

Web Posted: 12/06/2008 12:00 CST

Musical education

By Craig Kapitan - Express-News

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 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 Thursday during the annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza, a weeklong slew of workshops and performances that concludes 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 go here.’ 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 Soliz. 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.

The original incarnation of 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 asked 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 1930s. “There really is no point of comparison.”

Thursday's workshop is one of many such 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 vihuela player said after he emerged from a dressing room following the workshop, dressed to perform and preparing to play for Trinity students.

“I feel I can express myself through mariachi,” he said.