

## An Unconventional Class

How the mariachi movement is reaching new heights at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

By Lexi Vollero

(Original story written and reported in Spanish)

**\*\*Please visit [this website](#) for a comprehensive guide of mariachi programs across the Chicagoland area\*\***

The sound of ruffling sheet music mingles with plucked sequences and an occasional trumpet blast as students enter the theatre, remove their coats and wait for rehearsal to begin. Four years ago, students from the University of Illinois at Chicago began meeting to play the energetic rhythms and sing the passionate lyrics on mariachi music that cry “Mexico” with pride (both literally and figuratively). The musical ensemble made the transition from a club to a class offered by the university for credit three years ago. According to Michael Espinosa, the ensemble’s director, it is the only the only class officially recognized by a university in the entire city of Chicago that focuses on this genre of folk music. This achievement contributes to the growing movement of formalizing mariachi musical education in the city and diversifies the styles of music offered by UIC. On this day, November 9, the students prepare for a concert the following Monday to share this piece of Mexican heritage with their campus and the surrounding community.

The UIC students meet on the music department’s main stage every Thursday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Since it is a performance class, the musicians rarely do anything other than play their instruments and sing. 11 students make up the ensemble: four violins, two trumpets, two guitars, two guitarrons and a vihuela. The opportunity to participate in this class is open to anyone in the university and only one student in the ensemble is earning a music major. Even the head of the music department started volunteering to play violin in rehearsals this quarter for fun.

As a violin and trumpet player with a background in classical and mariachi music, Espinosa recognizes the stylistic differences between the two genres. “[Mariachi] music is fun to play. The music isn’t always exact, like classical music,” says Espinosa.

For example, the director of a mariachi ensemble does not have as active of a role as a conductor of an orchestra. Instead, they stand back from the ensemble to watch the musician’s interactions while they play, which forces the musicians to add emotion and leaves room for interpretation and improvisation.

Espinosa is also the director of the Chicago Mariachi Project and primarily works with elementary and high school students. Thus, he appreciates the change in pace that this ensemble provides because the musicians at UIC are skilled enough that they can focus on the unique and fun stylistic elements of mariachi instead of the basics.

For the most part, Espinosa stands next to the arc of students during rehearsals, looking at the score in his hand and calling out directions or cueing specific entrances when he sees fit.

Between songs, the students talk efficiently among themselves or approach Espinosa and take notes on their sheet music. While they are focusing on their parts, the students maintain a cheerful rehearsal environment by making jokes and chatting in a mixture of Spanish and English.

This score (pictured above) from their repertoire is the song “El Viajero” (“The Traveler”) by Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. It is a lively song that paints a vivid image of the diverse natural and cultural beauty found in Mexico. All the musicians join the soloist at each chorus to chant “Mexico!” in a celebratory manner.

Espinosa explains how the formalization of mariachi is recent, so there aren’t many scores in existence. Many groups learn songs through oral tradition, but educational programs require notated sheet music. As a result, he has to organize and transcribe around one half of the songs himself when he chooses the ensemble repertoire.

Every musician, or “grito” (“yeller”), in a mariachi group doubles as a instrumentalist and vocalist, but there are various solos throughout each song. Along with the energized and rhythmic music, the musical performances have the added visual element of different musicians moving in and out of the arch to sing various solos or play short yet captivating passages. The two men in the above photo, Rodrigo Delgado and Jesus Escobar, sing a duet followed by a melodic violin section synchronized with rapidly ascending and descending scales in a style similar to that of an American fiddle.

Samuel Castro (center), a student graduating this coming December, plays the vihuela, an instrument unique to this musical style that looks like a small guitar. With a background as a heavy metal drummer, he had never considered playing mariachi until he saw one of the UIC ensemble’s shows. The director invited him to observe a rehearsal and after, he taught Castro how to play chords and read sheet music.

“My favorite part [of mariachi music] is the feeling behind playing and singing the songs, it is to play them as a group, especially alongside musicians of high caliber,” says Castro. “What I enjoy more than playing the music is when the public enjoys it and when they yell and sing along with us.”

Yazmin Reyes (right), a first-year student at UIC, began playing guitar in a mariachi ensemble in fourth grade. Initially, she joined the class at UIC because she saw it as an opportunity to sing, but she learned how to play the guitarron, the ensemble’s low voice that looks like a large guitar, out of necessity for the ensemble. She never would have had this opportunity to explore the music that she grew up listening to without the various mariachi programs in certain public schools across Chicago.

“I think that art is growing [in Chicago], especially since I began to play. The “boom” in these school programs has definitely increased and I can only see continuing to grow in the future,” says Reyes.

The UIC program plays a different roll in Chicago than the other leading organizations, the Mariachi Heritage Foundation and the Chicago Mariachi Project, which focus on the education of young students interested in the mariachi style from a young age. Conversely, the UIC class provides an opportunity for experimenting or new musicians to explore the unique style while offering other opportunities for musical performance and education.

At this university alone, the creation of this one class lead by Espinosa has impacted many individual student musicians and impressively spread an awareness of the passion, creative freedom and cultural connections of mariachi. This demonstrates that the adoption of these formal programs makes the Mexican art form accessible to students from different backgrounds, ages and levels of experience and have the pull and potential to continue spreading.