The concert is part of Ford and Lincoln Mercury's seventh annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza, which begins at 8 a.m. Friday. The music was led by Mariachi Vargas members.

The show also will include a firework-inducing mariachi pionero, Benjamin Valdez, in the Mariachi Music Hall of Fame. Valdez, 65, founded local trio Los Conquistadores in the late 1950s. He was the first musician to offer private mariachi lessons in San Antonio.

A mariachi group competition runs from 5 to 10 p.m. Friday. A vocal competition runs from 8 a.m. to noon Saturday. Also performing at the concert Saturday will be one of this year's winners, Victoria Acosta, as well as winners of this year's competition.

The extravaganza concludes with a mariachi Mass at 8 a.m. Sunday at San Fernando Cathedral.

Since the mid-1970s, Martinez has played a major role in putting together a network of mariachi conferences and seminars across the Southwest United States. His advice for young musicians is to practice four hours a day to practice.

He said he first experimented with the mariachi-orchestra combination during a 1966 concert with the San Antonio Symphony.

"They christened it 'the marriage of the century,'" Martinez said.

The new CD was recorded with the Philharmonic-Orchestra of Querétaro, Mexico. Martinez said the two groups have long been prevalent in Vargas' music, which is the most complex and intricate of any maria-chi. However, the vast number of musicians playing on this album, about 500, provides a full, expansive sound that lives up to the "marriage of the century" moniker.

Ruben Fuentez, a former Vargas director who played violin with the group from 1944 to 1979, produced "Sanfín." He wrote the traditional upbeat Mexican tango that opens the CD. It concludes with his 1968 classic "La Bala.

More than two decades after

Recognized as the best in the world, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán was depicted by artist Joe Lopez in a commissioned piece for the fabled group.

"Sometimes, the companies weren’t interested in this kind of a record; other times we couldn’t find anyone we really wanted to collaborate with.

JOSÉ "PEPE" MARTINEZ
director, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán

Martinez saw the possibilities inherent in recording with an orchestra, he finally was able to surmount the obstacles that kept the album from becoming a reality. "Sometimes, the companies weren’t interested in this kind of a record; other times we couldn’t find anyone we really wanted to collaborate with," he said. "Doing this kind of a record is very expensive, because of the number of musicians, the time it takes to record, and the quality you have to maintain."

Martinez, 90, was born in Tecalitlán, Jalisco, the birthplace of Mariachi Vargas. He showed how he could take mariachi music to an international level during his tenure as director of El Gran Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán in the 1960s and early '70s. Under his leadership, the group recorded arrangements of Mozart and Beethoven symphonies. He also got notice by fellow musicians for his innovative melodies, including a potpourri of songs by José Alfredo Jiménez. Martinez joined Vargas in 1975 as a violinist and vocalist, and as director he has maintained the group’s reputation for unsurpassed virtuosity and originality.

Martinez-composed pieces such as "Lluvia de Cuerdas," "Viva El Mariachi" and "Al Son Que No Te Quieran" are revered by musicians as challenging to play the kinds of songs that separate the pros from the wannabes.

Being asked to join the group is the mariachi world’s highest honor. Vargas has a storied tradi-

dition that dates back to its founding in 1967.

The group played a large role in mariachi’s acceptance as Mexico’s national music, touring the country in the mid-1960s with President Lázaro Cárdenas. During the 1950s and 1960s, the group backed such legends as Pedro Infante, Lucha Villa and José Alfredo Jiménez. It also accompanied Linda Ronstadt on her 1967 "Canzone de Mi Padre" tour.

Though recent dates in Guadalajara and Houston featured a symphony backing, Saturday’s concert will be purely mariachi.

In the meantime, Vargas is finishing up a straight-ahead mariachi album, but Martinez and Fuentez are getting songs ready for "Sanfín Vol. 3."