



JOHN DAVENPORT/STAFF

Martin 'Marty' Luevano takes the vocalist role at a mid-November performance by Mariachi L. Sister Michelle plays guitar; brother Moses is on guitarrón.

Family BAND

All-sibling Mariachi L understands teamwork

BY RAMIRO BURR
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

It is library-quiet in a far North Side home as eight musicians stand stiffly in a semicircle around mariachi instructor Pete Moreno. On cue, they launch into a lively medley of classics such as "Son la Negra" and "Viva México," the sound of violin strings and guitarrón strumming resonating loudly in the small living room. A note here or there is missed. But gesturing quickly with his hands, Moreno keeps the disciplined group moving forward: "That's it. Keep going, like that."

The musicians focus and concentrate, trying their best to get the tunes just right after a handful of tries.

"OK, that was better. Let's take a break," Moreno says.

Relaxing, the musicians begin teasing each other and gleefully monkey around as they walk outside. In the backyard, they become totally carefree, frolicking around a swing set and making faces for a photographer.

The award-winning Mariachi L has morphed back into the Luevano kids, three girls and five boys.

They are the only known all-sibling mariachi troupe anywhere, says Jesse M. Hernandez, a former research analyst working for the military and the kids' proud grandfather.

"There are other groups of brothers, but the parents are also part of the troupe," Hernandez said. "We've asked everywhere. As far as we know, this is the only mariachi of brothers and sisters."



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Marcial, shown during the mid-November performance at University of the Incarnate Word, is the trumpet player of the group.



KARLA HELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

The Luevano siblings — Mariachi L — practice in their backyard. They are, from left, Marty, 8; Mercedes, 11; Merrit, 13; Michael, 12; Marcial, 17; Moses, 14; Michelle, 15; and Mary, 7.

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See MARIACHI L/10G

Mariachi L singers have eyes on Vargas prizes

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Mariachi L is Marcial III, 17; Michelle, 15; Moses, 14; Merrit, 13; Michael, 12; Mercedes, 11; Marty, 8; and Mary, 7. Their parents are Marcial Luevano Jr., a detective with the San Antonio Police Department, and his wife, Maggie, who formerly worked for the Boerne school district but is now home-schooling the youngest child.

The Boerne-based family is getting ready to take part in this year's Ford Motor Co. Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza. Last year, Marty, a third-grader at Fabra Elementary School in Boerne, won first place in the elementary/middle school vocal division. He and his sister Michelle will compete in this year's vocal competition, which takes place before Saturday's Mariachi Vargas concert at Municipal Auditorium.

The Mariachi L story begins in 2000, when Michelle started taking guitar lessons.

She became interested in the music when Sister Bernadine Reyes, a Benedictine nun, and family friend Fausto Gutierrez introduced the Luevano family to a new mariachi program in Boerne. Michelle was the first to sign up; her brothers soon followed.

The mariachi program was part of a Hispanic outreach ministry designed by the Benedictine sisters in Boerne to instill self-esteem and cultural pride, according to Sister Bernadine Reyes, prioress of the Benedictine sisters.

"They came out and took part

in the first mariachi class," said Reyes. "Marcial and his wife were just so committed. I was very impressed.

"I am just so proud of them now."

That program eventually was phased out, but the Luevanos kept going.

"They started on the guitars that were given to us by the archdiocese," Marcial Luevano said. "They didn't play violin in the beginning, but we ended up with a couple of the violins that Fausto provided."

The fledgling group struggled in the beginning. Soon, though, they enlisted Moreno as a private instructor.

"We went to go see him, and in one hour he taught them three songs, whereas in six months, they had learned about four songs," Luevano said. "We were very impressed."

The siblings take private lessons and practice every week. On average, they perform at two to three events a week, from weddings and family reunions to festivals and parish functions.

Last year, Mariachi L released its debut CD "L' Principio." That was followed this year by the appropriately titled "Ocho." The Luevanos sell the CDs at their shows and on their Web site, www.mariachil.com, which includes photos of the troupe in typical mariachi *trajes* with western-style boots and "Texas" belt buckles.

Away from the business of mariachi, they are typical suburban kids, into sports, video games and movies.



JOHN DAVENPORT/STAFF

Michelle Luevano (left) along with brother Marty will take part in Saturday's vocal competition at Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza. Marty won in his age group at last year's competition.

Michael, who plays the violin, says he loves the "Halo" video game and is a serious football fan: "The Texas Longhorns are my favorite team because they're from Texas." Ninth-grader Moses, whose instrument is guitarrón, plays freshman football for the Boerne Greyhounds team. "I

also do track. I usually run a long distance, usually two miles."

Michelle, a sophomore at Boerne High School, plays the vihuela in Mariachi L, but she also plays flute in the high school band.

"Band really keeps us busy a lot, and we don't have time to (go to) the malls," she said. "But I want to be a psychiatrist, you know the people who go, 'OK, so how do you feel about that?'"

Mariachi instructor Moreno — who teaches at South San and Holy Cross high schools and has his own professional group, Mariachi Los Parientes — has worked with the Luevanos for six years: "We started when the littlest one was just born."

He said teaching a family is very different from teaching a high school group.

"When they're related, they help each other more and are more involved," he said. "You have to get into their family a little to be able to handle it. And

they're real good kids."

According to grandfather Hernandez, playing together has helped the children learn the value of discipline and teamwork.

"They recognize that playing instruments in a group requires everybody's cooperation to do it," he said. "I have also noticed a maturity in them in that they also realize that they depend on each other as brothers and sisters, just as when they play in a group. It is an intricacy they do not yet realize."

Marcial Luevano and his wife handle all the bookings, scheduling, transportation and other business details for the group. It is a considerable amount of work, but he said the effort is worth it.

"I think it's good because they stay together and they get to enjoy stuff together," he said. "Hopefully, later on down the line, it will give them another excuse to get together."

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Mariachi festival schedule

The Ford Motor Co.'s 12th annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza features a week's worth of events, highlighted by a concert by Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. Here's a rundown.

Today

7:30 p.m. Noche de Cultura, Instituto de México, 600 HemisFair Plaza Way: Julio Martinez and Arturo Vargas of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán will perform and discuss mariachi music.

Thursday

6 p.m. Serenata en el Rio, Rivercenter mall lagoon, 849 E. Commerce St., features student mariachi groups from across the U.S.

Friday

8 a.m.-1 p.m. Mariachi instrumen-

tal and vocal workshops, Municipal Auditorium, 100 Auditorium Circle

5-10 p.m. Mariachi group competition, Municipal Auditorium: Elementary/middle school, high school and college/university mariachis face off for the opportunity to open for Mariachi Vargas on Saturday.

Saturday

9 a.m.-noon Mariachi vocal competition, Municipal Auditorium: Student vocalists from elementary school to college will compete for 'Best Mariachi Vocalist in the U.S.' title.

7:30 p.m. Mariachi Vargas concert, Municipal Auditorium; tickets available through Ticketmaster outlets



COURTESY PHOTO

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán is the renowned troupe at the center of Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza.

Sunday

11:30 a.m. Mariachi Mass, Sacred Heart Chapel, Our Lady of the

Lake University, 411 S.W. 24th St.

For more information on the festival, go to www.mariachimusic.com