

The Mariachi Tradition in Nochistlán, Zacatecas

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Introduction: Mariachi Identity

Research studies on the historical development of the mariachi tradition have largely been framed within identity formation. Through the broad, post-revolutionary social currents in Mexico, mariachi transformed from rural regional peasant music to a global symbol for Mexican national identity, which in turn has been re-imagined within immigrant and Mexican-American communities in the US. The consequence of this transformation has been the popular notion of mariachi representing a homogenous socio-cultural identity, recognizable through its musical performance. Ethnographic evidence suggests mariachi contains diverse regional-centric socio-cultural identities grounded in reciprocal audience/performer musical semiotics. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how mariachi performance is indicative of distinct socio-cultural musical identities that are context-based and in Mexico can be most closely associated with regional *patrias chicas* (little countries). Utilizing Thomas Turino's concept of participatory/presentational performance and his understanding of Peirce's theory of semiotics, I suggest that mariachi performance in Nochistlán, Zacatecas signifies socio-cultural identity through qualitative musical characteristics that are enhanced by the ritualized participatory nature of performance framed as authentic rural culture.

Lying in the southern-most tip of the state of Zacatecas is the Municipality of *Nochistlán de Mejía*, known as *la tierra de los músicos* (the land of the musicians). Music making in Nochistlán is familial with many organized musical groups containing different generations of family participants enriching the social life of its citizens. This suggests that music is central to how *Nochistlaneros* define their individual and collective identities. Mexico has a long-standing history of regionalism politically, economically, and culturally. Regionalism, framed within the concept of the *patrias chicas* (little countries), coined by Post-1960s Mexican historiography¹, reflects unique and distinct characteristics with regional pride paramount in the expression of local identities. Concepts of identity and culture have been foundational to the study of music as social life.² Turino states that, "general theories about artistic practices and expressive cultural practices ... begin with a conception of the self and individual identity, because it is in living, breathing individuals that 'culture' and musical meaning ultimately reside."³ This idea provides the impetus for examining how mariachi shapes regional identity.

¹ Carmen Ramos, "Myth and Method in Modern Mexican Historiography." Rev. of *Invitación a la Microhistoria*, by Luís González, *Latin American Research Review* 13 No. 2 (1978): 296.

² Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 95.

³ Ibid.

Recent scholarship has focused mainly on the innovation of mariachi within modern, urban spaces, overlooking the rich, vibrant rural tradition central to its historical development and actively visible within Nochistlán musicians and ensembles. My own experiences both as a working mariachi musician and teacher spurred my interest in the rural aspects of mariachi performance. Originally from San Antonio, I have played with a number of musicians from Nochistlán and surrounding areas in Zacatecas. Upon moving to North Texas and working with various mariachi groups, I became aware of the large Nochistlán immigrant population in Fort Worth. Within the mariachi industry, Nochistlán maintains a strong reputation, not only for high quality musicianship, but also perceived authentic “*conocimiento*”⁴ - a valuable commodity in mariachi performance. *Conocimiento* literally means knowledge and among mariachi musicians it references a complete awareness of all facets of mariachi performance both musical and socio-cultural that make-up perceived authenticity. The notion of authenticity, among musicians and audience, is closely tied to mariachi expressive practices, particularly in areas where performance is participatory and utilizes musical semiotics.

Semiotic Theory and Socio-Cultural Musical Identity

The American philosopher and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) defined the concept of sign as something that stands for something else to someone in some specific way. This interaction, described as semiosis, contains three basic elements: (1) the sign, something representing something else to someone; (2) the object, the ‘something else,’ whether abstract or concrete; and (3) the interpretant, the effect on the perceiver, created by mentally associating the sign and object together. Three basic classes of effects are created by the sign-object relationship. The first, an emotional interpretant, is a direct instinctual sense, feeling, or sentiment caused by a sign. The second type is an energetic interpretant, a physical reaction caused by a sign. In mariachi music, an example of this would be the characteristic shouts or yells exuberated by both musicians and/or audience members when particular songs are performed or heard. The third type is a sign-interpretant, which is a linguistic-based concept. Peirce further developed three trichotomies analyzing different aspects of a sign and the distinct types of relationships between the three basic components (sign-object-interpretant).

The first trichotomy describes the type of sign: *qualisign* is a pure quality embedded in a sign; *sinsign* is the actual specific instance of a sign; and *legisign* classifies the sign as a general type. The second trichotomy specifies the ways a sign and object are related by a perceiver: icon, refers to a sign that is related to its object through some type of resemblance between them; index, refers to a sign that is related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience, such as Peirce’s famous example of smoke serving as an index of fire; and symbol, used in a way that is actively divorced from standard usages, is a sign related to its object through the use of language. The third trichotomy describes the ways a given sign is interpreted as representing its object: rheme is a sign representing its object as a qualitative possibility without (in itself) asserting a truth or falsity of the object’s existence; dicent, represents an object in respect to its actual existence; and argument, is largely within the linguistic domain and not relevant to this

⁴ Russell C. Rodríguez, “Cultural Production, Legitimation, and the Politics of Aesthetics: Mariachi Transmission, Practice, and Performance in the United States,” (PhD diss. University of California Santa Cruz, 2006): 3.

analysis. Rhemes and dicent signs are foundational to artistic practice and meaning,⁵ as they best represent their objects through performance that is not linguistically based. Combinations from each of the three trichotomies form the basis of sign interpretation indexing regional identity and the participatory nature of mariachi performance in Nochistlán.

Participatory and Presentational Performance

There is a clear separation of participatory and presentational performance traditions dichotomously based on the types of activity, artistic roles, values, goals, and people involved in specific instances of music making. Further, the goals, values, practices, and styles of performance are contextually shaped by their conception of ideologies, reception and purposes of music within a particular field. Steven Pearlman, in describing different work contexts, identified the “show mariachi,”⁶ as most closely resembling presentational performance, where the audience is passive in music making, actively engaged in listening to the music as art and watching the performance as dramatic theater. Performances of ranchera singers, accompanied by mariachi, regularly consumed through television, radio, film and commercial recordings, have historically shaped the aspects of participatory performance context. Artists such as Vicente Fernández, Antonio Aguilar, Lucha Villa, or enumerable others, regularly performed in live concerts lasting sometimes in excess of 4 hours. The role of a mariachi as an accompanying ensemble is cemented in the popular consciousness of traditional Mexican society. Therefore it is a strong cultural expectation that a mariachi will be competent in performing audience-mandated repertoire, as well as in the “art of accompanying”.

Mariachi in general, is strongly presentational, however in Nochistlán, participation takes the form of audience-mandated repertoire dictating what the musicians will perform. This is highly distinct from presentational “show” mariachi groups, who use a “scripted” playlist to highlight technicality, virtuosity, and dramatic interpretation. In Nochistlán, what might be labeled as “sequential participatory music,”⁷ in which everyone takes a turn alone or in smaller groups, performing for other people in the event, involves audience members participating in live karaoke-style singing accompanied by the musicians. Because traditional Mexican mariachi musicians learn through ritualized aural transmission of recordings, by artists “iconicized” within the popular consciousness, repertoire becomes sacralized, representing the “authentic style of interpretation”. In an interview with Juan Carlos Nolasco, trumpet player for Mariachi Internacional Los Perez de Nochistlán Zacatecas, I asked him how important was repertoire knowledge to the mariachi tradition (Juan C. Nolasco, personal communication, October 10, 2013). His response was that it was the most essential part and that most musicians, like himself begin playing with a small amount of repertoire knowledge consisting of 10-15 songs. Through the course of playing in ranches and pueblos, he would encounter requests that he did not know. Whenever he was unfamiliar with a song, he would write it down in order to “study it” later through recordings as there were no teachers. He described spending hours upon hours listening to mariachi albums when he first began learning mariachi, in a systematic repetitive approach,

⁵ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 95.

⁶ Steven Ray Pearlman, “Mariachi Music in Los Angeles,” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1988).

⁷ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 50.

“looking for the notes”, especially when his father was not present to teach him. Musicians, who have been trained through the rites of aural/oral transmission of repertoire, gain an inherent understanding of the cultural symbolism and mythology attached to mariachi recordings, creating coded behavior. This is also true of non-performers, or audience members who have recognized these meanings through the popular consciousness. The social interaction between audience and musician forms the basis for the culturally encoded behavior at the core of participatory performance. Mariachi by its very nature is presentational, as it involves a group of skilled musicians performing for an audience, but the ritualized nature of audience-mandated repertoire combined with accompanied singing represents a continuum from participatory to presentational that is context-centric and socio-culturally grounded.

Sonido Campirano de Nochistlán

Cesar Jauregui is a well-regarded trumpet player from Juchipila, Zacatecas, a pueblo situated a few miles Northeast of Nochistlán. Now based in San Antonio, he has performed with numerous ensembles throughout the US and Mexico, including the renowned Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. He takes great pride in the musical traditions of Zacatecas and knows the Nochistlán region well. According to Jauregui, rural identity is framed through authentic performance, in part, characterized by a stylistic phrasing referred to as *el sonido campirano* or “rural sound” (Cesar Jauregui, pers. comm.). Campirano is an adjective synonymous with *campesino* – the rural peasant, who lives in the countryside – *el campo*. El sonido campirano is reflected in instrumental articulation and/or vocal accent stylization. According to Jauregui, “the phrasing of a trumpet player or vocalist from Nochistlán would be different from that of a performer from another region” (Cesar Jauregui, pers. comm.). The colloquial accent of a singer’s voice, as well as the timbre, vibrato, and tonguing technique of a trumpet player can vary regionally. Taken literally these musical characteristics can be signified as dicent-indexical-legisigns, referencing a rural socio-cultural identity perceived through performance aesthetics. They are dicent because the “characteristic timbres” of the instruments, or voices, are recognizable as pointing to a particular region, just as the weather vane represented wind direction. They are related to their object through co-occurrence in actual experience (a musician or ensemble from Nochistlán) and therefore indexical. Because the sounds are of a particular “type” (mariachi), they are legisigns.

Nochistlán in Texas

Nochistlaneros comprise a large majority among the Zacatecas immigrant population in Fort Worth. The Zacatecas population in Fort Worth is a close-knit community, with many families related to each other or from the same pueblos in Mexico. Maintaining strong cultural ties to their native regional identity, they pool resources, and each year, bring Mariachi Internacional Los Perez de Nochistlán, for a week of performances in various private local venues. Los Perez is very well known among professional mariachi musicians and aficionados but does not have the same commercial status as other more renowned groups. I asked Cesar why community members in Fort Worth would bring a group from Nochistlán as opposed to a local mariachi. In fact the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex has a number of mariachi ensembles made up of immigrant mariachi musicians, many from Jalisco who might be familiar with the repertoire since it is the neighboring state to Zacatecas. Cesar pointed to the rural campirano culture of Nochistlán and its significance referenced through Los Perez.

No somos modernos que vamos a escuchar a el Vargas o el Sol de Mexico. Al contrario, somos los mal preparados. No somos doctores ni abogados, somos la gente del rancho y queremos escuchar lo nuestro. Una trompetista como Martín (Díaz Muñoz) de Los Perez no va a frasear como uno de los del Vargas. El tiene un sonidazo bien campirano igual los cantantes también van a cantar diferente con el estilo ranchero. Y también Los Perez no es un mariachi de escenario. No, no, ellos su preparación es mejor para cumplir con lo que quiere escuchar la gente.

Rather than provide a direct translation, I summarize Cesar's comments that in comparison to the more recognizable, well-known groups, such as Mariachi Vargas, or the US based Mariachi Sol de Mexico, Los Perez represents the rural identity of Nochistlán. They are an immigrant population of "uneducated ones," not doctors or lawyers, but rural campesinos appreciating, valuing, preserving their rural regionalism musically, and colloquially distinguishing it from the more cosmopolitan identity embodied by mainstream commercial mariachi performance, as represented by an ensemble like Mariachi Vargas. The participation of the audience becomes significantly important to the context framed by Cesar's characterization that Los Perez is not a "show mariachi,"⁸ lacking theatrical panache. Their preparation is context-centric, focusing on the participatory needs of the audience through both stylistic interpretation and regional repertoire orientation. "When signs, in this case a musical style [characterized by Los Perez], are interpreted as organically emerging out of a particular social position [rural un-educated ones], they function as dicent-indices which are really affected by their object, ... the social position itself."⁹ The music is experienced directly as real signs of an existing identity, perceived as authentic, by indexing its musical qualities. Because the ensemble is of a general type of phenomenon ("a mariachi ensemble"), seen and heard before, culturally accessing a previous frame of reference, it is a legisign (a sign classifying a general type). Understanding the function of the sign is the key to its power in the perceiver.

I attended two performances by Los Perez, one in a restaurant, set-up in a cabaret style, with reserved seating and dinner included. The second was a free community concert by invitation only, held in a vacated church hall owned by a Fort Worth transnational Nochistlán business owner. The close-knit familial community was evident in both performances, with various musician family members, living in Fort Worth, in attendance. The restaurant performance felt more like a date-night type of event while the church hall represented a cross-generational community celebration. Two distinct indexical features were prominent in both performances.

First was the level of audience participation. In both performances 98% of the repertoire was audience requests. Although much of the repertoire was "standard" (considered part of a commercial mariachi cannon), there were many songs I was unfamiliar with, which were obviously recognizable by the audience through lyrics indexing the region of Zacatecas. The musicians themselves would participate in energetic banter with the audience soliciting requests and inviting audience members up to sing. It was inherently understood that any audience

⁸ To understand more about the show mariachi context see Pearlman, "Mariachi in Los Angeles", (1988).

⁹ Thomas Turino, "Signs of Imagination, Identity and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music," *Ethnomusicology* 43, No. 2 (Spring 1999): 247.

member could request to sing with the mariachi. In some cases these audience members could have been professional singers in their own right. Although on the surface this seems more of a presentational style of performance, I suggest that the strong influence of audience-generated repertoire empowers and increases the participatory potential. This reiterates the saliency of mariachi performance, from participatory to presentational, depending on the environmental socio-cultural contexts.

Secondly, Los Perez played with a style more rustic, aggressive, *con mucho colmillo* (non-literal translation meaning “with maturity and professional sound”) and recognizable dicent-indexical signs. I would note that mariachi music also acts as an emotional/energetic dicent-indexical sign through the eliciting of shouts and whistles from the audience, especially when songs were played with direct references to Nochistlán. Known literally as “gritos”, the sonic qualities of these verbal exclamations, elicited as well by the musicians, can vary acting as indexical of rural regional identity. They possess characteristics musically contributing to a song, increasing participatory potential and exemplifying how indexical signs combine roles, maintaining a “duplex structure.”¹⁰ The symbol associated with the object, in this case a “grito,” possesses two dimensions of meaning – iconically representing the object (perceived authentic performance identity) through a semantical rule of likeness (literal meaning – a yell) and being symbolically linked as well, through its sonic qualities to the music aesthetic. Vocal styling, as well, contains multiple duplex structures indexing rural identity. Jeannette Rodríguez, in her work on mestiza spirituality, describes social identities as consequences of social categorization that includes nationality, language, race, ethnicity and skin color, with language being second only to skin color.¹¹ Lyrical content of the music repertoire referencing Zacatecas in combination with the regional dialectical accent/vocal styling, reinforces the authenticity perceived by the audience. This music “is” Nochistlán, semantically and existentially. The repetitive context ritualizes the performance and as Rappaport argued “participation in ritual signifies ... indexically the acceptance of whatever is represented.”¹²

Conclusion

It is evident that in Nochistlán music is a central part of cultural identity, unifying community and family. More importantly this identity reflects the rural nature of life in Nochistlán, creating a frame of reference embodied through mariachi performance. Signifying music’s affective potential to construct socio-cultural identity provides a powerful tool for re-examining popular notions of homogeneity in mariachi performance. What is revealed is that musical characteristics of mariachi performance are not the same everywhere and are regionally context-centric, reflecting the cultures in which they are created and performed in. Nochistláneros index a socio-cultural identity embodied in the rural sounds created instrumentally and vocally. Participatory performance through audience-mandated repertoire, accompanied singing and energetic interpretants, strengthens the perception by Nochistlaneros of an authentic musical culture. Nochistlán immigrants in Fort Worth have carried over their

¹⁰ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985): 156.

¹¹ Jeannette Rodríguez, “Mestiza Spirituality: Community, Ritual and Justice,” *Theological Studies*, 65 no. 2 (June 2004): 330.

¹² Roy Rappaport, “Ritual, Time and Eternity,” *Zyon*, 27 no. 1 (March 1992): 6.

regional identity, actively recreating it through cultural activities, strongly evidenced through the tour organized by Los Perez.

Most striking is that mariachi music abounds in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex, yet the Nochistlán immigrant community seeks to bring an ensemble from Zacatecas, representing a more authentic culture bearer. I conclude that rural familial ties, regional culture and identity, referencing a larger Mexican cultural aesthetic, is strong and vibrant among the Nochistlán immigrant population in Ft. Worth. Mariachi represents authentic culture for Nochistláneros but is contingent on a specific context, characterized through stylistic interpretation and repertoire knowledge acting “as *sonic authority*.”¹³ Arising from this research, is a broader question, of how cultural negotiation and divergent dialogues intersect with Mexican-American communities in Ft. Worth, including subsequent generations of Nochistlaneros. What remains is an interesting case study illustrating the heterogeneity of Mexican regional identity and culture. Particularly interesting is how authentic culture is defined, both culturally and musically, within the mariachi tradition.

¹³ Helen Phelan, "Borrowed Space, Embodied Sound: The Sonic Potential of New Ritual Communities in Ireland," *Journal Of Ritual Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006): 19.

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