

## MARIACHI GUIDE

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Of all the major strains of Mexican and Mexican-American folk music, by far the best known to North Americans is that of the mariachis. For many it captures the essence of the vibrant nature of Mexican music.

What we may not understand is this: Exactly what is it that makes a piece of music typical of the mariachi style? What makes the mariachi musical ensemble different from other musical groups? What exactly gives it that special spice and vigor?

Belle San Miguel teaches instructors and students alike the recipe for creating a genuine mariachi sound. She explains the instrumentation, the history, and performance characteristics of the style in this guide to creating a mariachi band.

### Grade Level:

6-12

### Suggested Activities:

1. Ask students to identify the instruments found in a mariachi ensemble.
2. Ask students to illustrate their own instruments.
3. Ask students to make a chart of rhythm patterns found in mariachi music.
4. Help students with word pronunciation of songs.
5. Ask students to identify the sounds of the different instruments while listening to a recording of mariachi music.

### Purpose:

The purpose of establishing a mariachi is to bring to students a satisfying and rewarding musical experience that may serve to introduce or to preserve Mexican music.

### Definitions:

There are various hypotheses about the origin of the word "mariachi." The most common is that during the reign of Emperor Maximilian, minstrels often were employed to play at the French court during festive occasions, some of which were weddings. For this reason, the Mexican people began calling the minstrels "mariachi," derived from the French word "mariage" ("marriage").

Another theory suggests that, since all Mexican women are named Mary and since many songs are about women, the suffix "chi" was added to the root word "Maria".

### History:

A Mariachi, a strolling folk orchestra, originally consisted of stringed instruments: *vihuela*, guitar, violin, and harp. Trumpets were later added, and the *guitarrón vihuela*, guitar, violin, and trumpets revolutionized mariachi music in the 1930s.

There are many well-known Mariachis, but one of the most famous is the Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, organized by Gaspar Vargas in 1898. He started with four musicians who played the harp, *guitara de golpe*, and two violins. His son Silvestre Vargas joined his father's Mariachi

as a violin player at age 17.

In 1930 Don Gaspar increased his Mariachi to seven members: four violins, harp, *guitara de golpe*, and a *bajo sexto*. The number of members fluctuated between eight and ten during the middle thirties and the forties. The *guitarrón*, *vihuela*, and one trumpet were added to the group and the *bajo sexto* was dropped from the ensemble. In the late forties and the fifties, the instrumentation was changed again, to include six violins.

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán today consists of twelve members. In the rhythm section are four instruments: the *guitarrón*, harp, *vihuela*, and guitar. In the brass section there are two trumpets. In the string section there are six violins. The instrument that makes the great Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán so unique is the harp. By listening to this Mariachi, the students will learn to recognize this group's unique combination of sounds.

### Instrumentation:

The instruments used in a Mariachi are  
 Guitarrón (large bass guitar)  
 Vihuela (vihuela) (small guitar)  
 Guitar (standard)  
 Violin  
 Trumpet

Guitars are available in most music stores. The *guitarrón* and *vihuela* can be found in some music stores in the United States, or they may be purchased in Mexico. When buying a *guitarrón* or *vihuela*, imperfections in the glueing of the bridge and the neck must be checked: many of these instruments become unglued after several months of usage. In forming a mariachi, schools must invest in a *guitarrón*, a *vihuela*, and some guitars. The violins and trumpets might be loaned to the mariachi class by the school district music department.

### Guitarrón:

The *guitarrón* is the largest of the mariachi instruments. It is a large guitar made out of wood. The back of the *guitarrón* is what makes it so different from other instruments: the shape of the *guitarrón* gives it its unique sound. This instrument provides the bass sound of the mariachi. It has six strings and no frets. The sound is produced by pulling the strings. The parts of the *guitarrón* are the body, bridge, tuning keys, neck, and strings. The names of strings starting from the bottom are (transparency 1)

- 1st string—A
- 2nd string—E
- 3rd string—C
- 4th string—G
- 5th string—D
- 6th string—A

## Vihuela

The *vihuela* is the smallest of the guitars. This instrument is made of wood and looks like a miniature *guitarrón*. The *vihuela* gives the mariachi the rhythm and harmony that is so typical of this type of music. This instrument has five strings and no frets (the top string is missing). It is played like the guitar. The *vihuela* breaks the rhythm with its difficult strumming. When the guitars are strumming down-up, down-up, the *vihuela* might be strumming down-up, down-down-up, down-down-up.

The parts of the *vihuela* are the body, bridge, neck, strings, and the tuning keys. The names of the strings starting from the bottom are (transparency 2)

- 1st string—E
- 2nd string—B
- 3rd string—G
- 4th string—D
- 5th string—A

## Violin

The violin is the smallest instrument in the string family. It has a lovely, singing tone and is similar to the soprano voice.

The players press on the strings to change the pitch. The instrument has no frets. The four strings are set in vibration by the bow drawn across them. It alternates the melody with the trumpets. The names of the strings are (transparency 3)

- 1st string—E
- 2nd string—A
- 3rd string—D
- 4th string—G

## Trumpet

The trumpet is a treble bass wind instrument with a shallow-cupped mouthpiece. It has three piston valves, and a trumpet player can produce all notes of the scale by pressing the valves in various combinations. This instrument alternates the melody with the violins and gives color to mariachi music by adding running notes and trills (transparency 4).

## Uniforms

An important accessory to any performing unit is the uniform. A *charro* outfit is a must for any mariachi group. These outfits must be made by an experienced tailor. Sketches of some very simple and some very elaborate uniforms are included here. Uniforms may be selected according to the school colors. The uniform consists of white shirt, jacket, trousers for boys and skirts for girls, tie, hat, and mariachi belt.

Simple: shirt, trousers, jacket, tie

Elaborate: shirt, jacket, trousers with *galas*, tie, hat, mariachi belt

## Method of Instruction

In beginning a mariachi group these are some suggested steps to be followed.

1. Listen to a good recording of mariachi music and try to identify the instruments. Only by listening will students be able to get the unique sound. Point out the entrances and sound of the different instruments.

2. Clear diction in singing is important. In a song such as "¡Ay, Jalisco no te rajes!" the sentence "Muchacha bonita, la perla más rara" may very well sound like "Muchacha bonita, la perra amarrada" if the diction is not clear. Copies of words should be made available to students.

3. Learn to play basic chords. For the guitar, *vihuela*, and *guitarrón*, master the basic chords of the songs you choose to learn.

4. Rhythm is next. There are many patterns in mariachi music. Differentiate the strums or *mániquo* and transcribe these on charts, which may be mounted on the wall.

The *guitarrón* player reads the guitar chord names at first, and adds secondary bass notes as progress is made in mastering the instrument. Several players should learn the *guitarrón* and *vihuela*. It is a good practice to group voices and guitars together while trumpets and violins are working on their parts. Once the guitars and voices are sure of their parts, combine them with the other instruments.

The important thing is to get a song under way as a group so that the full sound of the mariachi will be heard.

## Music

Mariachi arrangements are difficult to find. "El Carretero" and "La Bikina" were arranged by Juan Ortiz and have been used successfully in mariachi programs. Many students are able to arrange their own songs once they have a model to follow.

## Hints

Try to keep your ensemble together.

The *guitarrón* player is the key to setting the tempo.

Tune your instruments to the trumpet, but make sure there is a warm-up period before the tuning takes place.

*Vihuela* and guitar players should avoid using picks for strumming.

Keep your arrangements simple.

Try to have as many students as possible do a *solo* part.

Here are some patterns that may be helpful in explaining the different rhythms to the rhythm section. Note that --- means start the strum down; --- means strum up.

## Recordings

Sones Jaliscenses

Mariachi Guadalajara, *Sones de Jalisco*, Musart, D-719.

Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán, *Sones*, Musart, DM 1203.

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *El mejor mariachi del mundo*, RCA Victor, MKS 1156(c).

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *El mejor mariachi del mundo*, Vol. 2, Arcano Records, DKL 1-3036.

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *Sones de Jalisco*, RCA Victor, MKS 1653.

Sones Jaliscienses Plus Other Genres

Mariachi México, *Mariachi México*, Musart, D-90 nes, polkas, *marcha, pasodoble*).

Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán, *Música y sonos de mi tierra*, Cos AZA, LP-AZ-009 (*sones, rancheras*).

Mariachi México, *Música y canciones de México*, Tres, LPT 3013 (*sones, rancheras*).

Mariachi Los Rancheros, *Ya llegaron los mariachis*, Epic, TRLP 5101 (*sones, huapangos, rancheras, ridos*).

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *Fiesta en Jalisco*, RCA Victor, MKS 1863 (*sones, potpourris*).

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *LXXV Aniversario*, Arano Records, DKL1-3251 (*sones, waltz, obertura, odoble,, potpourri*).

Mendoza, Amalia (with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán), *Éxitos de Amalia Mendoza*, RCA Camden, CAM 309 n, *rancheras, boleros*).

Mendoza, Amalia and Juan (mariachi not specified), *Los famosos corridos y canciones*, Columbia, MDC 1054 n, *corridos, rancheras*).

Negrete, Jorge (with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán), *El mítable Jorge Negrete, Vol. 1*, Pegasus Records, LP 14 (*son, corridos, rancheras*).

#### Miscellaneous:

Aguilar, Antonio (with Mariachi México), *Corridos de caballos famosos*, Musart, 1563 (*corridos*).

Fernández, Vicente (mariachi not specified), *Vicente Fernández*, Caytronics, CYS 1359 (*rancheras, boleros*).

Jiménez, José Alfredo (with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán), *Mis corridos*, RCA Victor, MKS 1699 (*corridos, huapangos*).

Jiménez, José Alfredo (mariachi not specified), *Rancheras: Songs of the Mexicans*, Caytronics, CYS 1103 (*rancheras, huapangos*).

Mariachi México, *Mariachi México de Pepe Villa, Vol. 3*, Son-Art, SE-615 (polkas, *pasodobles*).

Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán, *La danza de las horas y otras clásocas*, Torres, LPT 3024 (*oberturas*).

Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán, *El sonido clásico del Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán*, Torres, LPL 3031 (*oberturas*).

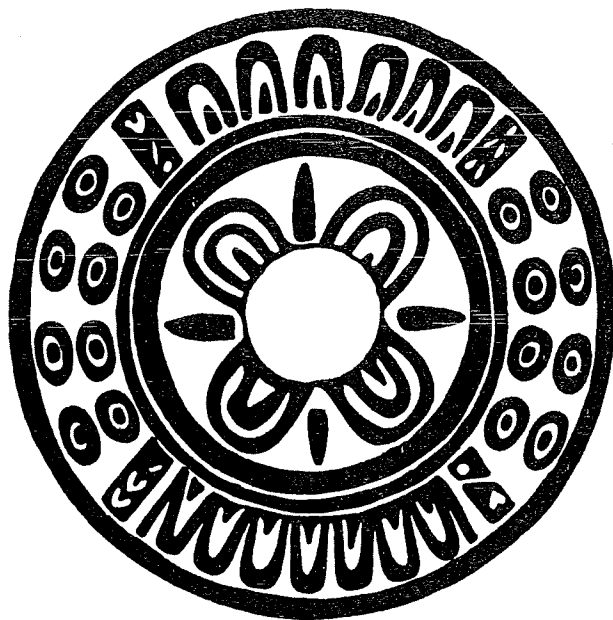
Mariachi Tenochtitlán de Heriberto Aceves, *Huapangos*, Phillips, 832.652 (*huapangos*).

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *Danzones*, Arcano Records, DKL-3025 (*danzones*).

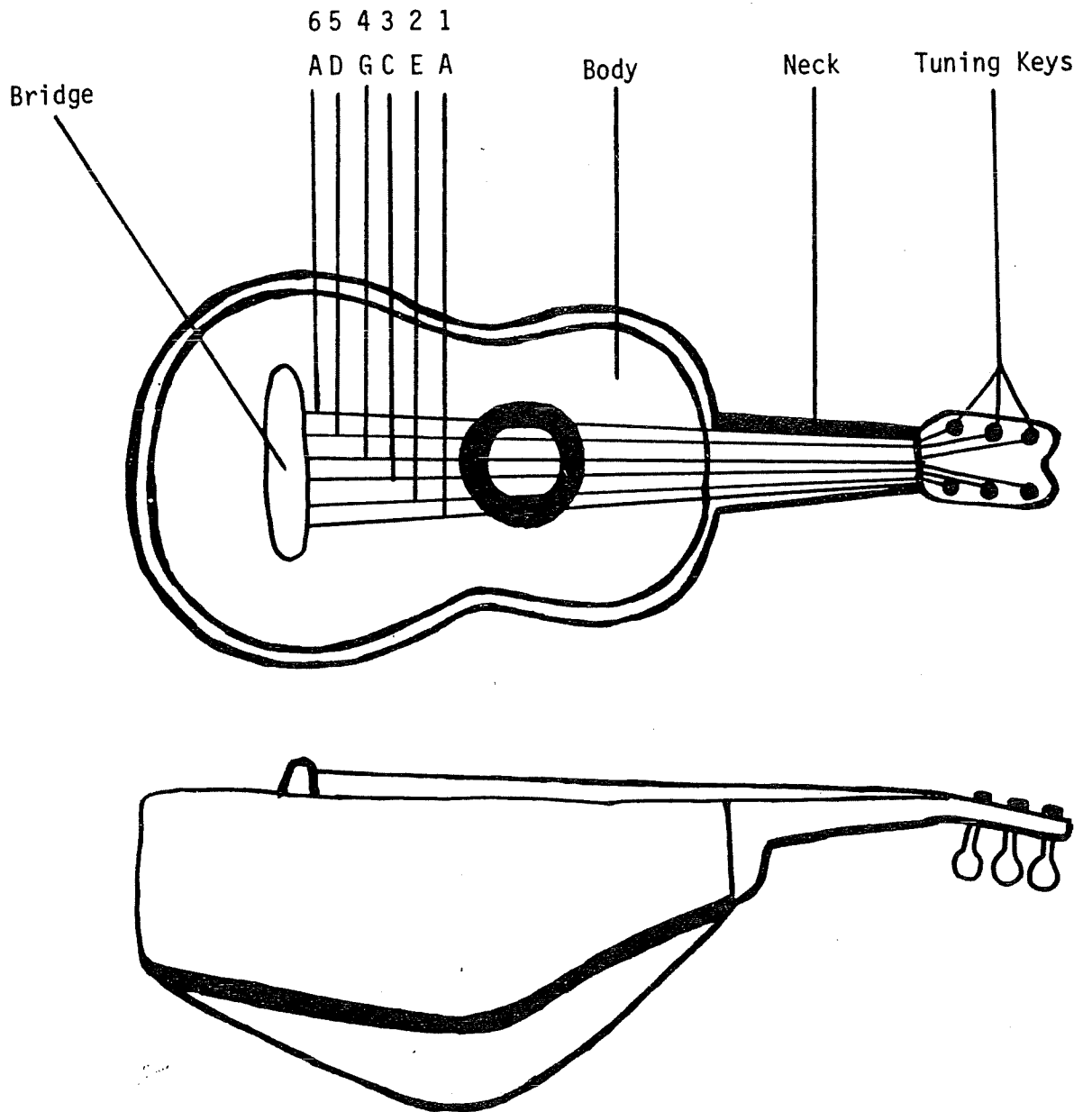
Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *Pasodobles*, RCA Victor, MKS 1294 (*pasodobles*).

Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, *Valses mexicanos*, Arcano Records, DKL1-3032 (waltzes).

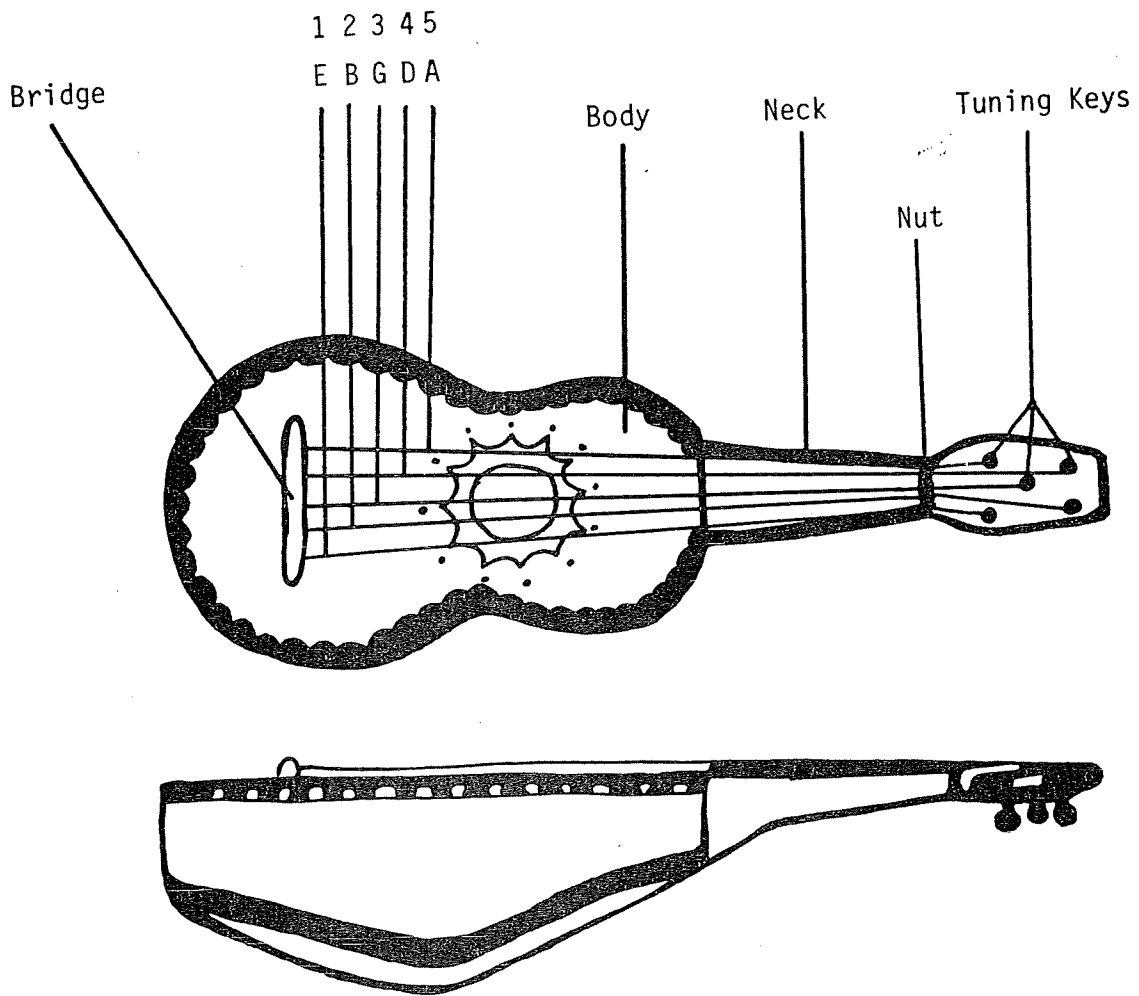
Mejía, Miguel Aceves (with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán), *Canciones de José Alfredo Jiménez*, RCA Victor, MKS-1119(c) (*rancheras, huapangos*).



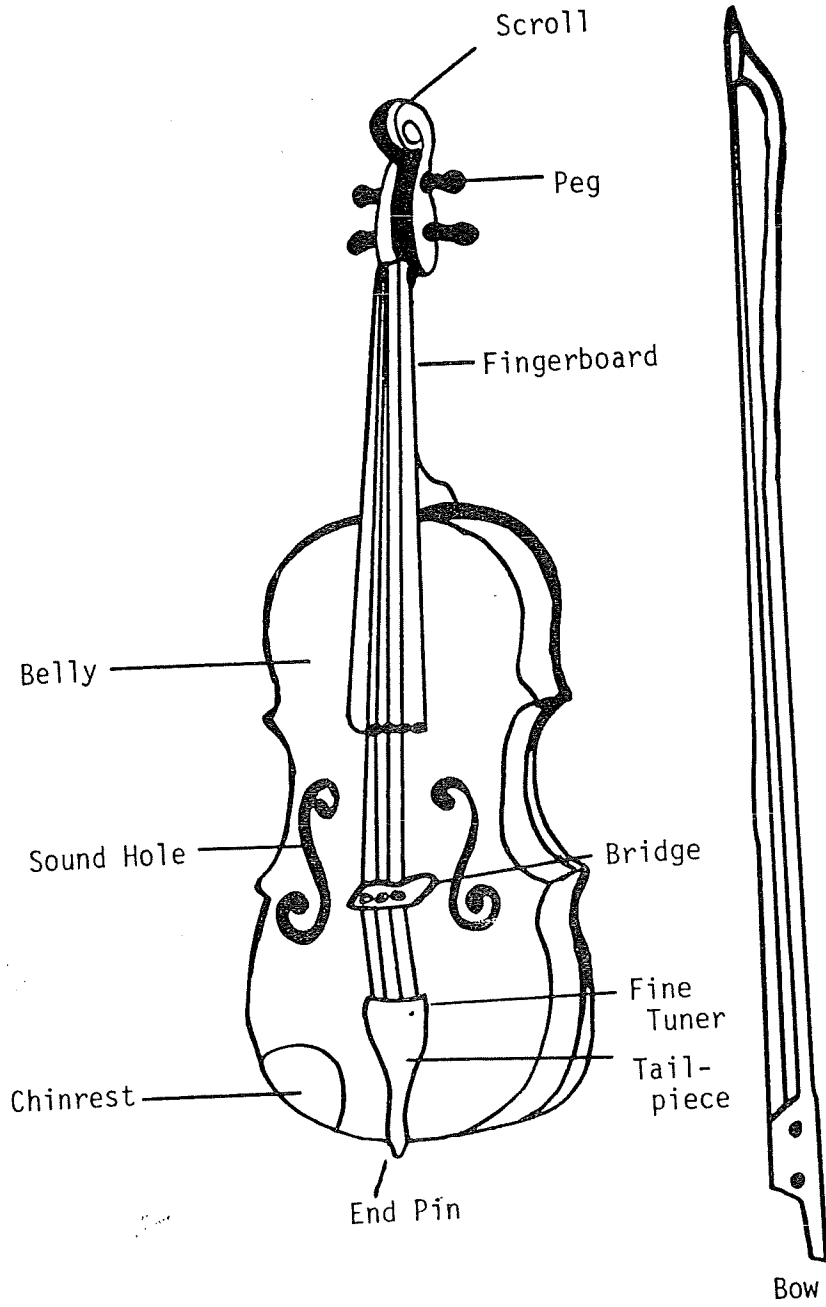
# GUITARRON



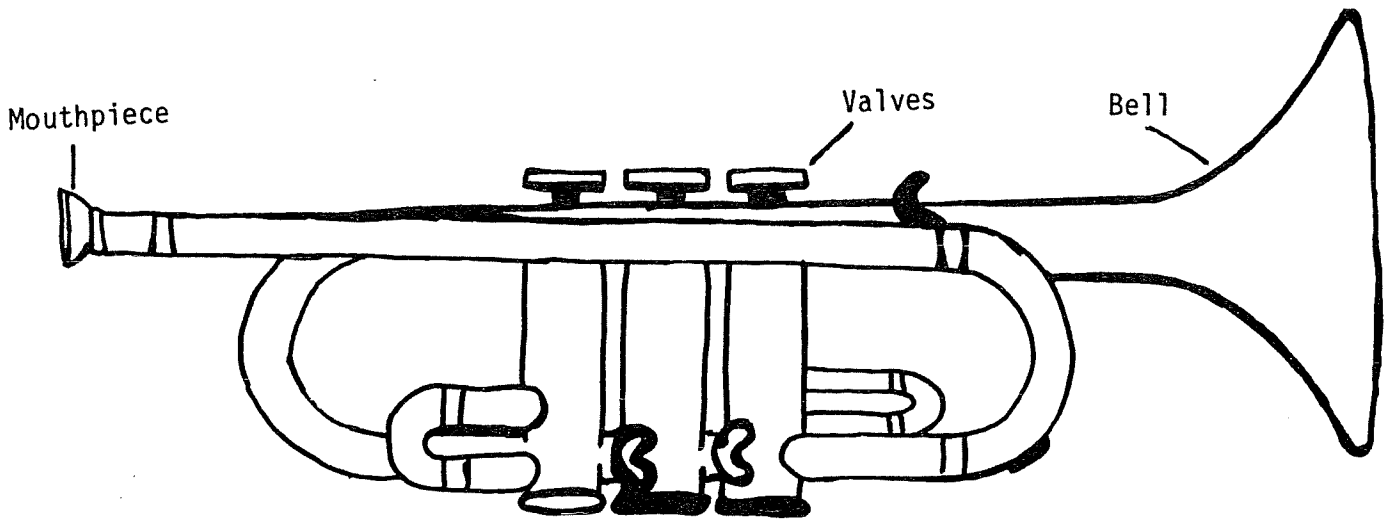
# VIHUELA



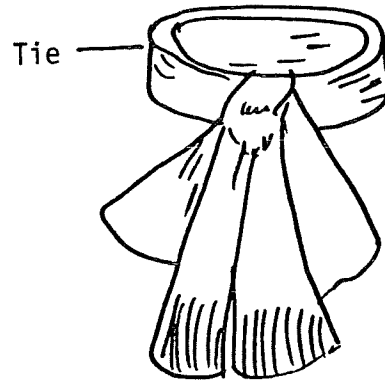
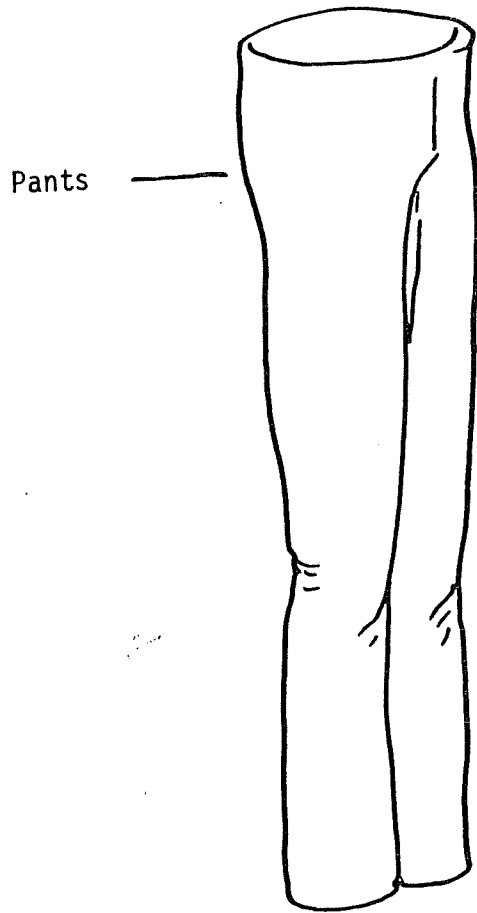
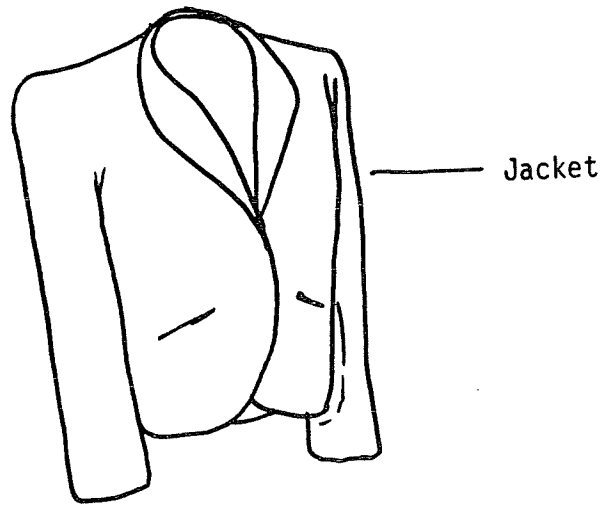
# VIOLIN



TRUMPET

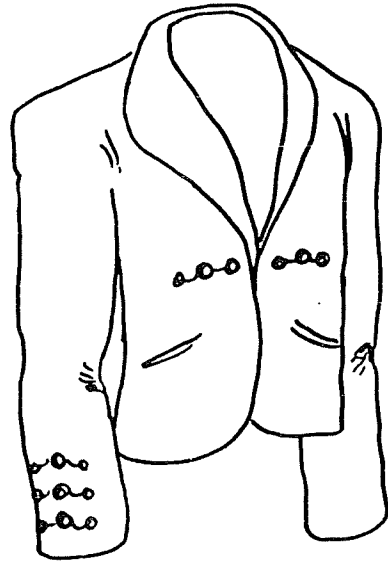


# SIMPLE CHARRO OUTFIT





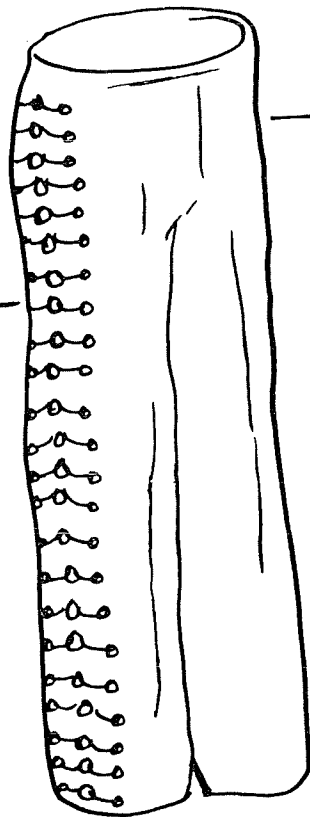
ELABORATE CHARRO OUTFIT



Jacket

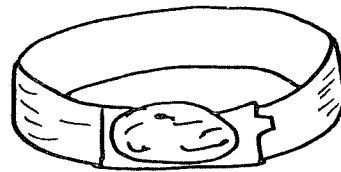


Tie

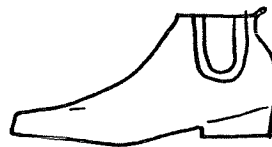


Trousers

gala



Mariachi belt



Botines



Charro hat

Bolero (Vihuela) (Guitarrón)

Handwritten musical notation for Bolero. The Vihuela part is in treble clef, 4/4 time, with four quarter notes, each with an accent (^). The Guitarrón part is in bass clef, 4/4 time, with a half note, a quarter rest, and two quarter notes.

Son

Handwritten musical notation for Son. The first part is in treble clef, 3/4 time, with three eighth notes, each with an accent (^) and a grace note (v). The second part is in bass clef, 3/4 time, with three quarter notes.

Handwritten musical notation for Son. The first part is in treble clef, 6/8 time, with six eighth notes, each with an accent (^) and a grace note (v). The second part is in bass clef, 6/8 time, with three quarter notes.

Canción Ranchera

Handwritten musical notation for Canción Ranchera. The first part is in treble clef, 2/4 time, with a quarter rest and a quarter note with an accent (^). The second part is in bass clef, 2/4 time, with a quarter note and a quarter rest.