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## Mariachi extravaganza goes beyond the music

By Hector Saldaña- Express-News Staff Writer

Few annual music festivals have as citywide a flavor or as big an educational footprint.

The seven-day, multivenue “Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza” is a celebration of mariachi music, art, literature, education and Hispanic culture.

If it feels Mariachis R Us, it's because there really is just about something for everyone at this mariachi competition event now 14 years running. More than 20,000 people are expected to participate.

It opens with a mariachi Mass at Mission San José at noon Sunday.

“The Mass at San Jose is really special to me,” said organizer and producer Cynthia Muñoz. “It's where I started playing mariachi Masses as a kid.”

A mariachi art exhibit, Christmas-themed serenade along the River Walk, student workshops, book reading and concerts are all part of the fun.

A mariachi music presentation at Trinity University on Thursday is new this year.

The grand finale is a Dec. 6 concert starring the 12-piece Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán at Municipal Auditorium. Mariachi Vargas is known throughout the world and has recorded with Luis Miguel and Linda Ronstadt.

Tuesday, Noche de Arte at Centro Cultural Aztlan, 1800 Fredericksburg Road, Suite 103, features mariachi-inspired art by local artists including Kathy Sosa, Blas Hernandez, Angel Rodriguez-Diaz and Jesus Moron.

Thursday, a serenade is planned at Rivercenter Lagoon at 5:30 p.m.

“It's so exciting to see. It's what makes our city so unique,” said Muñoz. “It just continues to grow every year.”

The 70-piece UTSA Orchestra participates for its fourth straight year.

“What keeps me going is all the successes with students,” said Muñoz, noting that student participating in school mariachi music programs score better in achievement, particularly in terms of graduation rates and interest in higher education.

“It's about students. It's about families. It's about education.”

Don't forget the fun in those plucky nylon strings and brass, too.

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