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Mariachi Programs at the University Level: Investigating Eurocentric Stereotypes

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MARIACHI PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL:
INVESTIGATING EUROCENTRIC STEREOTYPES

A Thesis

by

CLYDE M. GUERRA

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF MUSIC

August 2021

Major Subject: Music Performance

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INVESTIGATING EUROCENTRIC STEREOTYPES

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August 2021

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ABSTRACT

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The number of mariachi programs at the high school level continues to grow in the Rio Grande Valley and beyond. However, degree-granting mariachi programs are virtually nonexistent at the university level. The established university music education system and its implementation of classical techniques and styles encourages mariachi violinists to adapt to classical violin teachings. Because mariachi violinists may lack what is considered “formal” training prior to attending a university, they may experience a disadvantage in relationship to classically trained violinists. In this research, I will investigate the perceived attitudes that exist towards mariachi violinists, and the conditions under which they learn, to better understand the current state of educational equity in the music education system. I argue that the established music education system has encouraged the development of Eurocentric views of violin technique and styles, thereby undermining the success of mariachi and other folk music instruction in collegiate level institutions.

DEDICATION

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the love and support of my incredible family. To my parents, Olga and John, thank you for being a constant source of support and encouragement throughout my graduate studies. To my sisters, Amanda and Stephanie, my brother-in-law Travis, my Aunt Laura, and my grandparents, Maria and Nazario, thank you for continually providing me with your moral, spiritual, and emotional support. I wholeheartedly dedicate this thesis to all of you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At a time when social and cultural tensions are giving rise to necessary discussions of diversity and inclusivity in the United States, decolonization of the music curriculum has never been a more relevant and important topic of research. The educational system in the United States, and the music education system at both the K-12 and university level, in particular, is based on traditional models developed in Europe as a result of colonization. Consequently, our established music education system trains musicians using time-honored pedagogical practices developed for European-specific traditions.¹ This Eurocentric-based pedagogy makes sense if the objective is producing musicians that play in Western styles and Western ensembles. But what are the learning implications when an instrumentalist's career goals lie outside of the Western art music tradition? How does a music education system that is so deeply rooted in Western art practices affect the learning experiences of students in vernacular music degree programs in higher-level institutions?² These questions become increasingly important as selected institutions including the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley begin to diversify their music curriculums to include major and minor concentrations in jazz, popular music, music technology, and my career interest, mariachi studies.

¹ Hill 2009, 210.

² See Moore 2017; Attas and Walker 2019; Jacque and Waterman 2019; and Robinson 2019 for more on this topic.

Music education in the United States has shown a historical dependence on Western art music teachings and on the music of Western composers.³ While there is no doubt that works by composers such as Bach and Beethoven are important to our music education system today, classical music represents only one of the many musical traditions that American musicians learn and play. Still, most colleges and universities around the country offer music degree programs that follow curricula consisting of predominantly western teachings, and they require the study of Western art music techniques.⁴ This puts musicians who did not grow up studying Western classical teachings at a disadvantage if and when they decide to pursue an undergraduate music degree. There are already several colleges in the US that offer traditional/folk music degree programs.⁵ The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley has recently joined that list by introducing a first-of-its-kind mariachi education undergraduate concentration with K-12 certification.⁶ While the addition of this mariachi concentration diploma represents a step in the right direction for curricular diversity, there is still much work to do in order to achieve adequate cultural representation for all American musicians.

While diversifying the music curriculum is necessary, adding vernacular music programs to higher-level institutions is no easy task for those involved in their development. First of all, university music professors in the US are trained and accredited in programs that demand a high

³ Scholten 1988, 22-25.

⁴ Moore 2017, 4-5.

⁵ Moore 2017, 7, 13-14, 128, 135-139. Some degree-granting programs including mariachi studies are in place at the undergraduate level (majors and/or minors) at Texas State University in San Marcos, Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, and Southwestern College near San Diego, Ca. Many other colleges have mariachi ensembles. In terms of other vernacular styles, the University of Northern Colorado's School of Music began their Folk and Bluegrass Studies program in 2017. Berklee College of Music is known for its wide range of progressive undergraduate music degrees including jazz composition, songwriting, and even a "professional music" degree that allows students to create their own major to achieve specific musical goals.

⁶ The mariachi concentration was approved in 2018 in a proposal headed by Dr. Susan Hurley-Glowa, Chair of the UTRGV School of Music Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. The concentration has since been accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music.

degree of competency in Western art music, history, and culture. This type of specialized training requires years of intense study that leaves little time for learning other kinds of music. In turn, students today are also not encouraged to be diverse music makers: it is not unusual for their musical mentors to actively discourage students from learning other styles, because it is viewed as a distraction that might slow progress within their Western classical specialty.⁷ Because of such viewpoints, music students in the US typically become experts in performing and teaching Western art music, but they are mostly unfamiliar with other styles and their related skill sets.⁸ Those who go on to become college music professors may be willing to adapt to new teaching challenges associated with students of vernacular traditions, but others may be uninterested or unequipped for these new circumstances. The accreditation rules provided by the *National Association of Schools of Music Handbook* do not stipulate that students must focus on classical teachings throughout their studies and seem flexible enough to allow for degree concentrations outside of the Western tradition.⁹ In fact, although guidelines for a Bachelor of Music in Mariachi Studies cannot be found in the current edition of the handbook, the handbook does provide specific guidelines for a Bachelor of Music in Jazz Studies as well as other folk concentrations.

As part of a larger discussion of the institutionalization of folk music, it is also important to consider the issues raised for aural-based styles to be successfully adapted into current music curriculums. Like many folk music styles, mariachi is an oral/aural tradition.¹⁰ This, of course, contrasts Western art music styles, which are highly dependent on notation.¹¹ While it is almost

⁷ Campbell 2004.

⁸ Robin Moore 2017, 13, 17, 20.

⁹ National Association of Schools of Music Handbook 2021.

¹⁰ See Moore 2017, 130-131 for examples of aural teaching in other programs.

¹¹ Moore 1992, 61-84.

essential to mariachi education, learning by ear is not a skill that is typically taught in US music schools today. In fact, in his article, “Playing by Ear—Foundation or Frill?,” Robert H. Woody comments that “many teachers dismiss learning by ear as a simplistic and inefficient alternative to doing it the right way, through notation.” Although most mariachi songs have now been transcribed, teaching the music’s rhythmic and stylistic characteristics can only be done through demonstration and is often left to those who have become stylistically competent through years of experience or inherited knowledge. There are few mariachi method books, and those that do exist are rarely used by public schools today.

Mariachi offers a way for Hispanic students to connect musically to their culture, but it may not be welcomed with open arms by current college educators for a variety of reasons ranging from unfamiliarity with the style and its teaching challenges to lack of respect for the vernacular style’s merit. In this research, I will unpack some of the challenges facing both mariachi learners and the professors assigned to teach them. I am particularly interested in documenting and analyzing the various views, attitudes, and biases associated with learning violin. My overall goal is to understand existing attitudes towards teaching and learning mariachi and classical violin as a means of generating solutions—to find ways to create effective, nurturing, and relevant programs for students studying musical traditions outside of the Western canon, like mariachi.¹²

Personal Background

As someone who grew up playing mariachi but earned an undergraduate music degree in classical violin performance, I have experienced first-hand what it is like to have to abruptly

¹² See Moore 2017, 1-30 for an extended discussion on these issues.

adapt to Western classical teachings. I was raised in the small, culturally rich city of Roma, Texas and was introduced to mariachi music by my grandparents at an early age. My grandmother frequently played albums by artists such as Pedrito Fernandez and Linda Ronstadt on her old boom box while she cooked and did housework. I listened to the beautiful music that she played and felt an unexplainable attraction to it. As I grew older, I dreamed of playing mariachi music, and that dream became a reality for me when I began to play violin for my local middle school's mariachi ensemble. My violin teacher started off our instruction with an *Essential Elements* book, and as soon as we learned the most basic techniques, we were given mariachi repertoire to learn and perform. At that time, there was no developed orchestra program in the school district, so being a part of an orchestra and learning orchestral repertoire was not an option for me or any other violinist at my middle school.¹³ I continued to perform in mariachi ensembles all throughout my middle school and high school career and won acclaim for my skill as a violinist and singer at the state and national level. As I got older and gained more experience, I considered the possibility of pursuing mariachi professionally but was discouraged by the reality that no college pathway existed for such a career.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had already performed multiple concerts and recorded an album with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's highly acclaimed and nationally recognized mariachi ensemble, Mariachi Aztlán. I knew I wanted to continue performing with Mariachi Aztlán, and I had become more serious about pursuing violin in college. For that reason, when it came time for me to pick a college major, I decided to pursue a Bachelor

¹³ Roma ISD officially started an orchestra program in 2013. Although there was no orchestra program at my middle school at the time I was learning violin, I was frequently encouraged by my violin teacher to participate in contests like TMEA All-Region orchestra and UIL solo & ensemble. I participated in all-region orchestra in the eighth grade and was awarded second chair. That was my first and only experience playing in a full orchestra until I started my studies at UTRGV.

of Music in Violin Performance at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. The culture shock that awaited me in the university's music program began to reveal itself even before I was accepted into the music program. I quickly realized that even though I was a competent violinist, I was not prepared to audition for the school of music because I was only familiar with repertoire from the mariachi genre. In addition, I had spent the past seven years learning music by ear and therefore was not proficient at reading music. After contacting a professor from the music program, I was able to attain some audition materials that were considered appropriate and quickly prepared the works to the best of my ability at the time. I was accepted into the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's School of Music (at the time known as the University of Texas Pan American) and began my studies.

I started off my journey at the university feeling intimidated by every violinist around me. I was very aware of my lack of classical training, and I remember feeling completely lost when I attended my first orchestra rehearsal.¹⁴ Even though it was my first semester playing in the orchestra, my audition earned me a spot in the first violins, which made the situation even more nerve-wracking. I continued performing with Mariachi Aztlán, and only there was I able to continue developing my mariachi style and knowledge. In that ensemble, I was frequently featured as a violin and vocal soloist, serving as a leading figure within the group whose work was highly valued by peers and audiences. Interestingly enough, I was warned by my fellow peers that students who were in the university's mariachi were not particularly popular among the faculty of the school of music. This was something that was strange to hear, but because I did not want to sabotage my own college experience, I decided I would not mention that I played in the mariachi ensemble to my professors unless it was necessary.

¹⁴ Jacque and Waterman 2019, pp. 5-9 describes similar experiences encountered by Inuit music students.

While my undergraduate experience as a whole ended up being a very positive one, there were many instances that made me question my playing abilities and more importantly, my musical background. Although my applied violin professor was always supportive of my bimusicality,¹⁵ there were many times that I was told by other faculty members that I sounded “too mariachi.” In fact, most of the critiques that I received throughout my undergraduate experience were blamed on the fact that I had formerly dedicated myself to playing mariachi. After I played my last undergraduate hearing, I was congratulated by a faculty member who said they could no longer hear any “mariachi” in my playing. While that might have been a positive quality in their eyes, it made me feel as if I had somehow lost a part of who I was. While I understood that my progress was being measured on how much I progressed in the classical technique and style, I could not help but feel that instead my progress was continually measured by how quickly I got rid of my “mariachi sound.” Ultimately, my hard work and the guidance from my applied professor yielded me a successful college experience, as I even served as concertmaster in the university’s symphony orchestra. However, being successful in my classical studies also meant that I slowly distanced myself from playing mariachi altogether. My experience made me realize how important it is for colleges to be willing to adapt folk music programs into their curriculums. Just as classical musicians have a wide variety of colleges and universities to choose from if they wish to advance their skills, vernacular musicians should have access to higher-level institutions where they can advance their skills without being singled out for their non-Western musical backgrounds. It is for that reason that I have decided to look into the current state of curricular diversity in the US.

¹⁵ By bimusical, I mean being fluent in more than one musical tradition or culture, in a way comparable to being bilingual. See Hood 1960 and Hurley-Glowa 2012 for more on this concept.

In this thesis, I will investigate the different attitudes that exist towards mariachi violinists, as well as the conditions under which they study, in an effort to discover whether there are any harmful stereotypes or attitudes about folk music that may be hindering successful mariachi instruction at the college level. Additionally, in an attempt to bridge the gap between classical and folk music instruction, I will attempt to discover what constitutes a successful mariachi curriculum at the college level. In an effort to offer my own experiences and insights as a mariachi violinist, my research in this thesis will investigate the above issues as they relate specifically to violinists. That said, the issues discussed in this thesis can very well be applied to other instruments of the mariachi ensemble. Although the information provided in this thesis alone may not change the mindsets of current music educators, I believe it is important and necessary to start discussions about the current state of curricular diversity in the US in order to bring about change. After all, if we wish to create more diverse college music curriculums, we must first understand why in the year 2021 they are not already in place.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mariachi is not a genre that is native to the US, yet it is becoming arguably more popular in the United States than in its original birthplace of Mexico. Middle school and high school mariachi programs continue to grow in numbers across the US. These programs are especially popular in the Rio Grande Valley region of Texas because the area's large Mexican American population can strongly identify with mariachi music. In fact, for many Latino kids growing up in the US, playing and performing mariachi is one of the only things that connects them to their culture.¹⁶ Unfortunately, once mariachi violinists graduate from high school, they are left with few options if they want to continue pursuing mariachi professionally-either as performers or educators. Although many colleges have mariachi ensembles that violinists can perform in, there are virtually no college degree programs where violinists can further develop mariachi style and learn repertoire, theory, and composition as it relates to mariachi.¹⁷ Consequently, the lack of these programs also means it is more difficult for mariachi musicians to become successful mariachi educators. This issue is not exclusive to the mariachi genre, though. Most colleges and universities exclude folk/traditional music degrees from their curriculums and prioritize classical

¹⁶ Sheehy 2006, xiv-xv; 1-4.

¹⁷ Degree programs are expanding at several universities in Texas and California in addition to UTRGV.

music. The conversation then becomes one of curricular diversity as well as decolonization of the music curriculum.

When discussing decolonization, it is important to first clarify what exactly the term means in relation to music education. Decolonization of the music curriculum strives to diversify the music curriculum by incorporating a greater number of styles that are socially and culturally important to musicians. In his address at the Music Council of the Three Americas (COMTA), Gary L. Ingle had this to say about decolonization of music:

Decolonizing music involves a conscious decision to move away from an ‘either/or’ ‘colonial’ mentality to a ‘both/and’ ‘decolonized’ mentality. Decolonizing music, however, is not about replacing one style or genre with another. Replacing ‘colonial’ music with indigenous music only perpetuates the ‘either/or’ mentality that has always been destructive to our musics, just with a different style becoming preeminent. We must be open and accepting of new music as well as old, of classical music as well as popular, improvised music as well as notated, and on it goes.¹⁸

Just as Ingle mentions in his address, decolonization of music, and the music curriculum in this case, is a movement that encourages the addition of other styles to the music curriculum without dismissing classical music’s present-day role in higher-level institutions.¹⁹ While there might be more extreme interpretations of the decolonization movement, Ingle’s mindset is important because it allows individuals to advocate for the inclusion of styles like mariachi into music curriculums without trying to diminish the role of classical music at universities.

While the goal of coexisting is ideal in this situation, it is important to note that overemphasizing Western art studies works against the possibility of coexisting and may be disadvantageous to some students’ education. As music educators, we should strive to produce well-rounded musicians, both in an academic and musical sense. However, some studies have

¹⁸ Ingle 2017, 17.

¹⁹ Also see Moore 2017 and Attas and Walker 2019, among many other new academic works on decolonization of the curriculum.

pointed out weaknesses in current teaching practices and curriculum. For example, in a report by The College Music Society titled “Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors,” authors Patricia Campbell, David Myers, and Ed Sarath question what it means to be an educated musician in the 21st century and note some shortcomings.²⁰ Their report touches on the lack of diversity in college music curriculums and also offers suggestions on how to diversify them. Their sentiments on the Eurocentric nature of music schools can be seen in the following quote:

Similar to the gap noted in creativity, large numbers of music majors graduate with little or no hands-on engagement with music beyond European classical repertory, let alone the cultivation of a genuine global artistic identity, which TFUMM believes is central to musical life and responsible citizenship. The extent of the problem is underscored by the fact that music majors commonly spend many years on campus without even a nod to the multicultural communities surrounding them, and that practitioners from these communities are rarely invited to engage with university students of music. Moreover, this ethnocentric lapse occurs on campuses where commitment to diversity and equality are regularly articulated by the administration, and where robust diversity discourse pervades the humanities and social sciences. The dichotomy between administrative rhetoric and curricular reality underscores the institutional nature of the problem. TFUMM views the culturally narrow horizons of music study as nothing short of a social justice crisis.²¹

The authors of this report go as far as calling the lack of diversity a “social justice crisis.”²² And while that may be up for debate among scholars, they bring up a very valuable point that should not be overlooked. Colleges and universities regularly publicize their “commitment to diversity and equality,” but either intentionally or unintentionally fail to deliver on that commitment. Diversifying college music curriculum poses a different kind of challenge to this commitment because expanding inclusivity of musical styles means adding styles of music that music faculty may not be familiar with themselves. This alone could cause for push-

²⁰ Campbell 2014.

²¹ Campbell 2014, 5.

²² Similar language is used in Moore 2017, 17-18.

back among music professors. It is also important to note that diversifying music curriculums may depend on both cultural and geographical factors. In the Rio Grande Valley, Hispanics make up more than 90 percent of the population, and a significant number of all violinists start off in mariachi programs and/or perform with local mariachi ensembles. Therefore, it makes sense that a university like UTRGV would add a degree program to help the growing need for mariachi educators in local public schools. In other areas, diversifying the curriculum may mean including country music, jazz, hip-hop or fiddle to college curriculums. The point here is that although diversifying the curriculum may mean different things for different places, the need for the inclusion of other non-Western styles remains the same.²³

One main area of concern when discussing the addition of mariachi to the college music curriculum is mariachi's historical portrayal in popular culture as a non-serious art form. Mariachi ensembles are often depicted in media and films as the background entertainment in Mexican bars and restaurants. Even among Mexicans and Mexican Americans, mariachi is seen as the music of happy hour and quinceañeras. In contrast, classical music has had a historical portrayal as a refined high art music. The two traditions have been assigned culture value based on assumptions connected to class, culture, functions, and elitist views, and as a consequence, mariachi is often not taken seriously as a legitimate genre worthy of study. Representations of mariachi and classical music in the media become a problem when trying to argue for the inclusion of mariachi as a genre that belongs in college curriculums, because they reify existing stereotypes. The negative attitudes that have emerged as a consequence to mariachi's portrayal can have detrimental consequences to the success of mariachi instruction at collegiate level institutions. While the focus of this paper remains on the issue as it relates to mariachi, it is

²³ See Moore 2017; Attas and Waterman 2019; Robinson 2019 supporting these views.

important to note that these condescending attitudes exist towards other styles of vernacular music as well and have been documented by scholars for decades. In his article, “Born in the U.S.A.: Vernacular Music and Public Education,” James Scholten offers his theories on why American music educators were reluctant to introduce vernacular music, specifically jazz, into public school curriculums. In the article, Scholten writes the following: “Why American music educators were so reluctant to bring it[jazz] into public school music is difficult to understand. Perhaps its association with black musicians and the places where it was performed offended the sensibilities of white music educators. However, the American public accepted it many years before music educators recognized its value and brought it into the public schools.”²⁴ Scholten comments on the racial nature of the issue and speculates that the venues where jazz was performed shaped music educators’ perception of the music as well.

In an attempt to showcase some of the attitudes that interfered with the adaption of jazz into public school curriculums, Scholten also cites the following quote from Peter Dykema and Karl Gehrken’s textbook, *The Teaching and Administration of High School Music (1941)*:

Swing music—which is merely a highly emotionalized style of playing jazz, and to which we are in no sense objecting as a legitimate type of human experience—is primarily physical. It induces violent physical movements—note the jitterbug. It is ‘fleshly’ in its entire conception. It does lead toward the spiritual. It is ‘good fun’ at the time, but it does not yield abiding satisfaction. To use such music in the school as a substitute for serious music is to cheat youth of a highly important experience which has the possibility of assisting in the development of spiritual resources.²⁵

While music education has come a long way since Gehrken’s textbook was written, this idea of “serious music” being of higher value to musicians than a vernacular style is one that still

²⁴ Scholten 1988, 25.

²⁵ Scholten 1988, 25.

lingers in the minds of many music educators today.²⁶ Scholten's article is important because it showcases these attitudes that, in present-day, may still be affecting curricular diversity at the university level. More importantly, his analysis of jazz' role in society can be applied to other vernacular styles like mariachi as well.

From the information provided above, one can start getting a glimpse of some of the attitudes that exist towards vernacular styles and the people that play them. Still, it is important to note that every genre of folk/traditional music will have their own set of issues and stereotypes associated with them because of the obvious cultural differences of musical styles. For mariachi, its portrayal in popular culture that I previously mentioned is certainly a factor leading to its "non-serious" music label but so many other social and cultural factors exist and contribute to this issue as well. In *Mariachi Music in America*, Daniel Sheehy describes the interconnection of mariachi culture through its "historical, social, economic, and musical" dimensions.²⁷ In doing so, Sheehy reveals his own experiences with attitudes he encountered while playing mariachi music as well as his thoughts on the state of public school music education. Some of his sentiments can be seen in the following excerpt from his book:

Being a student of music education of the time, I also began to question the content of my own public school music education. Why hadn't mariachi music or other 'ethnic music's' been included in my music performance and appreciation classes? Were they not 'good enough' for the classroom? Who determine what music was included in the curriculum, and why were certain music chosen over others? With all the passion of a recent Mariachi 'convert,' I became determined to see justice done-that is, to see that mariachi music and other 'worthy' culturally specific musical traditions be placed on a curricular pedestal alongside the European fine art masters.²⁸

²⁶ See Hurley-Glowa 1998 p. 6-7 for a discussion of German attitudes towards entertainment and art music. Also see Hurley- Glowa 2012-6-7, and Hurley-Glowa 2019, 105-106.

²⁷ Sheehy 2006, 8.

²⁸ Sheehy 2006, 8.

Sheehy's frustration with his own music education is important because it echoes the points that I am trying to make in this paper regarding curricular diversity. Sheehy also includes some very valuable anecdotes from some of mariachi's most influential figures, one of which is Natividad Cano. Natividad Cano, or "Nati" Cano as he was more commonly known, was and remains a highly admired figure for his work in elevating musical respect for mariachi music in the United States and for founding Mariachi Los Camperos. Sheehy includes the following excerpt from a 1999 interview in which Nati Cano describes how he felt when he was looked down on for playing mariachi music:

The musicians at the symphony, the Philharmonic, saw us as musicians and music that weren't worth anything, right?... So, they look down on us like that, and it hurt me very much because I adored, and still very much adore, mariachi music. Ironic, because [years later the symphony musicians] in New York in Lincoln Center told us, 'This music is very difficult! It's very pretty!' Then, supposedly to rid myself of that...curse, I started to study classical music. I was eight or nine years old... then I started to play with a group, at about the age of ten, with a classical music group, a quartet... People requested music, let's say such as *La Traviata* or *Rigoletto*... They hired us to play house parties... And around then I started to have more maturity, more maturity in learning. It served me well... Because that was the combination of being able to absorb the two musical cultures, and the one helped me with the other.²⁹

Nati Cano's experiences offer more evidence of the existing attitudes that hinder mariachi's perception as a serious form of art music. However, Nati Cano's testimony becomes even more interesting because the experience he narrates is from his upbringings in Guadalajara. This is somewhat surprising because mariachi is native to Jalisco and from his account, it seems that at that time mariachi was not given the proper respect and importance that it deserved because classical music was still regarded as more prestigious.

Sheehy's book is of utmost importance to my research because while there may be many articles documenting the attitudes and biases associated with music like jazz, there are few when

²⁹ Sheehy 2006, 40.

it comes to mariachi. Having access to personal accounts like Sheehy's and other important mariachi figures he includes in his book helps give my research the foundation needed to continue investigating these attitudes further.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

In an effort to gather as much anecdotal data as possible about the attitudes and conditions that mariachi violinists encounter throughout their studies, ethnographic research was conducted through the use of interviews. As part of the study, violinists with a range of musical backgrounds were interviewed. This included violinists who primarily play classical music and have studied classical technique and style, violinists who primarily play mariachi and have studied mariachi technique and style, and violinists with experience in playing both classical and mariachi technique, style, and repertoire. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, these interviews were conducted and recorded through the video communication application, Zoom. Every interviewee was given a recruitment document that explained the basis of this research along with a consent form. Every participant was also given the option to remain anonymous. Before the interviews were conducted, three sets of questions were prepared for each of the above-mentioned groups. Most of the questions remained identical for each group of interviewees, but some modifications were made in order to keep the questions relevant to the participants' individual musical backgrounds. Because this research relied primarily on interviews, it allowed me to collect important personal anecdotes about experiences and encounters that mariachi violinists have had in different stages of their learning. Although this research is first and foremost looking at the conditions under which mariachi violinists study in higher level

institutions, I allocated a portion of the interviews to learn about each interviewees' musical backgrounds and introductory musical experiences. It was important for me to know what each violinists' initial trainings consisted of and how their experiences differed from one another. Participants were also asked about their learning experiences as they moved through public school music programs. A summary of the results of these interviews will be discussed in the following section.

Results

Throughout the course of the interviews conducted for this paper, much was revealed about the conditions under which mariachi violinists study and the attitudes they encounter throughout their education. Mariachi violinists who pursued classical violin degrees seemed to have significantly different learning experiences from those who primarily played and studied classical music before attending a university. While the personal accounts in these interviews revealed important details about the state of university learning environments for violinists, disparities in teaching methods and materials were equally visible in early learning environments.

Early Learning Environments of Classically-Trained Violinists

A trend that seemed consistent among all of the violinists that were interviewed was the use of the same introductory violin method book, *Essential Elements for Strings*. This method book was used as a main resource in all mostly all of the interviewees' initial instructions. However, aside from using the same method book, the mariachi violinists and classical violinists who were interviewed had very different instructional experiences in their early training and moving forward. One classical violinist who was interviewed, Angelica Martinez, started playing

violin at the age of eleven in her middle school's orchestra program in 2010. She remembers being given three initial books which included *Essential Elements for Strings*, *Ševčík School of Violin Technics*, and Samuel Applebaum's *String Builder*. She was later given etude books that included Wohlfart, Op. 45, and Dont, Op. 37. All of these materials were used throughout her middle school education to improve her technique and overall musicianship. Aside from these materials, Martinez also began playing solo repertoire, noting that her first piece was Minuet II by J.S. Bach from the *Suzuki Violin School, Vol 1* book. Because Martinez's orchestra director was a violinist, she also took private lessons with her separately. After her first teacher moved away, Martinez continued private lessons with her new orchestra director. Martinez says she remembers both of her teachers implementing strict practice routines that consisted of scales, etudes, and solo repertoire. She also explained how her reading skills were developed by her frequent participation in solo and ensemble competitions. Once Martinez reached high school, she continued to study under another private violin teacher. She commented that her private teacher challenged her with difficult repertoire in order to build her technique. Her hard work landed her many successes, as she noted she was a member of the All-Region orchestra and made it to the Texas State Solo-Ensemble Contest every year she was in high school. Aside from this, she was also the principal second violin of the South Texas Youth Symphony Orchestra.³⁰

Another classical violinist that was interviewed is the current orchestra director at Edinburg North High School in Edinburg, Texas. Moises Llanes began playing the violin in the fourth grade through a pilot program at his elementary school in 1974. Although he did not remember the specific teaching materials that were used in his initial training, he pointed out that he did begin with an introductory violin method book. He explained how his parents made him

³⁰ Angelica Martinez, virtual interview, Jan. 21, 2021.

and his siblings learn to play piano by the time they were six, and so he already had a lot of fundamental music skills when he started playing violin. Llanes expressed how he had wonderful middle school and high school teachers that each contributed to his future musical successes. He explained how his middle school orchestra director “went full-on symphony orchestra for contest and made [them] all learn solos” as a way to challenge them.³¹ However, he comments that even then he was a bit disappointed with the education system itself, noting that public school music education focused too much on the performance aspect and not enough on understanding music. In high school, Llanes was a two-time All-State violinist and received 1’s in the Texas Solo-Ensemble Competition every year.

Early Learning Environments of Mariachi-Trained Violinists

Contrasting the early learning experiences that Martinez and Llanes had, interviewees that started off in public school mariachi programs seemed to have very different educational experiences. Lack of both violin-specific materials and even dedicated violin teachers in their initial instruction proved common among those who started playing in a middle or high school mariachi program. In my interview with Jorge Vázquez, a former violinist in the world-renowned Mariachi Sol de México, Vázquez explained how his training began at the age of fifteen in his high school’s mariachi program in 2010. Vázquez commented that he grew up in Northern California and that there were no middle school mariachi or orchestra programs in the area for him to participate in. While explaining the dynamic of his high school’s mariachi class, he described how his teacher was “mainly a vocalist” and therefore did not focus much on violin techniques and pedagogy.³² Instead of being given violin method books or other introductory

³¹ Moises Llanes, virtual interview, June 30, 2021.

³² Jorge Vázquez, virtual interview, Mar. 18, 2021.

materials to start his training, Vázquez recalls being asked to learn mariachi songs like “Las Mañanitas” during class time. He comments that most of the time, he was not learning the mariachi songs from notated music, but instead by watching and by asking the more experienced violinists from the mariachi program for help. When describing this process, he said the following: “I would ask them, ‘How does this song go?’ and they would just tell me the fingers. I didn’t even know what notes I was playing sometimes.”³³ Because he was learning mostly by ear, Vázquez was not actively practicing his reading skills. Vázquez says he was never given any etudes or technique-building materials, and he did not play an etude until he was in college. He noted, however, that the group was asked to warm up with scales.

Another interviewee had experiences similar to those of Vázquez. Mayra Garcia-Adame’s passion and dedication for mariachi music allowed her to persevere despite very difficult educational experiences. She is the current director of Palmview High School’s Mariachi Los Lobos and founder/director of the award-winning, all-female mariachi group, Mariachi Mariposas. Garcia started off her instruction in a middle school mariachi program when she was eleven years old in 1986. Unlike the experiences of the classical violinists mentioned above, though, Garcia received very little guidance and instruction from her first mariachi teacher. In her interview, Garcia recounts the following about her early instruction: “I basically learned to play violin on my own until I was a freshman in high school because our teacher was a french horn player... He had no idea how to play violin. So he gave me a book, gave me a violin, told me how to hold it, told me how to grab the bow, and I had to do it on my own.”³⁴³⁵ Garcia

³³ Jorge Vázquez, virtual interview, Mar. 18, 2021.

³⁴ Mayra Garcia-Adame, virtual interview, Jan. 11, 2021.

³⁵ When asked what book was given to her, Garcia revealed that she too was given an *Essential Elements* violin method book.

also mentioned that she was never given any scales or etudes to work on. The only task that she was given all throughout her middle school education was to learn and play mariachi songs.

Once in high school though, Garcia was required to join the orchestra program if she wanted to play in the mariachi ensemble. Garcia remembers she was not fond of the idea at first, but after experiencing the orchestra, she ended up enjoying it.

The Effects of Different Early Learning Environments on Interviewees' Higher Education

The nature of the violinists' preliminary musical training and learning environments seemed to play a significant role in their successes at later educational stages of their lives. In Vázquez' case, his unorthodox preliminary training did not hinder his ability to be drafted into one of the most prestigious mariachi ensembles in the world. However, in his opinion, his lack of dedicated technical training and reading exercises resulted in him being unprepared for his college music education. In 2014, Vázquez began studying at Bob Cole Conservatory of Music in Long Beach, CA, where he was one of only three violinists that did not have a classical music background. Vázquez recalls feeling very unprepared when he first began his studies. He detailed how he auditioned for the orchestra ensemble and was placed in the first violins because of his playing abilities and because the professors saw potential in him. However, he expressed how nerve-wracking it was to sit in the orchestra and have to sight-read difficult orchestral works when his reading abilities were not as developed as the classical violinists around him. Aside from feeling unprepared, he frequently experienced moments that revealed just how much his musical background differed from the other violinists at the conservatory.³⁶

Vázquez remembers playing the first piece given to him at the conservatory, Bach's Violin Concerto in A minor, and being told by students who overheard him practicing that

³⁶ Jorge Vázquez, virtual interview, Mar. 18, 2021.

hearing him play the piece “brought back so many memories.”³⁷ In other words, they pointed out that they had previously played that piece probably much earlier in their musical careers.

Vázquez also explained that professors would often make references to pieces that he never played before to make points about stylistic moments in the music. He gave the following example on the subject: “In the context of studio class or orchestra rehearsals, the teachers would say something like ‘This accent in this Mozart... do you all remember when you were ten and you were playing Suzuki book three and that one piece that had this accent? Well, it’s kind of like that.’”³⁸ He jokes that every violinist around him would excitedly let out an ‘oh yea! I remember,’ and he would think to himself, “no.”³⁹ Given his mariachi background and lack of classical repertoire in his early educational environments, he obviously could not relate to those experiences.

In Garcia’s case, her journey was clouded by feelings of worry and frustration towards her career choice. Even though she knew she was a competent violinist, she expressed that the transition between high school and university was very difficult for her, admitting that she wanted to quit by the second year of her college career. Garcia started attending UTPA (now UTRGV) in 1993. She remembers feeling overwhelmed by the level of the violinists around her. She had the following to say on the subject: “In high school, I was always first chair. I loved violin, so I always practiced a lot... When I entered college, it was a very very difficult transition for me. I was not at the level that most of my peers were. To hear them play and to listen to my applied professor, I’d be liked ‘Wow’... I never learned that.”⁴⁰ Garcia also mentions how her

³⁷ Jorge Vázquez, virtual interview, Mar. 18, 2021.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mayra Garcia-Adame, virtual interview, Jan. 11, 2021.

lack of knowledge in the classical genre made her professors treat her differently from her classically trained peers. “I felt like they [applied professors] would give up on me because I wasn’t like all my other friends. I didn’t know as much. I felt like I was an outcast, and it really depressed me because I was always thinking maybe this is not for me....maybe this is not for me.”⁴¹ She revealed that the only reason she continued with her chosen major was because she loved violin and playing mariachi music. Garcia was a member of UTPA’s Mariachi Aztlán and performed with the ensemble throughout all of her college education.

Both Garcia and Vázquez’ journeys reveal just a glimpse of what it is like for some mariachi violinists when they decide to study at a higher-level institution. Because Vázquez had virtually no experience with classical teachings and Garcia had only a limited knowledge of classical teachings before attending college, their experiences in college proved more difficult. On the other hand, violinists like Martinez and Llanes generally felt prepared for their college music experiences. Llanes said that he thought he had received the proper training prior to attending Southern Methodist University in 1982. He noted that although performing in the orchestra and competing in events like solo and ensemble were important to his experience, he credits his success in university to his “early formal experience with music education.”⁴² Martinez began attending UTRGV in 2017, and she has since served as the associate concertmaster of the symphony orchestra.

Still, while it is important to note that while the mariachi violinists mentioned in the last pages encountered difficult moments in their college experiences, there were also mariachi violinists among the group of interviewees who had much better educational experiences at the

⁴¹ Mayra Garcia-Adame, virtual interview, Jan. 11, 2021.

⁴² Moises Llanes, virtual interview, June 30, 2021.

college level. Not surprisingly, though, these students attended a college that is known for its progressive and inclusive music curriculum: Berklee College of Music.

Josué Eduardo López is a full-time composer, arranger and mariachi performer who is originally from the Rio Grande Valley but currently resides in Los Angeles, California. His learning experience in a public school mariachi program echoes that of the mariachi violinists previously mentioned. Although he is now a full-time mariachi musician, López began playing violin through his middle school's orchestra program in 1999. At the time, there was no middle school mariachi program at his school. When he reached high school, though, he joined the school's mariachi ensemble. As López described his experience in the mariachi group, he explains that his high school mariachi director was mainly a harp player. He remembers very little emphasis being placed on technical and stylistic aspects of the music, adding that his experience was more of a "just play the music, sing the music, and try to get through the song without falling apart" situation.⁴³ López left the Rio Grande Valley in 2007 after he was accepted into Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA. Although López studied guitar at Berklee, he expressed how his experience at Berklee was a positive one because of the school's diverse student population and unique music curriculum. López expressed how the musical culture at Berklee was like a "melting pot" and was "not confined to classical music education."⁴⁴ He commented that most of his violin peers at Berklee were "jazzers and fiddlers" and that classical violinists were actually the minority at the school.⁴⁵ Although he was not studying violin, he was familiar with the coursework and regimes that the violinists at Berklee were given. He explained that the mentality at Berklee was very much summarized by "if you want to do it and you can do

⁴³ Josué Eduardo López, virtual interview, Jan. 5, 2021.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

it and you have talent, we are not going to stop you. You can do it.”⁴⁶ He expressed how the best aspect of his education was “meeting lots of people from different walks of life.”⁴⁷

Another mariachi musician who had a similar college experience to López was violinist and current public school mariachi teacher, Claudia Rascon. Rascon began playing violin at the age of ten within an all-girls mariachi group in El Paso, Tx called “Las Florecitas.” The ensemble existed independent from a school district, since there were no middle school mariachi programs at the time. Once in high school, she joined the mariachi program which was directed by an *armonia* teacher.⁴⁸ Because of this, Rascon did not receive much violin training from the program. Instead, she enlisted in private lessons with a well-respected mariachi violinist, Joe Baca. Rascon started attending Berklee College of Music in 2012 and studied with three violin professors throughout her education. When asked how her professors responded to her musical background, she explained that none of her professors took issue with the fact that her musical background included primarily mariachi music. In fact, Rascon comments that her knowledge of mariachi style and techniques was celebrated, and she was even allowed to play mariachi for her assignments and exams. Rascon explained how her violin professors were not all classical violinists themselves. Her first violin professor was a classical violinist and the former concertmaster of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, Sandra Kott. However, she also studied with a jazz violinist, Rob Thomas, and a bluegrass violinist, Matt Glaser. Rascon expressed that having professors that were so opened minded “opened up [her] mind to so many possibilities.”⁴⁹ But while Rascon might have had a great college experience, she noted that she was not spared

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Armonia*: The rhythm section of the mariachi ensemble that includes guitar, vihuela, guitarrón, harp, and sometimes guitarra de golpe.

⁴⁹ Claudia Rascon, virtual interview, Jan. 15, 2021.

from comments concerning her affiliation with mariachi. She explained that when she was in high school, voice teachers told her she would “ruin her voice” if she kept singing in mariachi. Comments like this worried Rascon and gave her anxiety.⁵⁰

Rascon was not the only victim of negative comments from members of the classical music community. Almost every interviewee that played mariachi shared specific situations where they felt their musicianship and musical backgrounds were put into question. In my interview with violinist Monica Fogelquist, the current mariachi director of University of Texas at Austin’s Mariachi Paredes, Fogelquist describes how she struggled to be taken seriously as a violinist because of her association with mariachi music.⁵¹ Although she now plays primarily mariachi music, Fogelquist actually started playing violin under a private teacher in her hometown of Wittier, California when she was only seven years old in 1990. Her teacher used the Suzuki method and corresponding materials to begin her studies, so Fogelquist’s primary instruction was based in classical teachings. When Fogelquist and her family moved to Wenatchee, Washington, Monica’s father, Mark Fogelquist, started a brand-new mariachi class at Wenatchee High School. Monica joined her father’s mariachi class in 1995 and has continued to play mariachi professionally since then.⁵² During her interview, Fogelquist expressed how playing with mariachi groups overshadowed her violin skills even from an early age. In one specific instance, Fogelquist remembers practicing very hard for a young musicians competition where she played *Symphonie Espagnole*, Op. 21 by Édouard Lalo. After her performance, she says “a pillar of the classical music community” came up to her and commented, ‘Oh my

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ See Monica Fogelquist 2017 for more accounts of her training and personal trajectory.

⁵² See Mark Fogelquist 1996 and Harpole and Fogelquist 1989.

goodness, I had no idea you played so well for a mariachi violinist.’⁵³ Fogelquist mentioned she felt confused when she heard that comment and did not know how to react.

Unfortunately, that experience was only the first of many that Fogelquist would encounter throughout her early career. As yet another example of these types of negative attitudes sometimes associated with mariachi, Fogelquist describes a situation that took place as she began to audition for music schools after high school. After submitting her scholarship audition packet to the School of Music at the University of Washington, Fogelquist says she received feedback for her audition materials with a note that read, “NO MARIACHI.” Fogelquist adds that the comment was underlined for emphasis. Fogelquist says that comment was disheartening, as she had sent the appropriate classical materials she was asked for but added a mariachi piece to showcase her versatility on the violin. She commented that she thought it odd for the faculty to make such a comment since the University of Washington has one of the biggest ethnomusicology programs in the country. However, Fogelquist also says she understands that she was applying to the school of music and not the ethnomusicology program where “they probably would have understood what [she] was trying to do.”⁵⁴

Finally, Fogelquist expressed her disappointment with UTRGV’s School of Music, where Fogelquist recently received her Master of Music in Ethnomusicology (2017). She says she really wanted to improve her violin skills but was refused applied lessons because she did not wish to play and perform with the symphony orchestra. Fogelquist was a member of UTRGV’s Mariachi Aztlán at the time and says that being pressured to be in the orchestra was an “unfair

⁵³ Monica Fogelquist, virtual interview, Jan. 7, 2021.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

demand” because Mariachi Aztlán was a full-time ensemble that had “a very rigorous practice schedule and a very demanding performance schedule.”⁵⁵

Now that Fogelquist is a mariachi director and lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, she says she continues to see the same attitudes towards the students that form part of the mariachi ensemble under her direction. She expressed the following in her interview: “A lot of musicians, including professors, that are so entrenched in their Western musical practices and ideals don’t understand that music like mariachi requires you to have a substantial amount of technique and development in order to be successful in that realm.”⁵⁶

Mayra Garcia, who was mentioned earlier in this chapter, contributed most of her college struggles to the fact that she played mariachi music before and during her college education. Garcia said nobody really liked the fact that she was playing in UTPA’s mariachi ensemble. She clarified this comment by noting that her peers, even those that just played classical music, were not the ones that made her feel bad about her musical likings. “It came mostly from the teachers,” she said. “They knew I liked and played mariachi, and it kind of shaped their perception of me. They didn’t understand why I wanted to play mariachi and not classical music.”⁵⁷

Jorge Vázquez, who was also mentioned earlier in this chapter, explained that while his violin professor was supportive of him and his musical endeavors, the other string faculty would question why he was still playing mariachi. He said he felt it put his professor in a tough situation because she wanted to support him but felt pressure from her superiors not to. Vázquez also explained how he received harsh criticism from the conservatory’s faculty because of his

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Mayra Garcia-Adame, virtual interview, Jan. 11, 2021.

busy gigging schedule. As a professional mariachi, Vázquez' evenings and weekends were booked with mariachi performances. Vázquez explained how the school would regularly have great opportunities like masterclasses and guest artists, noting that Midori Gotō was a frequent guest at the conservatory. Unfortunately, Vázquez said he and the other two violinists who worked as professional mariachis were unable to attend those events, as they always took place on weekends when mariachi groups work the most. Because of this, Vázquez says he was viewed as someone who was not serious about his education. He revealed that he was told, "If you are not here, I can tell this doesn't really mean anything to you and you are not serious about it."⁵⁸ He explains that to him and the other violinists that also played mariachi, it was not about wanting to be there but really not being able to. "To us it was like... I can't stop working because then I can't pay my rent, and if I can't pay my rent, I can't live here."⁵⁹ He expressed how the situation resulted in him being at a disadvantage because he was seen as a student who "didn't take music seriously enough to come on Friday nights or Saturday evenings."⁶⁰ Vázquez comments that this worked against him and the other mariachi violinists when it came to auditions.

Situations and attitudes that were experienced by these interviewees are unfortunate, but they come from a lack of understanding of mariachi music and the musicians who play it. Stigmas and stereotypes that surround mariachi music could be a contributing factor in this situation. I touched on the idea that mariachi's portrayal in the media could be contributing to its non-serious music label, but the interviewees all had their own unique opinions on the situation regarding stigmas and stereotypes towards mariachi and its musicians. In my interview with

⁵⁸ Jorge Vázquez, virtual interview, Mar. 18, 2021.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

López, he explained that stereotypes towards mariachi definitely existed and stemmed from ignorance and a lack of understanding and empathy towards the music. López commented that there is a lot of depth to mariachi music that sometimes classical musicians do not see. He had the following to say on the subject:

Orchestra musicians are just focused on one thing, play your instrument. Who cares what the audience is doing? It's a different mentality. Orchestra musicians and mariachi musicians are different in the sense that playing violin is just a fraction of what we have to do... I don't think orchestra musicians seeing it from the outside really see that.⁶¹

López elaborated on this point by explaining that mariachi violinists are multifaceted performers having to play violin, act, sing harmonies, interact with the audience, and memorize all their music. He expresses how it can be easy for a classical musician to judge a mariachi violinist for not being able to read, but they do not always see how for mariachi violinists reading is only “part of a tool of many other things.”⁶² However, López expressed that he tends to agree with the stereotypes because he says mariachi violinists do tend to be less capable readers and have more intonation issues than classical violinists.

But while López sees some truth to the stereotypes surrounding mariachi violinists, Fogelquist argued quite the opposite, stating that violinists who come out of public school mariachi programs are “miles beyond in basic mechanics.” Fogelquist said she had previously worked in a school where the violinists in the orchestra did not know how to correctly hold a violin, did not clean their instruments, did not rosin their bows, and simply did not practice.⁶³ She mentioned that these are problems that she does not see too often in mariachi violin culture. Fogelquist focused on stereotypes that arise from the actions of members of the mariachi

⁶¹ Josué Eduardo López, virtual interview, Jan. 5, 2021.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Although Fogelquist was teaching mariachi, she occasionally stepped in to substitute for the orchestra teacher.

community itself. She says she is a big advocate of doing things the right way as mariachi musicians and faults mariachi groups that do not show respect for the music and the culture. She expressed her opinions in the following quote from her interview:

We're constantly having to push back against the stereotypes of these little groups that [people] see strolling around Tex-Mex restaurants here in Texas while they are eating their chips and queso. To me, that's not what a mariachi is. Now, if those groups are doing things right, as in they rehearse and they show up clean and they are organized, they play set repertoire and their main goal is not pleasing the customer at any cost, then go for it. You are doing something good for our community. Unfortunately, the majority of the groups that are in the regular consumer's eyes are those that are not embodying good musical values and integrity. The main thing that they are looking to do is make a quick buck and exploit the music for financial gains... If that's all you're doing and you don't care about the craft and the larger message you are sending with your music to the world, then don't do it.⁶⁴

Fogelquist adds that mariachi music is “ethnically defined” and unfortunately because it is not the Western standard, mariachis have to fight much harder for people to value it.⁶⁵ She concludes her thoughts by expressing that educators who work in higher education should have “open enough minds” and have enough worldly appreciation for all things so that they won't perpetuate narrow viewpoints.⁶⁶

Fogelquist's point about the settings where mariachi's are heard and seen is an idea that Rascon touched on in her interview as well. Rascon says she has received dismissive comments about mariachi and its musicians from her friends within in the Hispanic community. She said the reason they have a negative view of mariachi is because they have only heard it at *cantinas* and other parties.⁶⁷ She also believes that some musicians are unable to appreciate mariachi because some songs within the genre are not “harmonically charged.”⁶⁸ She argues that even

⁶⁴ Monica Fogelquist, virtual interview, Jan. 7, 2021.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *Cantina*: a type of bar common in Latin America and Spain.

⁶⁸ Claudia Rascon, virtual interview, Jan. 15, 2021.

though most mariachi songs follow simple chord progressions, it is because the songs are meant for “singing from the heart.”⁶⁹ On a positive note, Rascon believes that stigmas are soothing down and that mariachi is becoming a more globalized music.

Classically-Trained Violinists’ Views on Mariachi Music and Violinists

Given the nature of the answers collected by the mariachi violinists, it was interesting to see what the classical violinists I interviewed had to say about mariachi music and the violinists who play it. Angelica Martinez expressed her admiration for violinists in mariachi, noting that she had always wanted to play mariachi herself but was too shy to do it. Martinez commented that she actually thinks mariachi violinists have an edge over classical violinists because of their performance abilities. Martinez points out that her opinion of mariachi changed after having the opportunity to play in a small project with a mariachi ensemble in high school. She remembers showing up to a rehearsal with her music and asking herself why no one else in the mariachi had music. She also remembers how on stage, the mariachi violinists around her were smiling and interacting with the audience while she played to herself. Martinez comments that before this experience, she used to think all mariachi violinists did was “play fast runs,” but after having a chance to sit in and play with a mariachi, her appreciation for the music and its musicians positively changed.⁷⁰ Although Llanes did not speak on the stereotypes and stigmas that existed towards mariachi, he had plenty to say about mariachi education and what constitutes a successful curriculum, which can be seen in Chapter V.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Angelica Martinez, virtual interview, Jan. 21, 2021.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

After reviewing the data that was collected from the violinists who were interviewed, there were a few different issues that stood out. Most notably, the interviewees perceive a lack of respect for mariachi music by some college music educators. From the personal anecdotes that were provided by the mariachi violinists, we can see how each interviewee was subjected to harmful and/or discriminatory behavior because of their participation and affiliation with mariachi. Before discussing this issue more in depth, though, I believe it is important to highlight some issues that may be leading up to the conditions that mariachi violinists are facing at higher-level institutions.

First and foremost, the initial educational experiences that mariachi violinists had in comparison to the classical violinists were significantly different. Not only were in some cases the mariachi violinists not provided the appropriate introductory materials, but they were also not guided by teachers who knew how to play their instruments. While it is not uncommon to have public school music teachers teach instruments that they do not play, this situation is worse because in some cases like Mayra Garcia's, the teachers were not even string players and had no knowledge of mariachi as well. Still, Garcia was able to teach herself because of the violin method book she was given. In cases like Jorge Vázquez', though, he was given no resources and expected to learn mariachi songs without any musical literacy or technical foundations.

Learning by ear in mariachi is not uncommon due to mariachi's aural nature, but violin itself demands at least fundamental knowledge of technique and basic mechanics in order to play any genre. Although the situation will vary with every school and teacher, it is probably more likely than not that, just like the classical violinists seen here, orchestra programs generally follow more structured and standardized curriculums for teaching violin. Both Martinez and Llanes were subject to strict practice routines and given classical repertoire that prepared them for their more advanced educational experiences.

Without a doubt, the next issue that goes hand-in-hand with the less-than-perfect initial instruction that mariachi violinists received is the lack of emphasis on reading skills that mariachi violinists experienced. One of the main challenges that mariachi violinists dealt with when they started their studies at colleges and universities was deficient reading abilities. Much like the experience I had at the beginning of my college education, almost every mariachi violinist who was interviewed expressed feeling uneasy about the state of their reading skills, especially in the context of orchestra rehearsals or other group learning environments. This, of course, has not gone unnoticed by music educators and could be a contributing factor to the stereotype that mariachi violinists are lower-class musicians. In reality, it seems that public school mariachi programs do not prepare mariachi violinists for college music environments. Throughout my interviews with mariachi violinists, it was visible that reading skills were not developed and instead were sometimes completely ignored in their initial learning environments. López mentioned in his interview that as a mariachi violinist himself, he agrees that mariachi violinists do tend to be worse readers than classical musicians. However, López also points out the importance of putting the issue into context. He explained how mariachi violinists have various duties within a mariachi ensemble and reading is only one of many skills that they have

to learn. He pointed out that because classical violinists practice reading for seven years before attending college, it is no surprise that they are excellent readers. I would add that as mariachi violinists learn by ear more often than classical players do and because mariachi violinists have to memorize all their repertoire before performances, reading plays a less significant role in mariachi violinists' lives. It is important to note, however, that mariachi education is evolving and improving every year, and the experiences that the interviewees had in these interviews may not be the experiences that public school mariachi musicians may be experiencing today. However, presenting and documenting this information can assist educators in building successful public school mariachi curriculums.

Before moving on, it is important to touch on the idea of being “unprepared” for college music environments. Both Garcia and Vázquez mentioned feeling unprepared when they first entered their perspective music schools. However, it is important to note that the reason they were “unprepared” for their college music studies was because they were suddenly tasked with studying classical teachings that were unfamiliar to them. While they might have been unfamiliar with classical teachings, both were extremely competent mariachi musicians. As previously mentioned, Vázquez played for arguably the most prestigious mariachi group in the United States, Mariachi Sol De México. For many mariachi violinists it is the ultimate goal to play with a group of this level. So, if these musicians were in fact unprepared for their college music educations, it is only because they were suddenly being compared to musicians from an entirely different genre of music.

Moving on to the issues regarding stereotypes and stigmas, every violinist who was interviewed was aware of or experienced the stigmas that exist towards mariachi and its musicians. Whether they arise from the lack of classical training mariachi violinists receive, the

setting where mariachi is heard, or the cultural and racial baggage, the microaggressions towards mariachi musicians because of these stigmas was visible in their individual experiences.⁷¹ Fogelquist being told she played well “for a mariachi violinist” is a prime example of this. Vázquez being told he was not serious about his education because he was not able to miss his mariachi commitments is another. Vázquez says he is aware that people think mariachi violinists have a scratchy tone, lack technique and that mariachi music itself is easy to play. Fogelquist suggested that some mariachi musicians themselves perpetuate stigmas by allowing themselves to act silly and perform music from outside of the mariachi genre at parties and restaurants to please audiences. However, she also recognized the role that educators play in keeping these stigmas relevant by explaining that educators dismiss the extensive work that goes into becoming proficient in the mariachi style. Of course, this is probably the result of what López said in his interview when he stated that stigmas in mariachi come from a lack of understanding and empathy for the musical tradition. Perhaps if classical musicians took the time to listen to learn and understand mariachi music, it would be more accepted by members of the classical community. Rascon also speculated that the settings that mariachi was heard in was a significant factor in the way it was viewed. But while mariachi music is played both in big stages and smaller less formal settings, performance settings should not define the importance and value of a folk music. Mariachi’s roots are based in informal performance settings, and therefore it is an important characteristic of the genre. Professional mariachi musicians typically perform at parties and restaurants, even though they also perform at larger more prestigious events as well.

After understanding some of the issues that may contribute to the attitudes and conditions that mariachi violinists study at in higher-level institutions, it is possible to reanalyze the

⁷¹ See Jacque and Waterman 2019 for further commentary on microaggressions in similar contexts.

experiences that they had at their perspective institutions. As each interviewee described their individual learning environments and experiences, it was clear that mariachi violinists had some extra obstacles to overcome due to their mariachi backgrounds. As pointed out in the previous chapter, violinists Rascon and López did not have the same experiences that the other interviewees had because of their college's unique outlook on inclusive music education.

However, when we look into the personal anecdotes that the other mariachi violinists provided, it is clear that they felt they were treated differently than their peers. Garcia admits she almost abandoned her goal of becoming a music educator because she felt her professors "gave up on her" due to her participation in mariachi and her mariachi background. Vázquez was subject to faculty members telling him he did not care about his education if he decided to play with mariachi groups. Fogelquist says she wanted to advance her violin skills and was denied the opportunity to because she only wanted to play with the university's mariachi ensemble. These instances are examples of the attitudes and conditions that mariachi violinists experience when they study at colleges and universities.

I asked myself at the beginning of this research whether the attitudes that I was witnessing and experiencing in my own journey were justified in any way. As I near the end of my research and consider everything that I have learned along the way, I am conflicted in my thoughts on the matter. Of course, I do not believe that negative attitudes towards violinists of any folk music genre should be tolerated. On the contrary, I was saddened to hear how difficult it was for some violinists who genuinely loved mariachi and violin yet encountered so many obstacles along the way for wanting to pursue it. However, I am now more aware of some clear issues within mariachi education that may be leading to the stigma and stereotypes that exist towards mariachi violinists. It is clear that mariachi education in public schools has a long way to

go in terms of preparing students for a successful college experience if the Eurocentric emphasis on violin and valuable music-making remains unchanged. High school mariachi programs may be producing musicians that are competent in the mariachi style, but that does not mean that they will be prepared for success at a school of music within an institution with a Western classical emphasis, as we saw in this research.

With all of this considered, I revisit the main focus of this thesis: the need for more degree-granting mariachi programs at the university level. Most of the issues listed above are in a constant chain reaction due to the lack of mariachi education at higher-level institutions. If college music students who wanted to pursue mariachi as a profession were allowed the opportunity to learn ways to effectively teach mariachi, their future students would become better musicians because of it. Right now, it can be said that the opposite might be true. Because the majority of colleges and universities offer music curriculums that are centered around Western art music, teachers who graduate and become mariachi teachers are unprepared to start and develop public school mariachi programs. Since students in public school mariachi programs do not focus on classical teachings and their teachers might also be unprepared to teach mariachi technique and style, they consequently end up having a sub-par music education, in a self-perpetuating cycle. The problem remains because there are virtually no programs available to assist in mariachi-specific professional development.

That is not to say that public school mariachi programs are not successful in their own right. Mariachi programs in the Rio Grande Valley are celebrated for the level of competence in the mariachi style that students possess at the end of their education. However, when these students get to college, as we saw in the interviews, it becomes difficult for them to adapt to a whole new musical culture. The solution to this problem does not necessarily mean that mariachi

programs should change all of their teachings and focus more on classical studies. But it also seems clear that college music curriculums will struggle to accommodate mariachi students quickly or easily, especially because mariachi is a largely oral/aural tradition and not many method books or skilled, specialized academic facilitators exist to teach its style and techniques.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley has a unique opportunity to demonstrate that folk programs like their new mariachi concentration can produce successful musicians and educators. In the meantime, public school mariachi programs can begin incorporating basic music theory courses and focus on building reading skills and technique. College music programs could also open their minds to the possibility of including a more diverse option of degree programs, like UTRGV is trying to do. Berklee College of Music already provides an example of a music school that both promotes a diverse curriculum and produces world-class musicians. Sandra Kott, a violin professor at Berklee that Rascon mentioned in her interview, speaks on her teaching philosophy in the following quote taken from her dedicated Berklee College of Music faculty webpage: “I get quite a cross-section of students with a large range of interests. They don’t always play a classical piece. Some of them play whatever jazz piece they’re working on, or a fiddle piece. You work on the same technical issues with students one way or another. It doesn’t matter whether they’re jazz or classically oriented or whatever, because they all have to do the work on their instrument.” If more educators approached music education with this mentality, it would be possible to offer more broadly-defined musicians the opportunity to study music at higher-level institutions.

CHAPTER V

ENVISIONING SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE MARIACHI CURRICULUMS

While the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley is pioneering what may become the future of college-level mariachi degree programs and curriculums, it is still too early to tell if these types of degree certification programs will be successful.⁷² Designing higher-level mariachi curriculums is a difficult task because of mariachi's aural nature and mostly "handed-down" knowledge. However, it is worth noting that important figures in the mariachi community including José Hernández, Daniel Sheehy, Ludim Pedroza, and Mark Fogelquist have done significant work in elevating mariachi education in the US.

But regardless of the internal issues that mariachi curriculums may face, the more important issue is the possibility that mariachi degree programs may not be welcomed by current music professors. We have seen from the interviewees' experiences that some college music educators may not be open to the idea of having programs like mariachi within academic music institutions. While it is difficult to know the exact reasons that mariachi is looked down upon by some in the classical community, one can assume that the stereotypes that surround mariachi and

⁷² Although UTRGV's mariachi program has enjoyed many successes and national attention throughout its thirty-two years in existence, founder Dr. Dahlia Guerra stated that the program experienced many challenges and growing pains along the way. However, she commented that the program always had the support of UTRGV's upper administration. Both she and Mariachi Aztlán's current director, Francisco Loera, have worked together for twenty-five years to ensure the program's growth and success. Under Dr. Guerra and Mr. Loera's direction, UTRGV's mariachi program has grown to currently include three mariachi ensembles and the new mariachi concentration. Dr. Guerra had the following to say on their work in the program: "Our goal has been to maintain a high level of musical excellence, while capturing the spirit and style of traditional mariachi music."

its musicians have something to do with this. In an effort to delegitimize the stereotypes that may or may not be true regarding violinists who come from public school mariachi programs, public school mariachi curriculums should evaluate the current state of their curriculums and ask themselves if they are effective in creating college-ready musicians for current standards

After reviewing the data collected from the interviewees, one can start to see the issues that need attention regarding public school mariachi education. Along with a structured introduction to violin, teachers should try their best to give students a well-rounded music education by introducing them to the basics of music theory, ear training, reading and sightreading. Interviewees who are public school music educators also brought up issues with public school mariachi education, and some had suggestions on how to provide students with the best possible music education. Garcia, who has been an educator for almost twenty-two years now, expressed her disapproval of mariachi competition culture, especially in the Rio Grande Valley. She says she is sometimes torn between wanting to teach her students all they need to know to succeed as a musician and producing a winning competition group. Mariachi competitions, especially in the Rio Grande Valley, become more and more competitive each year. Unfortunately, this has caused many middle school and high school directors to focus on just producing a winning group, while simultaneously disregarding opportunities to teach important music lessons.

Llanes, who just completed his thirty-fifth year as a public school teacher, explained how students that come out of schools that have only mariachi programs are not prepared for college music settings. He expresses that he believes the dynamic at his school is the most successful way to produce competent mariachi violinists. In his high school, all violinists need to play in the orchestra if they want to be in mariachi. Correspondingly, violinists must be a part of the varsity

orchestra if they want to be in the varsity mariachi. “Having a classical training alongside with a mariachi training is the best possible thing you could do for a student. I have no doubt that that’s the case,” he said. He explains that unfortunately, this ideology is controversial because of the racial implications that it holds. He argues that a white orchestra teacher saying what he said would be called a racist and accused of not acknowledging the importance of mariachi and its significance in our culture. Llanes further explained that orchestra programs are able to teach students over 400 years of musical knowledge that they will not get if they are in a mariachi program alone.

When it comes to discussing and developing college-level mariachi curriculums, the most important aspect in my opinion is creating a curriculum that allows students to gain extensive knowledge in mariachi style and technique while also learning how to effectively teach mariachi in public school programs. If college programs can get mariachi musicians prepared enough to effectively teach mariachi to younger generations, we can slowly start to rid ourselves of the general musical “weaknesses” that are associated with mariachi violinists and other instruments of the mariachi ensemble as well. I have made some suggestions about what beginning ensemble teaching needs to include, but what would a successful college mariachi curriculum look like? After gathering feedback from all of the interviewees as well as applying my own knowledge and experiences, I have a few concrete suggestions.

First and foremost, college mariachi curriculums should cater to mariachi musicians’ skill sets and build on them within the style of mariachi. Instead of trying to get rid of the style and techniques that mariachi musicians have learned throughout their experience in public school mariachi programs or even gigging groups, college educators should be prepared to help them grow their techniques and overall musicianship just like a conservatory would do for a classical

musician. This would mean that mariachi musicians would be able to take courses that are mariachi-specific. If violinists, for example, wanted to learn more about mariachi-specific style, which takes years of practice to develop, they should be able to take a mariachi violin style courses with someone who is knowledgeable on the subject. Mariachi students should also be able to choose mariachi as a major ensemble for a number of semesters if that is what they wish to do. That said, because we want students to be well-rounded musicians and have as many professional opportunities as possible in the future, playing in an orchestra should be encouraged as well. The idea here is to allow students the freedom to choose an ensemble that they think is going to benefit them in the future.

As far as academic courses, mariachi students should follow a degree plan that includes both classical and mariachi studies. Students should take piano courses, music theory, music history, and all of the other necessary courses that already part of current music education curriculums. However, these courses should include mariachi studies in their coursework as well. One option here would be for schools that offer mariachi degrees to work theory, history, and harmony, as it relates to mariachi, into their courses. The second option would be to offer standalone courses for those subjects, but that would require a professor who is solely dedicated to mariachi studies. In addition to those courses, though, degree-specific method and stylistic courses should be offered. In order to prepare students to teach mariachi-specific instruments like vihuela and guitarron, they need to take appropriate method courses from a skilled instructor on those instruments.

While I may have some suggestions for the more general aspects of the curriculum, there are many questions and issues that still arise when discussing college mariachi curriculums. Violin mariachi majors may face some challenges, but because violin is an instrument that is

taught at every music school, the situation should not be too difficult. On the other hand, instruments like vihuela and guitarrón are rarely seen in schools of music. Those are instruments that would require a lot more work in terms of creating curriculums and appropriate degree plans. Regarding solo recitals, should violinists, for example, be able to play solely mariachi for them if they are majoring in mariachi or should they have to prepare music from both classical and mariachi repertoire? This is one of the issues that still needs to be ironed out.

The biggest issue concerning college mariachi curriculums that I foresee is the question of who teaches the courses. While there may be individuals with doctoral degrees that are willing to teach mariachi courses, that does not mean they are the best fit to do so. This is something that violinists López and Fogelquist touched on in their interviews. López explained that the most knowledgeable teachers of mariachi style and technique are usually not individuals that have gone to universities to study music. He added that those who have spent years obtaining a Ph.D. probably have not performed in a long time. Fogelquist expressed similar concerns and expressed that the best people to teach mariachi are individuals who perform mariachi professionally and do not possess the educational qualifications that it would take to teach at a university. This creates problems because most university systems require that all faculty have at least the equivalent of a master's degree in order to teach. That said, this situation has come up many times in the past forty years at institutions that have hired "artists of distinction," (for example as masters of African drumming ensembles, or specialists in other non-Western traditions) and they have successfully found ways to fairly employ them. Hiring cultural specialists may be the solution that will provide the best learning opportunities for university-level students.

There are other issues to explore that were beyond the scope of this limited project. For example, future studies may want to include interviews with music faculty members at various institutions to collect their input on the topics discussed in this paper. Additionally, studies may incorporate comparison and critical evaluation of existing programs that include mariachi or other traditions outside of the classical realm.

I did not approach this research with the goal of providing a one-sided story. Instead, I was interested in learning about the struggles that folk musicians like mariachi violinists go through in a music education system that is Eurocentric in its roots. In the end, I ended up learning how to become a more successful educator for students of vernacular traditions like mariachi. On the question of whether there is educational equity for mariachi violinists in the current music education system, at this moment I would say that no, there is not. However, this is starting to change with addition of degree programs that cater to musicians of music traditions other than classical. As long as music educators are willing to keep an open mind and understand musics that might be unfamiliar to them, I have no doubt that college mariachi degree programs can and will be successful.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

CITED INTERVIEWS

Fogelquist, Monica. January 7, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

Garcia-Adame, Mayra. January 11, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

Llanes, Moises. June 30, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

López, Josué Eduardo. January 5, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

Martinez, Angelica. January 21, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

Rascon, Claudia. January 15, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

Vázquez, Jorge. March 18, 2021. Virtual interview with author through the communication application, Zoom.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Clyde Michael Guerra is a violinist, singer, and aspiring professional performer. He was born in McAllen, Texas and was raised in Roma, Texas, where his musical journey began at the age of nine in his elementary school's guitar ensemble. He started playing the violin in his middle school's mariachi program and continued to advance his violin skills in high school by performing with the award-winning Mariachi Nuevo Santander from Roma High School. Clyde graduated from Roma High School in 2015, ranking third in his class. He went on to pursue a Bachelor of Music in Violin Performance at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. While attending UTRGV, Clyde was a member of Mariachi Aztlán and traveled the country performing for audiences big and small. He also excelled in his classical violin studies and served as concertmaster of the UTRGV symphony orchestra. Clyde graduated with a Bachelor of Music in Violin Performance in May of 2019.

Shortly after completing his undergraduate degree, Clyde was awarded a Presidential Graduate Research Assistantship from UTRGV that allowed him to pursue a Master of Music in Violin Performance while simultaneously conducting the research found in this thesis. He completed the Master of Music in Violin Performance from UTRGV with a research thesis in August of 2021. He hopes to one day obtain his Ph.D. and teach music at the university level. Mr. Guerra can be contacted through email at clydeguerramusic@gmail.com.