

Mariachi Music Education in Diverse Teaching and Learning Contexts

by Leticia Isabel Soto Flores

University of California, Los Angeles

leticia@ucla.edu

Joint Conference of the AMS-Southwest Chapter & SEM-Southern Plains Chapter
Spring 2014

The University of Texas at Austin

Teaching Intangible Cultural Heritage

To keep traditions alive, intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community. As cultures are continuously adapted to the changing needs of modern society, so too are those traditions that, in order to transmit generations of knowledge and meaning to the following generations, must constantly succumb to the re-creation of skills and customs. Musical cultures all over the world have traditionally carried this out in a close community context, independent of formal education. Yet not only do traditions change; so do the educational systems in which knowledge and meaning are transmitted.

Towards the end of the 1960s, scholars began to question whether formal education systems respond, or not, to society's changing teaching and learning needs. In *World Crisis in Education* (originally published in 1968), Philip Coombs, the first director of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning, analyzes the education problem at a global level, concluding that teaching systems do not maintain the same pace alongside social and technological revolutions. The "crisis", for Coombs, is that such systems tend to lose the ability to adapt to social changes, such as globalization, gender equality, increased migration, and socio-cultural identification. These inevitably impact *how* musical traditions are to be passed on to next generations by reshaping the relations between distinct educational systems, such as formal, non-formal, and informal teaching and learning contexts.¹

Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire offers a more profound interpretation of consequences of social changes on education. For Freire, education can be interpreted as a reflection of society, but with the potential to offer profound and important social transformations. Using bank operations as a metaphor for teaching and learning, Freire shows how there is a contradiction between the responsibility to teach and the idea of educating, and how this results in a situation in which the educator simply "deposits" information in the "bank account" of the learner. In effect, he asserts that only with "dialogicity," which is the essence of education, can transmission of knowledge truly become a kind of social liberty.² In sum, educational systems must not ignore social realities. Instead, they should reflexively reformulate the relationship between various educational systems in order to maintain their relevance to their community.

¹ See Coombs, Philip H. *The World Crisis in Education: A System Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968 y *The World Crisis in Education: The View from the Eighties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985

² Freire, Paulo. *Educação e Conscientização: Extencionismo Rural*. Cuernavaca: CIDOC/Cuaderno 25, 1968 and *Pedagogia del Oprimido*, Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno de España Editores, 1970.

Now, turning the lens on the teaching and learning of mariachi music, we find that, although this is a tradition that has historically been transmitted aurally and informally from one generation to the next, it has also recently entered the realms of both non-formal and formal education. As with other popular musics that confronted the coming of the mass media, mariachi music also evolved along with the globalized culture industry. At the turn of the 20th century, select groups from Western Mexico traveled to the nation's capital to secure their space in a promising performance scene. Mariachi music became such an important expression that it was featured in all emerging media technologies. Accordingly, the music promoted by the culture industry prompted the idea that all mariachi ensembles evolved into the internationally broadcasted stereotypical image, which made rural expressions appear to be a mere tradition of the past. Despite the culture industry's manipulation of traditional musics and the demanding effects of globalization, there continues to be a mariachi tradition that, in Mexico, has succeeded in sustaining traditional characteristics. Mexican scholars refer to this as the "traditional mariachi", as opposed to the "modern" mariachi expression.

Traditionally, the safeguarding of "traditional mariachi" music depended entirely on informal aural transmission, in a close community context, independent of formal education. Today, with the growing powers of globalization, the traditional mariachi expression is threatened and may be on the road towards becoming an endangered musical practice. For these traditional mariachi groups, the sustainability of tradition may not always be possible without a cultural policy at the state, national, or even international level.

In 2011, "Mariachi: string music, song, and trumpet" was among eighteen new items of intangible world heritage to be added to the *Representative List of the Intangible Culture of Humanity* by UNESCO. The Department of Popular Cultures of the State of Jalisco, under the auspice of the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA), created the National Committee for the Safeguarding of Mariachi with the aim of proposing an action plan that would secure funds for the safeguarding and revitalization of the mariachi tradition as a whole. Although the national plan is still under review (I am one of its reviewing members), the objectives are fourfold:

- To design, implement, and follow up on cultural policy measures and projects that would sustain mariachi social spaces and musical practices;
- To support mariachi musical research in order to contribute to the knowledge of the tradition;
- To create and sustain educational spaces and funding for formal and non formal musical transmission; and
- To strengthen the respect and dignity given by artists by vindicating mariachi music's artistic value.

In this respect, safeguarding traditions does not mean that they are frozen in time. Rather, that in order to continue on as living traditions, intangible cultural heritage, I insist, must be relevant to its community.

The problem arises with the fact that there are two different kinds of mariachi musical traditions in coexistence: "traditional mariachi" and "modern mariachi." The question must be asked: if what is being transmitted to the following generations is key to safeguarding of traditions, what are the sustainability options for the mariachi tradition as a whole? Only by understanding *what* is being revitalized can musicians and educators prepare *how* the music is going to be transmitted to the next generations. To better

approach a panoramic understanding of the mariachi tradition, I propose to look at three different teaching and learning contexts: the informal, non-formal, and formal.

On informal transmission

Musical knowledge in the mariachi tradition has been historically passed on to following generations through lived experience in unsystematic practices, and generally within the context of a participatory group of community or family members in a learning-by-doing context. It has involved important non-musical motivations for learning, such as the expression of a community's identity and cultural knowledge. The first mariachi group directors and musicians to enter the popular Mexican music scene in Mexico City at the turn of the 20th century, such as Gaspar Vargas and his son Silvestre, or Cirilo Marmolejo and his nephew José and grandson Santos, had inherited their mariachi tradition from generations past. Without any form of written music, the only way for them to learn the mariachi repertory was by playing it repeatedly.

Mariachi musicians did not originally read music because there was no need to do so. In the mid 1930s, young Miguel Martínez (b. 1921) first heard mariachi music on Mexican radio, before trumpets were officially accepted in mariachi instrumentation. He did not come from a musical family. When a local mariachi group director saw his fascination with the music, he urged Miguel to learn to play the trumpet so that he could perform with his group. He soon succeeded in purchasing his first used trumpet and in having a local saxophone player teach him the trumpet fingerings and major scales. After Miguel Martínez learned his first three songs from the music he heard on the radio, he began playing with the local mariachi group and realized that some of the pieces he learned were in a different key! While the music he performed might be associated with the modern mariachi musical tradition, he acquired the knowledge and customs through an informal educational process.

This learning-by-doing context taught him that, in addition to the melodies learned and the need to improvise upon given repertory, he was also required to know how to transpose music, continuously and almost spontaneously. Due to his perseverance and musical talent, Miguel Martínez sought to complement his knowledge with non-formal musical education, and was later invited to form part of the world-renowned Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán as their first trumpet player.



Image 1: Miguel Martínez, first trumpeter for Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

While Miguel Martínez did not come from a family of musicians, listening to this music on the radio was his access to the tradition, and the informal learning-by-doing context did not change soon after he joined Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

Non-formal mariachi teaching and learning

The end of the Mexican Revolution, in the 1920s, brought social changes that also impacted the learning situation for mariachi music. First, there was a political need to promote a national Mexican identity, and second, there were emerging technologies as a tool to successfully achieve this. As mariachi music gained national presence on live radio programs, mariachi groups such as Mariachi Tapatío de José Marmolejo and Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán were invited to accompany a growing number of Mexican iconic figures in Mexico City.



Image 2: Mariachi Tapatío, directed by José Marmolejo.



Image 3: Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, directed by Silvestre Vargas.

In a personal interview, renowned violinist and musical arranger Jesús Rodríguez de Hajar (b. 1920) recalled that when he first arrived in Mexico City from Tequila, Jalisco, in the 1940s, Mariachi Tapatío de José Marmolejo was the most acclaimed group because their violinists were the same as those from the renowned *Orquesta Típica*, directed by Miguel Lerdo de Tejada.



Image 4: Jesús Rodríguez de Hajar, as a child, and later, as the musical director of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

For Rodríguez de Hajar, it was not enough to know how to play mariachi music with the proper style; he also believed that one had to study music in order to reach higher standards of performance and meet the growing demands of the music industry.

Upon first entering the music industry performance space, and before the use of written music for a mariachi ensemble, musical producers or directors played each instrument's part on the piano, or on a mariachi instrument, one by one, until each musician memorized their part, and memorized all the songs they were going to accompany. By the mid 1940s, the increasing demand for a rapidly growing repertory and new musical arrangements sustained that aural learning-by-doing was a process that took too long. Aural transmission in this sense was not only inefficient; it was impossible.

As a result, not only did mariachi group directors begin to write music in modern

notation, but they also needed musicians who could read it. Many musicians quickly complimented the learning-by-doing transmission by studying with private instructors. Mariachi violinists in Mexico City, for example, studied with concert violinists Elías Breeskin, father of the famous Olga Breeskin, and Agustín Fuentes, father of the renowned Rubén Fuentes. In addition to learning instrumental and vocal technique with private instructors, mariachi musicians also enrolled in music schools to learn music theory and harmony.

The need for multiple skilled mariachi musicians in professional ensembles consequently led to a demand for non-formal education, which generally includes the knowledge and abilities learned in the kind of systematic instruction characteristic of schools, yet outside an official school curriculum, such as private or group lessons and workshops. These learning opportunities are often short-term and tend to work towards a specific goal. To compete on a professional level, musicians were also compelled to know music theory and to sing a broad repertory with an adequate vocal technique that was at once strong and supported as well as musically accurate.

Formal mariachi music education

Formal music education, on the other hand, follows an approved curriculum and takes place in an established institution such as a school or university. In the United States, the first attempts to institutionalize mariachi music into formal educational spaces extends back to the early 1960s at UCLA, when ethnomusicology doctoral student Donald Borchardt sought the implementation of the first mariachi courses in an educational setting, which later led to the formation of university mariachi ensembles. Today, educational mariachi programs are found in diverse academic spaces in the United States, including elementary schools, secondary schools, specialized music schools, community colleges, and universities. While there are a growing number of educational mariachi programs offered in American universities, only few programs offer a degree certifying formal education in mariachi music.

One example of a formal curriculum is the Associate Degree program in Arts at Southwestern College, Chula Vista, designed by Jeff Nevin, which offers formal music education in a two-year program, with a Specialization in Mariachi Music. Texas State University also offers an M.A. in Latin Music, also with a Specialization in Mariachi Music. Both seek to offer mariachi music students a more comprehensive mariachi music education. It is important to note, however, that not all mariachi music learning in formal institutions constitutes formal mariachi music education. A formal university mariachi musical experience is typically an ensemble course for students who already know the basics of their instrument.

In Mexico, the first school to offer a formal mariachi music curriculum is the Escuela de Mariachi Ollin Yoliztli en Garibaldi, which consists of a three-year program that grants a Professional Technical Degree in Mariachi Music Performance.³ The objective is to acquire what can be gained from a formal teaching and learning context, without losing sight of the rich and unique mariachi style. The danger is that, in a formal educational space, musicians tend to lose the "dialogicity" of teaching and learning within a community, and the music runs the risk of becoming a bank account of mere

³ I was appointed the director of this school during the fall of 2012, when the school officially opened.

musical information. Yet renowned musicians like Jesús Rodríguez de Hajar are convinced that informal education is not enough: mariachi music today demands formal musical preparation without neglecting the stylistic importance of this tradition.

Formal education with non-formal aesthetic values

While it is becoming more common for mariachi music to be taught in formal settings, these educational programs supplement, rather than replace, the learning that occurs in informal environments. Teachers working in formal mariachi programs acknowledge the critical importance of growing up in a mariachi performance climate, listening to it on a regular basis, having access to information that enriches one-on-one tutorials with experienced musicians.

Some Mexican scholars, in defense of the transmission of the "traditional mariachi" expression, oppose the institutionalization of formal "modern mariachi" music education. They argue that the existence of a mariachi school goes against the essence of mariachi music's tradition: as vernacular music, without a formal academy, rooted in regional oral expressions, and passed on to the next generations through family traditions.

When I was asked to present the educational project that is now the Escuela de Mariachi Ollin Yoliztli en Garibaldi, I thought a lot about the risks of institutionalization, and how a standardization of musical repertoire, style, and knowledge might do more harm than good to this centuries-long tradition. Despite the desire of many mariachi musicians on Plaza Garibaldi to have a mariachi music school, my project was, and continues to be, highly criticized by scholars and defenders of the so-called "traditional mariachi" expression. These non-practitioners critique efforts to preserve and teach mariachi music in a formal setting because, according to them, the "modern mariachi" expression was entirely invented by the mass media, and is not worthy of these formal efforts.

On more than one occasion, I have been summoned to official meetings, only to be publically criticized by scholars and some politicians who reject the project I direct. Some of these researchers have even come point of laughing at the idea that a mariachi musician can receive a technical degree. It is difficult for them to think that formal mariachi music education, in addition to professionalizing the music, can offer its students a sense of cultural pride, self-esteem, and musical growth.

These scholars have recommended that the Escuela de Mariachi Ollin Yoliztli en Garibaldi should offer "traditional mariachi" education (they don't specify non-formal or formal), because that is the tradition that is worthy of preserving, given that it is the one at risk. I have defended this project explaining that using a formal educational space to institutionalize "traditional mariachi" music, in one of the largest cities in the world, would remove it from its traditional social context forever.

The path paved by lesson plans for a formal curriculum may not be the only way to ensure a professional musical career for today's musicians. Complementing their musical life with non-formal and informal education could offer a more holistic formation, such that the relationship between teaching and learning results in a continuous and productive dialogue. Taking a deeper look at this reality might help avoid future decisions that would be adverse for the musical culture at risk. In retrospect, the mariachi music that is being institutionalized at the Escuela de Mariachi Ollin Yoliztli en

Garibaldi is part of the evolution that mariachi music has undergone throughout its history, and throughout the social changes that led mariachi music towards Mexico City, and the rest of the world.