  
 ↓ = Down Strum  
 ↑ = Up Strum

Example F

The musical notation shows two staves: Vihuela (top) and Guitarrón (bottom). The Vihuela staff is in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. It features a sequence of chords: C, F, G, C, F, G, C. Above each chord is a diagram showing the fretting of the strings. Below the Vihuela staff, a series of arrows indicates the strumming pattern: down, down, up, down, down, up, down, down, up, down, down, up, down, down, up, down, down, up, down, down, up. The Guitarrón staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, showing a simple bass line with quarter notes and rests.

La Bamba is a call and response; the copla (verse or stanza) followed by the coro (chorus) or response. The song form is improvisational, but the chorus is repetitive. The verses employ a loose version of the literary technique, “antimetabole”; literally meaning to turn-around. Son jarocho employs this device, but it does not repeat the entire phrase in reverse order as the term “antimetabole” would suggest. It uses repetition to make the lyrics predictable, catchy, and easy with which to sing along. In La Bamba, examples of antimetabole are the following: “Para bailar la bamba se

necesita una poca de gracia, una poca de gracia y otra cosita..." and "Quisiera tener la dicha, la dicha que el gallo tiene...."

### **La Bamba (Mexican Traditional (Folk) Song from the State of Veracruz)**

[Improvisational Form: Repeated, Copla-Coro]

Para bailar la Bamba  
Para baila la Bamba  
Se necesita un poco de gracia,  
Una boca de gracia y otra cosita.

Cuando canto la Bamba  
Cuando canto la Bamba  
yo estoy contento porque yo me acompaño  
porque yo me acompaño con mi instrumento

Ay arriba y arriba  
Ay arriba, y arriba y arriba iré  
Yo no soy marinero  
Yo no soy marinero  
Soy capitán, soy capitán, soy capitán.

Ay arriba y arriba  
Ay arriba, y arriba y arriba iré  
Yo no soy marinero  
Yo no soy marinero  
Por ti seré, por ti seré, por ti seré.

Bamba, bamba.  
Baila la Bamba.  
Bamba, bamba.  
Baila la Bamba.

Bamba, bamba.  
Baila la Bamba.  
Bamba, bamba.  
Baila la Bamba.

### *Son Joropo: 3/4 Meter*

Son joropo, literally translated "party song," is a product of Venezuelan musical mestizaje – called "Música Criolla" or Creole (of mixed European and Black descent) Music by Venezuelans because of its African and South American influences. Much like other styles discussed, son joropo is the music of the working-class, rural people, ranchers, and cattle herders, who celebrate with as much fervor as they work. "Joropo is performed with vocals or in instrumental form.... Joropo music features both slower, more lyrical songs called pasajes and faster tunes called golpes. The hallmarks of the traditional joropo singer are a powerful voice that can handle the fast, hard-edged vocal style and the ability to improvise the lyrics." (Romero, A. 2023, para. 2-3)

The more popular son joropos in the mariachi repertoire is "La Bikina" written by Ruben Fuentes. "Bikina," as I have learned is a word made-up by Fuentes. After a day at the beach with his son, Fuentes said "women who wear bikinis should be called 'bikinas.' The song lyrics speak about a bikini clad woman (la bikina) who walks pompously about, seeing without seeing, carrying a sorrow, a pain. She doesn't know love. Someone loved her and left her; now she cries for him. To listen to the music that carries one of mariachi's most haunting and unforgettable melodies, one would



think that there is much more to the lyrics. Whatever the story is lacking in words, one understands through the sentiment of the soul-stirring music – The Doctrine or Power of the Affections.

### La Bikina (music and lyrics, Rubén Fuentes)

[Verses Can be Improvisational Form: Repeated, Copla-Coro]

Solitaria, camina la bikina	La bikina,
Y la gente se pone a murmurar.	tiene pena y dolor.
Dicen que tiene una pena	La bikina,
Dicen que tiene una pena, que la hace llorar.	no conoce el amor.

Altanera, preciosa y orgullosa	Altanera, preciosa y orgullosa
No permite la quieran consolar.	No permite la quieran consolar.
Pasa luciendo su real majestad	Dicen que alguien ya vino y se fué
Pasa, camina y nos mira sin vernos jamás.	Dicen que pasa las noches llorando por él.

Like son huasteco, son joropo incorporates the apagón or quedo manico and is primarily in 3/4 meter with occasional shifts into 6/8 meter (hemiola). The armonia part of the end of “La Bikina” is notated below. The example highlights the shift from 3/4 to 6/8 and back again.

Son Joropo 3/4

Example G

↓ = Down Strum = Apagón or Quedo  
 ↑ = Up Strum

The musical notation shows two staves: Vihuela (top) and Guitarrón (bottom). The Vihuela staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Guitarrón staff is in bass clef with the same key signature. The piece starts in 3/4 time, shifts to 6/8 time (hemiola), and then returns to 3/4 time. Chords are indicated above the Vihuela staff: G, Em, Am, D7, G, Em, Am, D7, G. Rhythmic markings (downward arrows for 'Apagón' and upward arrows for 'Up Strum') are placed below the Vihuela staff. The Guitarrón staff shows a simple bass line with quarter and eighth notes.

### Paso Doble: 4/4 and 2/4 Meter

Although not a large part of the mariachi repertoire, mariachis in their infinite capacity do perform paso dobles. Paso doble has its roots firmly planted in Europe. And while it has been argued that the paso doble originated in France, there are 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish scores that antedate the French paso doble and make it more likely the paso doble is indeed a Spanish invention, another product of mestizaje (Castillian and Romani cultures).

The paso doble derived from a dance called by the same name, the “two step,” and the meter accordingly moves from 4/4 to 2/4. When I hear “España Cani (Spanish

Gypsy),” (Pascual Marquina Narro) the paso doble I have taught most frequently to my high school level mariachis, I think of matadors making their grand entrance to the plaza de toros. It is not difficult to find music written well in this style, as it is a popular song form found in the western music repertoire, but it is not typically arranged for mariachi including the manicos as shown in the example below.

Paso Doble 4/4  
 ↓ = Down Strum  
 ↑ = Up Strum

Example H

Vihuela

Guitarrón

It is more common for paso dobles to be written purely instrumental as accompaniment to dance; however, it is not uncommon for vocal pieces to be written in the paso doble style. Many composers, including Agustín Lara, one of Mexico’s most prolific composers, wrote paso doble. One of Lara’s paso dobles is entitled “Novillero.” It means “novice bullfighter” or bullfighter that is not yet a matador. The song speaks about an aspiring bullfighter whose enthusiasm gets the best of him and he jumps in the arena on a Sunday afternoon. He’s anxious to be a bullfighter, valiant and brave. He has faith that the Virgen will take care of him. But who knows if he will pay the price with his blood and life. The lyrics fit the paso doble style and melody, the mode and rhythms of the piece convey the action in the plaza de toros (the bullfighting arena). The piece changes meters and mode as the storyline progresses. While there are some repetitive sections it is more through composed meaning that each section, for the most part, is different: Instrumental Introduction-Text Introduction-Instrumental Interlude 1-Verse A-Verse B-Verse C-Instrumental Interlude (Melody and accompaniment for Verses A and B)-Verse B-Exit. It could be called binary, or in two parts, because the music for Verses A and B returns in the second half of the song, however, there are no lyrics; the return is purely instrumental.

**Novillero (music and lyrics, Agustín Lara)**

[Song Form, Binary/Through Composed (see above).]

Un domingo en la tarde  
 Se tiró al ruedo  
 Para calmar sus ansias  
 De novillero  
 Torero valiente

Despliega el capote sin miedo, sin  
 miedo a la muerte  
 La virgen te cuida  
 Te cubre su manto que es santo mantón  
 de Manila

Muchacho, te arrimas  
 Lo mismo en un quite gallardo, que en  
 las banderillas  
 Torero, quién sabe  
 Si el precio del triunfo lo paguen tu vida  
 y tu sangre  
 Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah  
 Ah, ah

Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah  
 Ah, ah  
 Muchacho, te arrimas  
 Lo mismo en un quite gallardo, que en  
 las banderillas  
 Torero, quién sabe  
 Si el precio del triunfo lo paguen tu vida  
 y tu sangre

### *Cumbia: 2/4 Meter*

The cumbia is a product of *mestizaje*, derived from a combination of African, Spanish, and South American dance. Known as the “Baile de Negros” or dance of the blacks because of the African influence in the drumming patterns that mark the *andante* tempo in 2/4 meter, its percussive and danceable style makes it a very popular song form. While cumbia evolved through the cultural and racial mixture of Africans and Colombians, it proliferated throughout Latin America into many subgenres including Mexican cumbia. Cumbia, what began as predominantly percussive music, is now performed by many different types of ensembles. Cumbias, what began as a predominantly percussive, instrumental genre designed to accompany dance, have become standard repertoire for the mariachi ensemble because of their lively tempo and danceability. Adding lyrics to cumbias is a modern invention. In listening to cumbia, I learned that themes for cumbias with lyrics are just as diverse as the musicians and ensembles that play them. What is consistent in the mariachi cumbia is the *andante* rhythmic ostinato that propels the movement of the music.

Cumbia 2/4

↓ = Down Strum  
 ↑ = Up Strum  
 X = Apagón or Quedo

Example I

### *Son Jarabe: 6/8, 2/4, and 3/4 Meter*

In the Spanish language, jarabe literally means “syrup.” The son jarabe began as what young people would reference today as a “mashup,” or medley of songs. The jarabe dance is a courtship dance and because of this, it was thought by colonialists

to be undesirable, vulgar, and immoral; it was for the same reason that common folk appreciated the music. Son jarabe, like paso doble and cumbia, is an instrumental genre meant as accompaniment for dance. However, as we learned earlier, during the Mexican Revolution, music originally written as purely instrumental music sometimes included politically charged lyrics as a means of spreading political propaganda, news, and information—jarabe was no exception.

Because son jarabe combines multiple songs, it makes sense it would include multiple song forms and meters. One of the most recognizable examples of this song type is “El Jarabe Tapatio,” commonly known as “The Mexican Hat Dance,” written by Jesús González Rubio. El Jarabe Tapatio is in 6/8 meter with transitions in and out of 2/4 and/or 3/4 meter. Below is an example of how a jarabe introduction or ending might be notated.

Jarabe 6/8, 3/4, 2/4  
 ↓ = Down Strum  
 ↑ = Up Strum

Example I

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system is for Vihuela and Guitarrón. The Vihuela part consists of a series of chords (C, G7, C) with a complex strumming pattern of down and up strokes. The Guitarrón part consists of a simple bass line. The second system is for Vih. and Guitarrón. The Vih. part consists of a series of chords (C, G7, C) with a simple strumming pattern of down strokes. The Guitarrón part consists of a simple bass line. The time signatures transition from 6/8 to 2/4 and then to 3/4.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Just as in the study of any other music, language, or culture, it is paramount precise, literal, translations (scores) of mariachi music are accessible to all, professional and student musicians alike. Incorporating culturally relevant curriculum is integral in providing the inclusive learning experience students need to be successful in academics. As it pertains to music in the United States (and the rest of the colonized world), western European music history, methods and theory dominate music notation and praxes; correspondingly, music education. We learn from Toosha Swain of the National Association for Music Education “...a curriculum solely based on Western methodology can isolate minority students, making it harder for them to learn.” (Improving Music Education for Hispanic Students. NAFME, 2018, para. 8) With over 62 million Hispanics living in the United States (62% of Mexican descent), it is dire to create decolonized music spaces that offer more than a single narrative; provide students with information that facilitates understanding and self-awareness and cultivates identity. And within these spaces, it is crucial all students are privy to the same quality of resources, including students who choose to take mariachi or

other non-Western centered music classes instead of band, choir, or orchestra in public schools.

My initial intent for writing this article was to amplify the necessity of properly documenting mariachi music for the reason of providing a resource for musicians, composers, and music educators, Mexican music or mariachi specialists or not, that would make straightforward the work of notating mariachi music. However, through the process of analyzing lyrics, going beyond listening to the music because it was aesthetically pleasing to me, I began to discern the marked significance of mariachi music to the history of Mexico. Mariachi's lyrics and distinctive rhythms preserve Mexican culture and heritage. The music tells the story of the Mexican people; their epistemologies, *conocimiento*, hearts, hopes, safeguarded in the music--rhythms interwoven musical ideas that merge Indigenous, Spanish, and African roots and lyrics encapsulated history and *Zeitgeist* pre and post 1821.

Mexico's story is unequivocally scarred by colonialism, racial mixture and forced assimilation; it underscores the *mestizaje*, hybrid nature of mariachi music. It was through this violent history of colonization mariachi instrumentation, rhythms, music, and repertoire evolved. Mariachi music, its lyrics, cultural and ethnic hybridity, and incendiary rhythms, is synonymous with Mexico--a symbol of national pride. The mariachi is an ensemble indigenous to Mexico that gathers its repertoire from every region in Mexico, ingenerated to tell a concise story of Mexico's history pre and post its official birth in 1821. The music of the mariachi tells a profound story, guards ancestral epistemologies, and treasures *conocimiento*; it has the power to transcend oceans and borders, build spirits, cultural understanding and pride, especially when it is realized authentically.

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