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Nurturing the New Mariachitos

After a Decade Uptown, the Mariachi Academy of New York Expands Its Horizons

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**



Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

The academy's director, Ramón Ponce Jr., leads instruction.

"Like Slash," said Sergio Ramirez, 12, after peeling off a riff from the Guns N' Roses song "Sweet Child o' Mine" on his acoustic guitar. "Yeah!"

"You should see him do that dressed in a mariachi outfit," said Ramón Ponce Jr., a music instructor with something other than rock songs on his mind.

They were together last week for class at the Mariachi Academy of New York, which Mr. Ponce, who is 36, launched as a small outreach program for 40 children in 2002. Now celebrating its 10th anniversary, the nonprofit academy is home to 120 students, ages 7 to 17, who come from all over the city to take classes on weeknights at St. Paul's School in East Harlem.

Lessons are free. Subjects for seven different classes include trumpet, harp, music theory

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and violin. The mission statement emphasizes "language and team working skills," but also aims to preserve a tradition.



Enlarge Image
Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal
Ramón Ponce Sr. draws up a lesson for a trumpet student.



Enlarge Image
Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal
Students practice at the Mariachi Academy of New York in East Harlem.

Mariachi heritage, which traces back to 18th-century Mexico, takes some tending, as it enlists many instruments integral to its sound. Some are familiar, others less so. "It's big!," a wide-eyed Sergio said of the guitarrón, an imposing instrument roughly the same size as him. Known less decorously as the fat Mexican bass guitar, the guitarrón provides ebullient undercurrents for much mariachi music, in which Mr. Ponce has a vested family interest. A fourth-generation mariachi, he started singing when he was three years old and began learning various traditional instruments just a few years later.

"Growing up, I lived across the street from a mariachi plaza where all of the mariachi musicians would get together to look for jobs," Mr. Ponce said of his childhood in Puebla, Mexico. "All you could hear was mariachi music."

One of those musicians was Mr. Ponce's father, Ramón Ponce Sr., an

accomplished trumpeter who later moved to New York to take a job with a mariachi band. A few months after, in 1988, the younger Mr. Ponce came to visit and play music and, after gaining admission to the prestigious Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, wound up staying.

When he was 16, he and his father started their own mariachi band in New York. "We played at restaurants, weddings, birthdays and things like that, but now, 20 years later, we've played everywhere from Carnegie Hall to Gracie Mansion," Mr. Ponce said of Mariachi Real de Mexico, the band he still leads with his father and younger brother. "When you ask where have we played, it's easier to ask where we *haven't* we played." (Two weeks ago, they played on the floor at the New York Stock Exchange to commemorate Cinco de Mayo.)

While work with the band progressed, Mr. Ponce expanded his academy for kids in hopes of keeping the bloodlines of mariachi alive. "One of the things we want to accomplish is for kids to be proud of who they are and where they come from," he said. "Through mariachi music we can do that. We've had parents come up to us and say that before they came to their mariachi academy, their kids were listening to Hannah Montana and wouldn't want to speak Spanish with their families. At first it can be a little bit embarrassing for a kid, something so traditional."

So one of new enrollees' first assignments is to begin researching some of the heroes of mariachi. "They have to reconnect with their families through that, because they have to ask their parents to find out," Mr. Ponce said.

A certain amount of musical cross-breeding serves the spirit of the enterprise, though. In guitar class last week, between canonical mariachi songs, the kids' riffs on Guns N' Roses mingled with the likes of "La Bamba" and Metallica's "Enter Sandman," much to Mr. Ponce's amusement. "They're definitely mariachi musicians," he said.

It was fun diversion from the real task at hand—training for the big concert to wind down the academy's summer schedule. On Sunday in an auditorium in St. Paul's Church on East 117th Street, all 120 kids will perform in the academy's annual Mother's Day Festival (one week after Mother's Day, the better to distinguish it). Some families will bring food to sell, and raffles and other festivities will figure into an event that in the past couple years

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has drawn upward of 700 people.

It also coincides with the scheduled launch of a fund-raising campaign on the crowd-sourcing website indiegogo.com. Mr. Ponce hopes to raise \$50,000 to expand the academy with a wider open-call for enrollees in the fall, with ambitions to take in up to 500 students. He also plans to open another academy in Passaic, N.J., to join yet another, the 60-student Mariachi Academy of Connecticut, in Wallingford, which he launched last year.

That's a lot of mothers to help make proud. "At first he was like, 'Mom, that's not my kind of music,'" said Claudia Serratos, who brings her son, the Guns N' Roses riffing Sergio, to classes every week from the Bronx. "In the beginning he didn't want to wear the mariachi outfit. But now he puts it on and feels proud. I get a little teary."

A version of this article appeared May 18, 2012, on page A25 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Nurturing the NewMariachitos.

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