

Mariachi Extravaganza starts today

Festival concludes with Mariachi Vargas concert.

BY HECTOR SALDAÑA

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He's known simply as the legendary "El Pato."

Victor Cardenas Garcia has been a fixture with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán for 50 years.

He is among more than 1,000 professional and student musicians participating in the 15th annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza, which begins today with a mariachi Mass at noon at Mission San José.

The eight-day festival of mariachi competitions, workshops, presentations, serenades and concerts attracts more than 15,000 visitors annually. Its highlight is the Mariachi Vargas concert at Municipal Auditorium on Saturday with Nydia Rojas, Ricardo Castillon and competition winners.

"It's a combination of opera, symphonic music and Mexican folklore," said producer Cynthia Muñoz. "It's beyond the imagination. Most people have no idea the level of musicianship of mariachi and Latin music."

Mariachi Vargas is among the world's elite mariachi groups. They first played San Antonio 30 years ago with the San Antonio Symphony.

"Mariachi Vargas is one of a kind," said Patricia Greathouse, author of the encyclopedic "Mariachi." "They have such a long tradition, and people have been with them so long. I think they are the best."

Festival organizers at Muñoz Public Relations focus on education. University, high school, middle school, elementary school and community school mariachi bands and mariachi vocalists



EXPRESS-NEWS FILE PHOTO

Mariachi Bondad from San Marcos Mariachi Academy raise their sombreros before their performance in 2008 during competition at Municipal Auditorium.

15th annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza

SUNDAY

■ Mariachi Mass, noon, Mission San José. Free.

■ Serenade to San Antonio, 3 p.m., Charline McCombs Empire Theatre

MONDAY

■ Official Kickoff, 2 p.m., St. Anthony Hotel

WEDNESDAY

■ Noche de Cultura, 7 p.m., Instituto Cultural de México at HemisFair Park

THURSDAY

■ Serenata en el Rio, 5:30 p.m., Rivercenter Lagoon. Free.

FRIDAY

■ Mariachi group competition, 9 a.m., Municipal Auditorium

participate.

"The purpose remains the same since Day 1," Muñoz said. "It's about cultural preservation and higher education for Hispanic youth."

The San Jose Mariachi

Admission \$7 (also good for vocal competition)

SATURDAY

■ Mariachi vocal competition, 9 a.m., Municipal Auditorium. Admission \$7

■ Mariachi book reading, 1 p.m., Memorial Branch Library, 3222 Culebra Road. Free

■ Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, plus Nydia Rojas, Ricardo Castillon and competition winners, 7:30 p.m., Municipal Auditorium

NOV. 22

■ Almuerzo con Mariachi featuring Mariachi Mexico de Noche, 1-3 p.m., Estela's Mexican Restaurant, 2200 W. Martin St.

Choir, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary and is where Muñoz first became interested in mariachi as a girl, leads today's mariachi Mass.

Also today, Mariachi Los Galleros de San Anto-

nio and Puerto Rican opera singer Antonio Barra-sorda star in the "Sere-nade to San Antonio" concert at Charline McCombs Empire Theat-re. Showtime is 3 p.m.

Mariachi Vargas' Car-denas is a product of a by-gone era, he said in an in-terview conducted in Spanish.

"There's been so many changes," he said a bit nostalgically. "For me, I loved the old days. I loved Mariachi Vargas of old."

Cardenas, a humble man, was born in a small village called Concepcion De Buenos Aires in Jalisco. He chalks up his ca-reer to "good luck."

His father and brothers were self-taught musi-cians. He learned mari-achi "en la frontera."

Before he joined Mari-achi Vargas, he worked as a restaurant mariachi.

"El Pato" is a self-taught musician, too. "I never studied music," he said.

He is impressed with the educational compo-nent of the festival.

"It's a beautiful thing," he said. "It gives me a lot of pleasure to see the chil-dren loving the Mexican music. It's very beautiful."

Did he imagine the ca-reer would be so long? No. He was hired to do a tele-vision program. And then a four-month tryout.

"I helped them out," he said. "And I stayed."

SUDOKU

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