

# Laura Sobrino

## Queen of the Mariachi Violin

By Michael Simmons



Laura Sobrino's life as a mariachi violinist began when she asked her mother for clarinet lessons. To her shock, her mother said, "Absolutely not. If you are going to take up anything it will be violin."

Laura remembers that day with a laugh. "I started crying. All my friends were taking clarinet and that is what I wanted to do, too. Then my mother offered an arrangement. She said I had to take violin lessons and learn the Ave Maria. Then, after I played the Ave Maria for her, if I still didn't like it I could take up any other instrument I wanted. That sounded easy to me. I went to school the next day with a permission slip for the violin thinking that I was going to beat my mother at this game. I would quickly learn the Ave Maria and go back to playing clarinet. But the first moment I held a violin I knew this was the instrument I was meant to play."

Laura turned that childhood challenge into a career as a professional *mariachi*, a teacher (she holds a master teacher certificate from the National Endowment for the Arts) and a publisher of some of the first accurate transcriptions of mariachi music.

Although she makes her living playing and teaching a Mexican folk style, she started as a classical violinist. After she began her lessons in school at the age of eight, one of her teachers recognized her talent and she was soon in private lessons. She progressed rapidly and was able to get into the University of California at Santa Cruz on a music scholarship where she encountered an unexpected culture shock. "I was just coming to terms

with the fact I was Mexican. My parents didn't let me speak Spanish when I was growing up and there were a lot of Hispanics at UC Santa Cruz from the Fresno area and they all spoke Spanish. That was the first time I felt uncomfortable because I didn't speak Spanish. I grew up in Watsonville and I went to a surfer high school. My brother and I thought we were surfers."

At the end of her freshman year Laura decided to take a year off, move to Mexico City and learn to speak Spanish. After she returned to Santa Cruz, she found she missed Mexico. "I started signing up for music theory classes and stuff like that when I noticed a class called the Music of Mexico and my heart made a big ping." Laura went the first day to audit the class and wound up the star student. Part of the class was learning to play some of the instruments used in various Mexican folk styles. She learned to play *norteño* button accordion, the *jarana jarocho*, the *requinto*, the *guitarron* and the harp. Because she was a classically trained violinist, it fell to her to teach some of the other students the parts in the class mariachi. That was the beginning of her teaching and the end of her classical violin lessons.

It was during her sophomore year that she began her professional life as a mariachi. She joined a student group and started playing weddings and restaurants. She decided to write her senior thesis on mariachi violin and went to Los Angeles to study with a band led by a friend of one of her professors. This was where her education really began. "I thought I was really hot because I knew forty or fifty songs. This band could play anything. I learned that a good mariachi must know hundreds of songs." She also discovered that her classical training could sometimes be a hindrance. "I was used to reading the music from a page. I needed the notes in front of my eyes. In our first student performance the teacher said we were going to have to perform from memory. In my first performance I was still so insecure that I hid the music under my Mariachi jacket and when he wasn't looking I put the music at my feet, but he caught me. He came over with his dirty boots and stomped all over the pages. He looked at me and said, 'That is the last time you are going to use notes when you play this music.'"

When she was in Los Angeles she met José Hernandez, the leader of the popular Mariachi Sol del Mexico. She became the first woman to join the band and it was during her tenure that she had finally begun to understand the music. "I was playing six nights a week for three months when I finally figured out what they were doing that made them sound mariachi. The other musicians teased me about the night it clicked. I made a gasp into the microphone and my eyes got huge. After the show they asked me what was that all about. And I said I finally understood how to play mariachi. If they played an unfamiliar song I knew how they were going to bow, how they were going to phrase it. At the next break I started writing down the bowings. That was the start of Mariachi Publishing."

It was around this time that she started to study the work of some of the older players from the '30s and '40s. Mario Santiago, a violinist who played with Mariachi Vargas in the '40s, mentioned that when the band made records they cut out sections of the old songs to make them fit within the three minute time span of 78s. This spurred Laura to get an NEA grant to document older versions of some of the standard songs. She studied the playing of Esteban Hernandez, the father of José Hernandez, and recorded dozens of tunes that have never been written down.

Laura still plays in mariachis but these days she is devoting most of her time to teaching. She gives workshops at various festivals on the west coast and teaches classes in the Los Angeles area. She is proud of the fact that a number of her students have gone on to become professional mariachis. Laura is hopeful about the future of mariachi in America. She notes that in Texas and New Mexico, high school students can choose between band, orchestra or mariachi. She is also beginning to notice regional styles developing in the United States. She says that San Jose mariachis sound different from those from Los Angeles or Tucson.

She is currently applying for another grant to set up a program to teach intermediate students the mariachi style in greater depth. She hopes to introduce the students to a violinist named Jesús Rodríguez de Hajar, who is the current director of Mariachi America in Mexico City. "He was one of the musicians who set the standard for playing *sones*. I saw him with his band and when I heard him play I was almost in tears. After the show I went up to him and said that I thought I knew how to play *sones*, but after hearing him I realized that after playing for twenty four years I don't know anything."

Not too long ago, Laura Sobrino fulfilled a promise she made over thirty years ago. "I was telling my husband the story about my first violin lessons and the Ave Maria and he asked me if I ever played it for my mother and I told him I never did. My parents were planning to come over for thanksgiving so we practiced the piece. After dinner I gave my parents a glass of wine and my husband went to the piano. I told my mother that years ago I made a promise to her that I had never fulfilled and then I played the Ave Maria for her. After I was done I said, "Mom, I made up my mind. I'm going to continue to play violin."

#### About Her Equipment

Laura plays a German Strad copy that one of her teachers ordered for her years ago. She says it is a wonderful violin with a very loud voice. She describes it as her baby. But after all these years playing in restaurants and parties it has picked up a few scars. One of its major scratches was caused when a man threw it out of her hands when he wanted to dance with her at a party. For big shows with a large audience she uses a clip-on microphone, but otherwise she doesn't use amplification. She mentions with pride that the mariachis she plays with say she is as loud as three trumpets.

She is currently looking for a new bow. "My bow was broken in 1986 and one of the musicians made two small wooden nails to hold it together. He said he can't make any promises, but we'll see how long this lasts. It held together until June 1998, when just before a concert the tip broke off again. This time it is broken for good." She is thinking about getting a Coda graphite fiber bow because it can stand up to the abuse a working mariachi puts it through better than a wood one.

#### Resources

Laura Sobrino has a web page, where you can order her mariachi transcriptions as well as get her teaching schedule. She also has a very good article on women in mariachi.  
<http://members.aol.com/sobrino/WebPage.html>

Fiesta del Mariachi is a web page put together by Sally Vega. It has sections on artists, history, concert listings and lots of links. This is great place to start if you are interested in mariachi.  
<http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/2626/>

#### Books

*How to Play Mariachi Violin*, by Lawrence Sanders  
 Fuge Imaginea, P.O. Box 2027 Santa Monica CA 90406  
 Mariachi Publishing. Orders: (213) 727-0783; Fax: 213-278-9945

#### Recordings

There are hundreds of CDs of mariachis available but it is difficult to find specific recordings by particular groups in the U.S. The best place to start is with recordings by Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan. Jonathan Clark recommends *El Mejor Mariachi del Mundo*, *Fiesta en Jalisco*, and *Sones de Jalisco* on RCA/BMG and *Fiesta del Mariachi* and *En Concierto* on Polygram. More than any other group they define what mariachi is. You can buy just about anything by them and it will be good. Other groups to look out for are Mariachi Cobre and Mariachi America de Jesus Rodriguez de Hajar.

Arhoolie (510-525-7471) has released a series of CDs of early mariachi recordings that is worth checking out:

*Mariachi Coculense 1926-1936* (Arhoolie CD 7011)  
*Mariachi Tapatio de Jose Marmolejo* (Arhoolie CD 7012)  
*Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan* (Arhoolie CD 7015)  
*Cuarteto Coculense 1908-1909* (Arhoolie CD 7036)

Corason (dist. by Rounder, 800-443-4727) has a fine recording of a group called Mariachi Reyes del Aserradero. They are from Jalisco, the region where mariachi was born.  
*Mariachi Reyes del Aserradero, Sones from Jalisco* (Corason COCD 108)

## Hand-Crafted Compact Discs



#### Our prices INCLUDE:

- ∞ Mastering
- ∞ Reference CD-R
- ∞ All set-up charges
- ∞ Replication
- ∞ Custom artwork creation
- ∞ All color separations, film & proofs
- ∞ Shrink-wrap
- ∞ Ground shipping

**MUSIC MASTERS**  
**1-800-344-9561**

MUSMSTRS@INLINK.COM  
 WWW.IWC.COM/MUSICMASTERS/



MODERN TECHNOLOGY  
 TRADITIONAL QUALITY