Mariachi Vargas harp player Julio Martinez (left) instructs harp students from around the state at Municipal Auditorium on Friday during the annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza, where members of the legendary group listened to and instructed high schoolers.

**MUSICAL EDUCATION**

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They had just stumbled off their school bus after a 5:30 a.m. departure and their sombreros and charro outfits were still stashed away. But the 20 members of Falfurrias High School’s mariachi group were all business on a cold morning this week, launching into one exuberant, well-honed song after another.

Frequently, the teens were flagged to a halt at mid-tune, which might

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Take a good look at the Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza.

make musicians cranky after such a long journey. But since the interruptions came from members of Mariachi Vargas of Mexico City — the most respected band of its genre in the world — the reaction was different.

The students soaked in the advice

See MARIACHI/5B
Mariachi students get unforgettable lesson

CONTINUED FROM 1B

Thursday during the annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza, a weeklong series of workshops and performances that conclude tonight with a Mariachi Vargas concert at Municipal Auditorium that will include winners of a statewide student competition.

It was no coincidence the workshop was held at one of San Antonio's college campuses.

"I really believe in the opportunities that studying mariachi gives to a lot of these kids," said Dante Suarez, an associate professor at Trinity University who helped arrange on-campus concerts this week. "They're seeing this for the first time, thinking, 'Wow, maybe I could do this.' I want them to know that Trinity, as well as any other university is within their reach."

Some students have never stayed at a hotel before, said Falfurrias mariachi instructor Joe Salas. But on the group's trip last year, students met with advisers for UTSA, Palo Alto College and Our Lady of the Lake University.

The festival also offers the community an opportunity to remember its roots, Suarez said. Mariachi started as a fusion of Spanish and Mexican music that has now blended into American culture as well, he said.

Mariachi Vargas was founded in 1897, but its namesake sound came in vogue in Mexico — becoming part of the national identity — after the group was invited to play at the inauguration of Mexico's president in 1934.

"When people say this is the best and the biggest, they mean it," Suarez said of the band, which has released dozens of albums and appeared in hundreds of movies since the 1950s. "There really is no point of comparison."

Thursday's workshop is one of many events that the band's members participate in each year. Mariachi Vargas violinist and vocalist Steven Sandoval said, "Dressed in black and speaking Spanish as he took a quick break from scrutinizing the students' performance, he said there's a satisfaction in using his talents to help push forward the mariachi tradition with younger generations."

Falfurrias senior Ricardo Garcia seemed to be a happy recipient of that tradition. Mariachi music gave him a new way of thinking about and interpreting music, the violinist said after he emerged from a dressing room following the workshop, dressed to perform and preparing to play for Trinity students.

"I feel like I can express myself through mariachi," he said.