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## UNESCO Designates Mariachi Music as Important to World's Intangible Cultural Patrimony

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The mariachi musical tradition is one of the most easily recognized elements of Mexican culture around the world. This type of jubilant and festive music—which generally features a combination of brass and string instruments and passionate lyrics—received official recognition from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) this year. At its meeting in Bali, Indonesia, on Nov. 28, a special UNESCO committee voted to add mariachi music to its list of traditions that are considered part of the world's intangible cultural patrimony.

Mexico's entry, entitled "El mariachi, música de cuerdas, canto y trompeta" (The mariachi, music of strings, song, and trumpet), was one of 19 nominations endorsed by the UNESCO committee. The committee designated cultural practices from China, France, Turkey, Portugal, Spain, South Korea, Croatia, Peru, Colombia, Cyprus, and Belgium as part of the world's intangible cultural patrimony.

Another 11 cultural practices were designated as "Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding."

Since 2008, UNESCO has designated seven Mexican cultural elements as part of the world's intangible cultural patrimony. These include the Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) practices in 2008; the Flying Dancers' ritual in 2009 ([SourceMex, Oct. 7, 2009](#)); Mexican cuisine, the Parachicos festival in Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas state, and the traditional Pirekuka folk song of the P'urhépecha peoples of Michoacán state in 2010 ([SourceMex, Dec. 1, 2010](#)); and mariachi music in 2011.

Additionally, UNESCO has designated several sites in Mexico as culturally important, including the agave-growing region in western Mexico in 2006 ([SourceMex, July 19, 2006](#)); the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in 2008 ([SourceMex, July 9, 2008](#)); and the Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatepetl volcanoes in central Mexico, the Naha-Metzabok Biosphere Reserve in Chiapas, and Islas Marías off Mexico's western coast in 2010 ([SourceMex, June 9, 2010](#)).

### *Recognition could help preserve cultural tradition*

The recognition of mariachi music is expected to help Mexico's efforts to preserve and strengthen this cultural tradition. "The community and the family hand down musically their knowledge, history, and the pleasure of singing to the nature surrounding them," Mexican officials said in their application to UNESCO earlier this year. "They consider it their own."

Even though mariachi music remains a vibrant part of the Mexican culture, there is some concern that younger generations have not fully embraced this part of their heritage. "Young people like to listen to foreign music and are forgetting about their roots," said Rosalino Martínez Flores, a member of Mariachi Real Azteca. "Regrettably, when they forget, they also become ashamed to listen to Mexican music. This is the type of music that defines us, that fills us with pride."

In its application to UNESCO, Mexico said mariachi music has helped expatriates reconnect with their cultural identity. "Immigrants, descendants of Mexicans living abroad, as well as Latin

Americans, have made the modern mariachi a symbol of community identity, because it is a bond linking them to their roots in spite of the distance," the application said.

The effort to preserve the cultural tradition played a role in UNESCO's decision to give the special designation to mariachi music. "Learning by ear is the main means of transmission of traditional Mariachi, and the skill is usually passed down from fathers to sons and through performance at festive, religious, and civil events," UNESCO said.

In its application, the Mexican delegation pointed out that the music has crossed borders and become a symbol of Mexico around the world.

"There are mariachi bands on all the continents," said the Mexican application to UNESCO. "Aruba is the country with the greatest demographic density of mariachis. They sing in Spanish as well as in their official language."

Jorge Aquino, director of the Escuela de la Música Mexicana, concurred. "Now including in foreign countries like the United States, Japan, and Colombia, there are mariachi schools, mariachi classes, mariachi degrees," Aquino told CNNMéxico.

Egypt is one country where mariachi music has gained some popularity. "The first group of mariachis in the Middle East does not have a drop of Latin American blood," the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior said in an article in September 2011. The article said the group demonstrated that it could play classical Mexican pieces with great skill.

"When we heard mariachi music for the first time, we were touched deeply by the intensity of the words of the songs," violinist Mohamed Samir said following a performance. "We wanted to play this music right away."

In July of this year, Mexico opened a new school dedicated to teaching all aspects of mariachi music to Mexican and foreign students. The school, known as the Centro Cultural del Mariachi, is near the famous Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City, known as the home of mariachi music. The school is housed in a four-story building, offering such classes as theory, technique, and performance.

Some analysts said the UNESCO recognition is a timely counterpoint to the publicity surrounding recent drug-related violence and the confirmation that a citizen coalition had filed an official complaint against President Felipe Calderón at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for his failed war against drug traffickers ([SourceMex, Oct. 26, 2011](#)). The news media consistently report gruesome results of the drug-related violence. The latest account included the discovery of 26 bodies in three vehicles during the last week of November. The Zetas drug cartel is thought to have executed the victims.

"It was a turbulent week in the effort to define Mexico's international image. This period featured news about drug-related killings in important cities like Guadalajara and the complaint against the president at The Hague," columnist Juan Manuel Asai wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Crónica de Hoy. "But the week concluded with the good news that mariachi music is now considered an important part of the world's cultural heritage. This should give a boost to Mexico's tourism industry."

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