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José 'Pepe' Martínez is music director of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

## Mariachi music takes the stage

The seventh annual extravaganza begins Friday, and events will include concerts, workshops and competitions.



BY RAMIRO BURR

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**T**raditional mariachi music is not lacking in beauty, but with the right classical touches, it can become even more attractive.

"It's like putting a lovely dress on a beautiful girl," said Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán music director José "Pepe" Martínez.

Vargas fused folk tradition with symphonic sound on the group's latest CD, "Mariachi Vargas Sinfónico," the first ever to combine the mariachi with a symphony orchestra.

"There had been others (musical fusions) in movies with Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante," Martínez said. "But only in movies. The most interesting thing is that in this case, the entire CD is with a symphony."

Mariachi Vargas performs Saturday at Municipal Auditorium. The concert begins at 7:30 p.m.; El Paso's Mariachi Los Arrieros opens. Ticket prices range from \$20 to \$100 and are available through Ticketmaster, (210) 224-9600.

See MARIACHI/4G

# Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza kicks

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

The show also will include a ceremony inducting mariachi pioneer Benjamin Valdez into the Mariachi Music Hall of Fame. Valdez, 83, founded local trio Los Conquistadores in the late 1940s. 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 last year's winners, Victoria Acosta, as well as winners of this year's competitions.

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: Set aside four hours a day to practice.

He said he first experimented with the mariachi-orchestra combination during a 1980 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.

Symphonic influences have long been prevalent in Vargas' music, which is the most complex and intricate of any mariachi. However, the vast number of musicians playing on this album, about 100, provides a full, expansive sound that lives up to the "marriage of the century" moniker.

Ruben Fuentes, a former Vargas director who played violin with the group from 1944 to 1975, produced "Sinfónico." He wrote the traditional upbeat Mexican huapangos that open the CD. The album concludes with his 1968 classic "La Bikina."

More than two decades after



COURTESY PHOTO

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

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**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 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, 60, was born in Tecalitlán, Jalisco, the birthplace of Mariachi Vargas. He showed he could take mariachi music to an international level during his tenure as director of El Gran Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán in the late 1960s and early '70s.

Under his leadership, the

group recorded arrangements of Mozart and Beethoven symphonies.

He also got noticed by fellow musicians for his innovative medleys, 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 Nos Toquen" 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 tra-

dition that dates back to its founding in 1897.

The group played a large role in mariachi's acceptance as Mexico's national music, touring the country in the mid-1930s with President Lázaro Cárdenas.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the group backed such legends as Pedro Infante, Lola Beltrán and José Alfredo Jiménez. It also accompanied Linda Ronstadt on her 1987 "Canciones 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 Fuentes are getting songs ready for "Sinfónico Vol. 2."

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**ACT**



COURTESY PHOTO

Benjamin Valdez (right), a pioneer in the development of mariachi music, formed Los Conquistadores in 1946.

## Mariachi pioneer gains hall of fame honor

Recognized as a pioneer in the development of mariachi music in San Antonio, violinist Benjamin Valdez will be inducted this year into the Mariachi Extravaganza's Hall of Fame.

Born in 1919 in Lockhart, Valdez has spent almost a lifetime performing and teaching mariachi music.

He began as a roving troubadour in 1939, playing at Market Square. In 1946, he formed Los Conquistadores, a trio with the legendary Jose Morante and Henry Rodriguez.

The golden age of the trios — the late '40s and '50s — was capped by the world tours of the legendary Trio Los Panchos. During this time, Los Conquistadores garnered national recognition for themselves and the city, appearing on "The Arthur Godfrey Show," "The Garry Moore Show" and other popular variety shows of the day. Valdez offered the first private mariachi lessons in San Antonio, teaching classes in violin, guitar, vihuela, guitarrón and

trumpet. His lessons formed the basis for the programs at the Guadalupe Cultural Center and local high schools.

Jesse Orta, the first recipient of the Ruben Fuentes Award, began his mariachi career learning from and playing with Valdez. Valdez was instrumental in the creation of Orta's mariachi groups, and for teaching other orchestra-trained musicians of the day the sones and rancheras of mariachi. His students included Jesus Guerra-El Cabrito, Carlos Leon, Frank Peña, Ben Sanchez, Roland Alcocer, Oscar Cavazos and Al Castro. In the late 1950s, Valdez played violin in San Antonio's first mariachi group, Mariachi Chapultepec, accompanying a young vocalist by the name of Rosita Fernandez. Already forging new ground, Mariachi Chapultepec recorded a popular tune that received plenty of radio airplay — "La Chispita" — a mariachi-style cumbia. Later, he started his own group, El Mariachi Caminantes.

— Ramiro Burr