



Smithsonian Folkways

Chips and Salsa: A Taste of Mariachi Music for the High School Orchestra

A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson

Designed by: Elizabeth J. Knighton
University of Washington

Summary:

Through this set of lesson segments, students will engage with the mariachi music of Mexico through discussing audio and video clips, listening to individual instruments within the ensemble and imitating them by ear, and through playing an arranged mariachi piece. Extensions can lead to analysis of formal elements within the music, further study of the culture from which this music originates, or contact with culture-bearing mariachi musicians.

Suggested Grade Levels: 9-12

Country: Mexico

Region: North America

Culture Group: Mexican

Genre: Mariachi

Instruments: Orchestra

Language: Spanish

Co-Curricular Areas: Social Studies, Spanish

National Standards: 2, 5, 6, 7, 9

Prerequisites: For Segments 2 and 3, intermediate to advanced playing ability on orchestral string instruments

Objectives:

- Learn about the history of one facet of Mexican folk music
- Consider ways in which mariachi serves as a symbol of Mexican culture outside of Mexico

Materials:

- Various tracks from *Mariachi Music of Mexico* and other Folkways Records
- Full set of orchestral instruments

Lesson Segments:

- 1. A Taste of the Musical Culture** (National Standards 6, 7, 9)
- 2. A Taste of the Musical Instruments** (National Standards 2, 6)
- 3. A Taste of the Performance Style** (National Standards 2, 5, 7)
- 1. A Taste of the Musical Culture**

- **Objective:**
 - Learn about the history of mariachi music through listening to historical recordings from rural and urban areas of Mexico

- **Materials:**
 - Sound Recording: “From Monterey,” track 101 on *Mariachi Music of Mexico*, various artists collected by Cook and Eskin. Cook Records/Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 1954. Available at: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/mariachi-music-of-mexico/latin-world/music/album/smithsonian>
 - Sound Recording: “El Carretero,” track 204 on *Mariachi Music of Mexico*, performed by Basilio Garcia and Band. Cook Records/Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 1954. Available at: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/basilio-garcia-and-band/el-carretero/latin-world/music/track/smithsonian>
 - Sound Recording: “Se me hizo fácil,” track 103 on *iViva el Mariachi!: Nati Cano’s Mariachi Los Camperos*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2002. Available at: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/nati-canos-mariachi-los-camperos/viva/latin-world/music/album/smithsonian>
 - Liner Notes to: *Mariachi Music of Mexico*, Cook Records/Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 1954. Available for free download at: http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/cook/COOK05014.pdf
 - Liner Notes to: *iLlegaron Los Camperos!: Concert Favorites of Nati Cano’s Mariachi Los Camperos*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2005. Download at: http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/smithsonian_folkways/SFW40459.pdf
 - Video: Nati Cano and the Mariachi Los Camperos perform “México Lindo” at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, 2004. View here: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/mexico-lindo/latin/music/video/smithsonian>
 - audio/visual equipment for playing the sound recording and the video
 - map of Mexico

- **Procedure:**
 - a. Listen to “From Monterey.” What instruments do you hear? How would you describe the style exhibited here? Have you heard anything like this before?
 - b. Listen to “El Carretero” and “Se me hizo fácil.” How are these recordings different from each other and from the first? Do they all sound like the same style? Why or why not? (Refer to the liner

notes for *Mariachi Music of Mexico* to guide the discussion after initial brainstorming.)

- c. Discuss a short history of mariachi music (reference the liner notes to *iLlegaron Los Camperos!: Concert Favorites of Nati Cano's Mariachi Los Camperos*). Talk about the way that mariachi has moved from being a rural folk music in Mexico to having a place in urban concert halls as an international symbol of the Mexican culture. Use pictures or maps as desired.
- d. Watch Mariachi Los Camperos performing “México Lindo” on the short three-minute video. Why do you think mariachi has come to symbolize Mexican culture across the United States? How does this performance communicate pride about participation in the Mexican culture? What is the image being portrayed? Talk about the text, the dress, the enthusiasm. Invite students to share about past experiences with mariachi, if applicable.

Assessment: Students will participate in discussion of the three listening/viewing experiences, and show understanding through correctly identifying significant differences among them and speculating about the meaning of these differences.

2. A Taste of Musical Instruments

- **Prerequisite:** Intermediate to advanced playing ability on orchestral string instruments
- **Objective:** Listen for each instrumental line and play sections of the melody or accompaniment by ear on their orchestra instruments
- **Materials:**
 - Sound Recording: “San Miguel el Alto,” track 102 on *iViva el Mariachi!: Nati Cano's Mariachi Los Camperos*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2002. Available at: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/nati-canos-mariachi-los-camperos/viva/latin-world/music/album/smithsonian>
 - Pictures of a vihuela and guitarrón
 - Audio/visual equipment for playing sound recordings
 - Orchestral string instruments
- **Procedure:**
 - a. Look at pictures of the vihuela and guitarrón. Discuss their special tuning, and the role that they play in the mariachi ensemble. (See the references section below for many good books which cover this issue.)
 - b. Listen to “San Miguel el Alto” as performed by Mariachi Los Camperos on *iViva el Mariachi*, track 102. Listen for the discrete instrumental lines.

- c. Try to sing along with each instrumental line, one at a time. Listen to the song again as desired. The opening violin/trumpet line is an easy place to start, with the opening guitarrón bass line as the next step.
- d. Have each student figure out a measure or phrase, by ear, on his/her instrument. Talk about how in its folk context, this music is learned aurally, with no notation.
- e. See how much of each instrumental line the students can “decode” by ear.

Assessment: Students will engage with the listening experience by applying it to their instruments. Watch for involvement and perseverance in those who do not get it right away.

3. Taste of the Performance Style

- **Prerequisites:**
 - Intermediate to advanced playing ability on orchestral string instruments
 - Note-reading ability
- **Objective:**
 - Perform an arrangement of a mariachi *canción ranchera*, and consider elements of the classic mariachi performing style
- **Materials:**
 - Sound Recording: “San Miguel el Alto,” track 102 on *iViva el Mariachi!: Nati Cano’s Mariachi Los Camperos*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2002. Available at: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/nati-canos-mariachi-los-camperos/viva/latin-world/music/album/smithsonian>
 - Video: Performance of the Mariachi Los Camperos and interview with Nati Cano at the Viva el Mariachi Festival in Fresno, CA. Smithsonian Institution, 2007. Available at: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/what-makes-good-mariachi/latin-spoken-word-world/music/video/smithsonian>
 - Sheet music for “San Miguel el Alto” arranged by Elizabeth J. Knighton (attached)
 - Orchestral string instruments
 - Audio/visual equipment for listening to sound recording and watching video clip
- **Procedure:**
 - a. Listen to the “San Miguel el Alto” sound recording again, this time following along on the sheet music. (Note that in general, though

not as a rule, the first violins play the violin part, the second violins play the trumpet part, the violas play the vihuela harmony, cellos play the vocal melody, and the basses play the guitarrón bass line. The arrangement follows the first forty seconds of the song.)

- b.** Learn the parts and play “San Miguel el Alto” as a string orchestra.
- c.** Watch the two-minute video of Nati Cano talking about what makes a good mariachi, and pay attention to the footage of Mariachi Los Camperos in addition to the interview portions. Discuss with students: What do you notice about this performance style? How is it different from the way you do concerts? What elements of this performance style could you incorporate while playing “San Miguel el Alto”? (e.g. memorize the music, play standing up (except cellos), be intentional about facial expressions, enthusiasm, and posture while playing, etc.)
- d.** Incorporate some of these performance elements while playing “San Miguel el Alto” in your classroom or in performance.

Assessment: Students will accurately play “San Miguel el Alto” and will participate in consideration of the performance style that is a part of the mariachi culture.

Extensions:

- Invite a mariachi musician to come visit your classroom, or arrange for the class to attend a performance of a local mariachi group.
- Obtain a guitarrón and vihuela and learn to play the harmonic parts on the authentic instruments.
- Learn about different the different musical forms used in mariachi (*canción ranchera*, *polca*, etc.) and use a selection of recordings to analyze and discuss musical form.
- Research other Mexican musical genres and styles, such as *corridos* and *conjunto*. Compare and contrast with mariachi. Discuss the way in which each has symbolized association with Mexican culture for those who participate in that musical culture.
- Examine the social issues surrounding mariachi, for example the social standing of mariachi musicians and how that has changed over time, the involvement of women in mariachi music, or the role of mariachi music in social events among Mexican Americans in the United States.