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Mariachi music, students show some magic

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Ramiro Burr
Express-News

For a few hours Saturday night, the Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza seemed to have it all from songs that stoked memories to music that lifted the spirits.

The music all came together at the Municipal Auditorium to provide a sonic experience that was beautiful, exuberant, poignant and provocative.

The renown masters of the genre, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, provided the musical fireworks on Saturday to cap a solid week of performances, workshops, competition and more.

But especially impressive were the student mariachi troupes that impressed with their musical technique and love of the music.

One highlight was Mariachi Nueva Generación from Texas State University in San Marcos who won first place in college/ university category. The group performed "Del Altar a la Tumba," and "Popurrí Miguel Aceves Mejía," in tribute to the legendary singer who passed away Nov. 6 in Mexico City.

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Known as Mexico's "Golden Falsetto," Mejía was a solid pioneer on par with the greats like Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete and Javier Solís.

Soprano singer Christina Ortega, a Mexico City native who has resided in San Antonio for more than a decade, said Mejía was memorable for his voice:

"He had power and great control, and he could sing those high notes that few could sing," she said. "He was simply marvelous."

The students' zeal in performing Saturday was plainly obvious as the auditorium crowd repeatedly cheered them on.

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"We bring the students here because here they get to meet the masters, learn technique and just absorb the experience," said Adrian Padilla, director of the Mariachi Halcon from Zapata High School in Zapata, who won their 1st place in the high school division for the second year in a row.

For 12 years, Ford Motor Company has sponsored the event, considered the biggest of its kind in the Southwest and the only one juried by members of Mariachi Vargas.

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"Our sponsorship demonstrates good corporate stewardship," said Bill Sims Jr., Ford Customer Relations Manager. "This is like the superbowl of (student) mariachis. It keeps getting better every year."

For more than a decade mariachi instruction has increased in high schools and universities across the South west.

"We now have new programs at St. Mary's University and St. Edward's University in Austin," said festival promoter Cynthia Munoz. "What makes this year special is that for the first time, officials in Guadalajara have invited the winners in this year's competition to perform at the annual Mariachi Encuentro Internacional in Guadalajara.

"This is so important because the students get a chance to see the roots of this music in the city (Jalisco) known as the capital of mariachi music."

Also new this year is TV Azteca America's (Ch. 31) broad-casting a 30-minute recap of the Saturday concert on Dec. 10.

The late Geraldine Orta Charles was this year's recipient of the Ruben Fuentes Award for the Mariachi Music Hall of Fame. Orta Charles was the daughter of Josephine and Jesse Orta, who were both honored in the past. Orta Charles spent most of her life carrying on the traditions of her parents in teaching and playing mariachi music through the church.

The festival wraps up at 11:30 a.m. today with a Mariachi Mass at Sacred Heart Chapel at Our Lady of the Lake University.

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