Chips and Salsa: A Taste of
Mariachi Music for the High School Orchestra
A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson
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Summary:
Through this set of lesson segments, students will engage with the mariachi music of Mexico through discussing audio and video clips, listening to individual instruments within the ensemble and imitating them by ear, and through playing an arranged mariachi piece. Extensions can lead to analysis of formal elements within the music, further study of the culture from which this music originates, or contact with culture-bearing mariachi musicians.

Suggested Grade Levels: 9-12
Country: Mexico
Region: North America
Culture Group: Mexican
Genre: Mariachi
Instruments: Orchestra
Language: Spanish
Co-Curricular Areas: Social Studies, Spanish
National Standards: 2, 5, 6, 7, 9

Prerequisites: For Segments 2 and 3, intermediate to advanced playing ability on orchestral string instruments

Objectives:
- Learn about the history of one facet of Mexican folk music
- Consider ways in which mariachi serves as a symbol of Mexican culture outside of Mexico

Materials:
- Various tracks from *Mariachi Music of Mexico* and other Folkways Records
- Full set of orchestral instruments

Lesson Segments:
1. A Taste of the Musical Culture (National Standards 6, 7, 9)
2. A Taste of the Musical Instruments (National Standards 2, 6)
3. A Taste of the Performance Style (National Standards 2, 5, 7)
1. A Taste of the Musical Culture
• **Objective:**
  - Learn about the history of mariachi music through listening to historical recordings from rural and urban areas of Mexico

• **Materials:**

• **Procedure:**
  - a. Listen to “From Monterey.” What instruments do you hear? How would you describe the style exhibited here? Have you heard anything like this before?
  - b. Listen to “El Carretero” and “Se me hizo fácil.” How are these recordings different from each other and from the first? Do they all sound like the same style? Why or why not? (Refer to the liner
notes for *Mariachi Music of Mexico* to guide the discussion after initial brainstorming.)

c. Discuss a short history of mariachi music (reference the liner notes to *Llegaron Los Camperos!: Concert Favorites of Nati Cano’s Mariachi Los Camperos*). Talk about the way that mariachi has moved from being a rural folk music in Mexico to having a place in urban concert halls as an international symbol of the Mexican culture. Use pictures or maps as desired.

d. Watch Mariachi Los Camperos performing “México Lindo” on the short three-minute video. Why do you think mariachi has come to symbolize Mexican culture across the United States? How does this performance communicate pride about participation in the Mexican culture? What is the image being portrayed? Talk about the text, the dress, the enthusiasm. Invite students to share about past experiences with mariachi, if applicable.

**Assessment:** Students will participate in discussion of the three listening/viewing experiences, and show understanding through correctly identifying significant differences among them and speculating about the meaning of these differences.

2. **A Taste of Musical Instruments**

- **Prerequisite:** Intermediate to advanced playing ability on orchestral string instruments

- **Objective:** Listen for each instrumental line and play sections of the melody or accompaniment by ear on their orchestra instruments

- **Materials:**
  - Pictures of a vihuela and guitarrón
  - Audio/visual equipment for playing sound recordings
  - Orchestral string instruments

- **Procedure:**
  a. Look at pictures of the vihuela and guitarrón. Discuss their special tuning, and the role that they play in the mariachi ensemble. (See the references section below for many good books which cover this issue.)
  b. Listen to “San Miguel el Alto” as performed by Mariachi Los Camperos on *iViva el Mariachi*, track 102. Listen for the discrete instrumental lines.
c. Try to sing along with each instrumental line, one at a time. Listen to the song again as desired. The opening violin/trumpet line is an easy place to start, with the opening guitarrón bass line as the next step.

d. Have each student figure out a measure or phrase, by ear, on his/her instrument. Talk about how in its folk context, this music is learned aurally, with no notation.

e. See how much of each instrumental line the students can “decode” by ear.

Assessment: Students will engage with the listening experience by applying it to their instruments. Watch for involvement and perseverance in those who do not get it right away.

3. Taste of the Performance Style

- Prerequisites:
  - Intermediate to advanced playing ability on orchestral string instruments
  - Note-reading ability

- Objective:
  - Perform an arrangement of a mariachi canción ranchera, and consider elements of the classic mariachi performing style

- Materials:
  - Video: Performance of the Mariachi Los Camperos and interview with Nati Cano at the Viva el Mariachi Festival in Freso, CA. Smithsonian Institution, 2007. Available at: http://www.folkways.si.edu/what-makes-good-mariachi/latin-spoken-word-world/music/video/smithsonian
  - Sheet music for “San Miguel el Alto” arranged by Elizabeth J. Knighton (attached)
  - Orchestral string instruments
  - Audio/visual equipment for listening to sound recording and watching video clip

- Procedure:
  - a. Listen to the “San Miguel el Alto” sound recording again, this time following along on the sheet music. (Note that in general, though
not as a rule, the first violins play the violin part, the second violins
play the trumpet part, the violas play the vihuela harmony, cellos
play the vocal melody, and the basses play the guitarrón bass line.
The arrangement follows the first forty seconds of the song.)

b. Learn the parts and play “San Miguel el Alto” as a string orchestra.
c. Watch the two-minute video of Nati Cano talking about what
makes a good mariachi, and pay attention to the footage of
Mariachi Los Camperos in addition to the interview portions.
Discuss with students: What do you notice about this performance
style? How is it different from the way you do concerts? What
elements of this performance style could you incorporate while
playing “San Miguel el Alto”? (e.g. memorize the music, play
standing up (except cellos), be intentional about facial expressions,
enthusiasm, and posture while playing, etc.)
d. Incorporate some of these performance elements while playing
“San Miguel el Alto” in your classroom or in performance.

Assessment: Students will accurately play “San Miguel el Alto” and will participate in
consideration of the performance style that is a part of the mariachi culture.

Extensions:
• Invite a mariachi musician to come visit your classroom, or arrange for the class to
attend a performance of a local mariachi group.
• Obtain a guitarrón and vihuela and learn to play the harmonic parts on the
authentic instruments.
• Learn about different the different musical forms used in mariachi (canción
ranchera, polca, etc.) and use a selection of recordings to analyze and discuss
musical form.
• Research other Mexican musical genres and styles, such as corridos and conjunto.
Compare and contrast with mariachi. Discuss the way in which each has
symbolized association with Mexican culture for those who participate in that
musical culture.
• Examine the social issues surrounding mariachi, for example the social standing of
mariachi musicians and how that has changed over time, the involvement of
women in mariachi music, or the role of mariachi music in social events among
Mexican Americans in the United States.