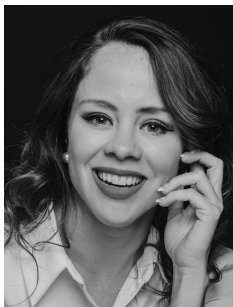


The Foundations of Mariachi Singing: A Pedagogic Investigation of Stylistically Informed Techniques

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The significance and popularity of Mariachi music have initiated extensive discussions about the genre's historical vocal practices, specifically concerning matters of vocal efficiency and sustainability. In this article, associate editor Justin John Moniz and co-author Paulina Villarreal investigate the technical skill sets required for authentic Mariachi performance. This investigation aims to enrich the teaching and practice of Mariachi singing and support the preservation of its rich musical heritage.

THE CURRENT STATE OF VOICE TEACHING often requires practitioners to guide singers through various genres. In the world of popular music, specifically, the myriad subgenres present are remarkably diverse, some requiring considerable technical alterations to facilitate authenticity in a given style. For the practitioner, the task at hand may be overwhelming. If the voice teacher can prioritize matters of vocal efficiency and sustainability, assisting a singer in assembling a technical process that serves the style is easily attainable.

Several unique vocal demands are present across the popular music canon. Unlike in classical singing, there is often a necessary imbalance within the vocal apparatus that must be present in order to authentically reproduce a specific style. Arguably, the most challenging task involves cultivating a technical approach that accounts for those necessary stylistic parameters while considering their impact on vocal longevity. Depending on the genre, necessary stylistic attributes may include cries, growls, creaks, screams, glottal onsets, harsh offsets, and distortion. How a teacher guides a singer through vocal gestures is incredibly formative in determining an artist's long-term health and vocal wellness.

The significance and popularity of Mariachi singing have generated much-needed discussion on the genre's stylistic characteristics, particularly as they relate to an efficient and sustainable vocal production. Similar to other popular singing styles, in Mariachi singing there is often a necessary level of imbalance that a singer will need to endure to possess considerable authenticity in the vocal production of this genre. In order to offer an approach that is both efficient and replicable, the practitioner must possess a clear understanding of the historical vocal practices of the genre and their relationship to current-day pedagogic methods.

HISTORY OF MARIACHI

Mariachi is a regional music style born in Western Mexico that traces back to the early eighteenth century.¹ This traditional style of Mexican folk music combines stringed instruments, brass, and singing harmonies. Initially emerging from rural and folk oral traditions encompassing the migrant experience of agrarian peasants, Mariachi gradually evolved into an urban genre after the advent of the Mexican Revolution. Parallel to blues and bluegrass in the United States, it is one of a small number of Latin American musical traditions that have found broad acceptance in the professional music industry while at the same time remaining rooted in the sentiments and identity of a unique culture.²

The Mexican revolution of 1910 sparked a wave of migration to Mexico City, where *ranchera* singers, for the first time, encountered the influence of European singing styles like Italian *bel canto*, Spanish *zarzuela*, and other European singing traditions. This historical event separates the early rural history of ranchera music from contemporary Mariachi *moderno* styles.³

The difference in style between opera and folkloric ranchera singing began to grow less distinct in the early twentieth century, giving rise to the professional and structured modern Mariachi singing style, combining the folkloric and classical vocal elements we recognize today.⁴

With the advent of radio and television broadcasts, Mariachi music “eventually rose to international fame in the twentieth century through popular charro movie musicals and the recording industry.”⁵ This significant media expansion coincided with the emergence of strong nationalistic feelings in post-revolutionary Mexico, incentivizing composers and performers to promote musical nationalism through lyrics, style, and dress. Promoting Mexico’s rural “life on the ranch” past with nostalgic exoticism became popular, providing Mexican composers and classical singers with performance opportunities never seen before.⁶

In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States emerged as a significant center of Mariachi musical life, as economic opportunity lured many musicians from Mexico.⁷ Social movements, the popular music industry, and the marketing ploys of the growing Mexican market have brought Mariachi music to the

fore of American life.⁸ The style has grown popular, particularly in Texas and California, where schools and universities are now developing academic programs to teach the tradition.⁹ In 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared the Mexican Mariachi tradition as a cultural heritage worthy of national and international safeguarding.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

Since Mariachi music reached international notoriety, its repertoire has expanded to include many musical genres and singing styles. Among the most popular styles performed with a Mariachi ensemble are *rancheras*, *boleros*, *huapangos*, *corridos*, and *sones jaliscienses*. Most texts in the Mariachi repertoire explore themes of love, betrayal, machismo, and country life, and each genre brings distinct stylistic nuances and technical demands on the vocalist.

A *huapango*, for instance, calls for the implementation of *falsete*, which requires the singer to develop the ability to perform a flip back and forth between chest register and falsetto register, similar to Hawaiian folk singers.¹⁰ *El son jalisiense* is another popular Mariachi genre commonly understood by singers as “more aggressive.”¹¹ This style does not involve the *falsete* break but encourages treble and TBB voices to sing exclusively in Mode I or the chest register in the middle and upper tessitura. Other commonly performed styles are the *bolero*, the *ranchera*, and the *polca*.

Ingo Titze draws a compelling parallel between Mariachi singing in Mexico and Neapolitan song in Italy, stating that both art forms have been cultured and influenced by operatic training but that the artists do not generally agree upon the benefit of such training.¹²

Mariachi singer, researcher, and scholar Juanita Ulloa adds that during the Mariachi golden age, classically trained movie arrangers and songwriters favored singers with classical training who could learn complex ranchera songs quickly, a practice that eventually sparked the creation of an “operachi” style.¹³ This blending of styles was popularized by international Mariachi celebrity Jorge Negrete, who often used less vibrato and resonance than a typical opera singer, crooned with a lighter production, and included operatic portamenti in *ranchera* songs.¹⁴

Mariachi singers today still rely heavily on imitating famous golden-age singers like Negrete. Ulloa states that Mariachi singers “benefit from training in breath management, voice production, and range expansion” and “robust breath support, easy onsets, and a gentler voice production to act as their home base.”¹⁵ Performers agree that singing in some Mariachi genres parallels opera, requiring great vocal strength and stamina to sing in open spaces with no amplification.

While the Mariachi tradition is rooted in the rural life of western Mexico in the 1800s and earlier, the modern Mariachi sound that we know today emerged during the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

Mariachi music was traditionally performed by a male ensemble that included violin, harp, and *guitarra de golpe* (5-string guitar variant).¹⁷ In 1933, the *guitarrón* (acoustic bass guitar), trumpet, and wind instruments were added.¹⁸

The sound of the modern Mariachi band has evolved to include a rhythmic bedrock of *guitarrón* acoustic bass, a *vihuela*, Mexican *guitarra*, trumpets, and a violin section.¹⁹ Mariachi ensembles eventually evolved to include women and treble singers in their ranks, both as instrumentalists and vocalists. Even as the transitional ensemble has grown in numbers, most Mariachi bands still perform without amplification today.

Men have historically been the primary soloists and instrumentalists in Mariachi ensembles, while women have struggled to establish their participation in the genre.²⁰ This can partly be explained by treble registration events and the rise of the *estilo bravío*, a style of singing known for forceful vocal production in Mode 1, combined with powerful, demanding stances, all while challenging and mocking male privilege.²¹

Mariachi singer Lucha Reyes is perhaps the most notable example of a treble singer who constantly employed the use of chest register up to C5 for the sake of projection in the pre-microphone era. Ulloa states that “it is doubtful that she received much vocal guidance over the years on how to use her belt voice safely and healthily,” partly contributing to her vocal decline.²²

Since most songs explicitly written for treble voices rest in the lower extreme of the treble tessitura, Ulloa developed the term “Mariachi *Fach*,” which she positions slightly below the contralto *Fach* (G3-G4).²³ Transposition of keys, however, is appropriate in mod-

ern performance when considering the needs of every individual voice.

Performance practice has evolved in the twenty-first century to allow for amplification, which has resulted in more sustainable singing habits, particularly for treble voices. Treble singers now have the option to perform songs exclusively in Mode 1 with amplification or default to Mode 2 production when approaching the top of the register. In fact, some treble singers consistently access *falsete* and upper range extension. In contrast, others, similar to Lucha Reyes, have utilized popular North American vocal genres that require a commercial belt production.²⁴ Both are acceptable ways of performing Mariachi songs.

An essential element of Mariachi performance practice often overlooked by beginners is the famous Mariachi *grito*, which translates to shout, yell, or scream. This high-pitched cry is repeatedly heard in Mariachi performances as a vocal interjection during instrumental interludes, aiming to express vivid emotions like pain or joy.

The distinct sound often resembles the North American cowboy “yee-haw” in pitch. However, its primitive, often improvised expression parallels the style of *cante jondo* or “deep song,” often associated with flamenco and Andalusian music. The all-female Mexican Mariachi ensemble *flor de toloache* describes the classic Mariachi shout as a blend of “a cry and a laugh.”²⁵ During a Mariachi performance, the *grito* is carried out by vocalists and instrumentalists.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

There are a plethora of skills required for authentic Mariachi performance. Singers must prioritize the development of vocal strength for powerful, unamplified production; implement proficiency in singing predominantly in the chest register; incorporate practical usage of the *falsete* flip; and develop a balanced Mariachi *grito* or shout.

Understanding the stylistic considerations and their impact on technical processes is incredibly beneficial for any practitioner. By investigating these four technical skills in detail, even those inexperienced in the art of Mariachi singing can offer considerable technical advice to an artist working in this specialized genre.

Vocal Strength

One of the most critical parameters of authentic Mariachi singing is vocal strength capable of power and unamplified production. The measurement of power in singing can vary as an individual's perception largely determines it. Volume and resonance are vital parameters in such an equation. The acoustical output of one's sound may be altered based on a change in decibel level, fundamental frequency, or the implementation of various formant tuning strategies. The utilization of formant tuning strategies, otherwise known as vowel modifications, is achieved by recognizing how specific vocal tract configurations (that is, various vowel shapes) have unique interactions with different fundamental frequencies. In this way, practitioners might guide singers to modify vowels to help harmonics match formants as closely as possible to optimize voice production.²⁶

Resonance is adjusted each time a singer changes the shape of the vocal tract.²⁷ Movements of the tongue, jaw, soft palate, larynx, and pharyngeal wall each play a role in manipulating resonance strategies that may aid the singer in generating more significant levels of power. From the sustainability standpoint, practitioners' ability to have a baseline understanding of sound and resonance is paramount.

Chest Voice/Belt Production

Two primary muscles are responsible for registration. The thyroarytenoid muscle (TA) is primarily responsible for chest voice and belt production, while the cricothyroid muscle facilitates head voice and pitch regulation. When the TA is dominant, the vocal folds are shorter and thicker, resulting in chest voice, chest-dominant, TA-dominant, or Mode 1. CT dominance places the vocal folds in an elongated and thinner configuration, resulting in head voice, head-dominant, CT-dominant, or Mode 2.

In Mariachi singing, the tonal aesthetic is such that an open approach to the modal voice facilitates the chest-dominant or belt production. More specifically, this approach relies upon the heavy use of open vowels. This significant utilization of open vowels in Mode 1 invites the opportunity for greater weight to be placed upon the vocal apparatus and thus an increased level of exertion for the singer is required, due to the stylistic demand to

remain in Mode 1. As such, there may be a greater risk of fatigue associated with these practices.

An effective way to mitigate such challenges might include monitoring the duration of engagement and facilitating warm-ups and cool-downs, which also considerably engage the CT. These might include head-dominant or semi-occluded vocal tract exercises such as a lip trill or hum.

Falsete Flip

The use of *falsete* flip is similar to that of flip in pop/rock singing. Unlike in classical styles where register equalization is of prime importance, there is a desired exploitation of registration necessary for authenticity in Mariachi singing. In order to do so, the singer must work to delay the *passaggio* as much as possible. For AFAB singers, this would be the delay of the first *passaggio*; for AMAB singers, this would be the delay of the second *passaggio*.²⁸ By delaying the register event, the energy transfer from the TA to the CT muscle becomes much less coordinated and more abrupt. Some would describe such an approach with shared characteristics as that of a yodel. In any case, the emphasis on laryngeal imbalance is necessary to implement this technical approach.

Breath pressure must also be carefully considered when successfully implementing the *falsete* flip. For balanced vocalism to occur at any register shift, breath pressure must be well regulated.²⁹ This regulation often manifests itself in a reduction of air pressure. Imbalanced vocalism would require the opposite approach. If the glottis remains fully adducted, pushing excess air through a register shift can generate high levels of subglottal pressure, which encourages Mode 1 to continue beyond its normative threshold. This pedagogic tactic subsequently facilitates a much more dramatic flip to Mode 2.

Mariachi Grito or Shout

One of the more advanced technical skills in Mariachi singing is known as *grito*. As previously addressed, this term may be interpreted as a shout, yell, or scream. In voice pedagogy, we often discuss the sensitive nature of word choice and syntax and the response each may elicit from a particular student. Each practitioner must define their intention with any stylism that may significantly increase a singer's vocal load. How does a "shout" dif-

ferentiate from a “call”? How might a “yell” differentiate from a “belt”? One might examine laryngeal and pharyngeal registration elements for further evidence of the parallel properties between the pairings.

Exploring ways a singer might redirect energies away from the larynx will help support vocal longevity. By grounding the *grito* in the breath, anchored by a lowered gravitational center within the body, a singer will begin redirecting engagement away from the laryngeal structure, thus mitigating higher pressure thresholds and the likelihood of early onset fatigue. The frequency of any stylism that increases vocal loading or cultivates a sense of imbalance in the vocal apparatus must be balanced to mitigate the risk of fatigue and a compromised state of wellness.

SUMMARY

Similar to pop and rock music, singers of Mariachi must learn to maximize the vocal output while minimizing the vocal risks. Even if the singer does not have extensive vocal training, cross-training the instrument (which can mean singing in both high and low registers with varying intensities and resonance options) before and after practice sessions, rehearsals, and performances is a critical factor in minimizing the risk of fatigue and vocal injury.³⁰

In addition, a singer must understand the road map of the voice, especially as it pertains to their first and second *passaggi*. With a careful understanding and awareness of what is occurring in these moments, a singer can begin to understand where to avoid over-stylization. Avoiding over-stylization during register shifts and moments of high-pressure thresholds will be invaluable in equipping a singer with the tools necessary to build an efficient and sustainable approach to performing in the Mariachi style.

NOTES

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7. Daniel Sheehy, *Mariachi Music in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.
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23. Ibid., 142.
24. Ibid., 133.
25. Yerba Buena Gardens Festival. “Learn How to Grito Like a Mariachi.” YouTube, 00:00 to 1:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vcs9tqRiGA4>.
26. Scott McCoy, *Your Voice: An Inside View* (Gahanna, OH: Inside View Press, 2019), 79.
27. Ibid.
28. AFAB is the abbreviation for the designation “assigned female at birth”; AMAB is the abbreviation for the designation “assigned male at birth.”
29. McCoy, *Your Voice*, 237.
30. Matthew Edwards, *So You Want to Sing Rock ‘n’ Roll: A Guide for Performers* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 87.

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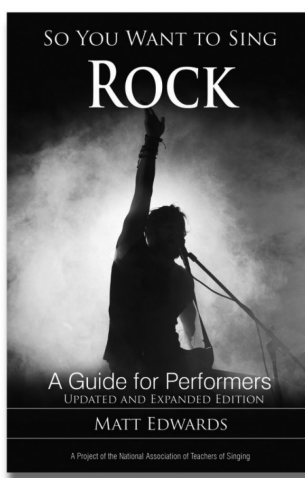
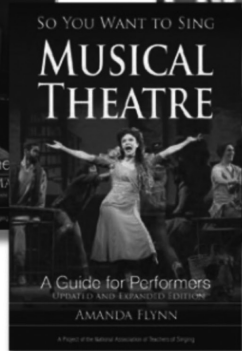
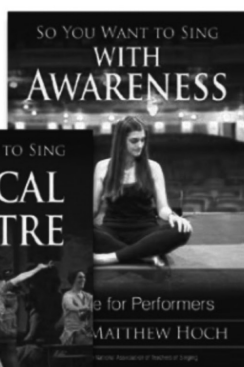
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