

# STUDY GUIDE : BALLET FOLKLORICO "QUETZALLI" de VERACRUZ

p. 1 of 4

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## Students Introduction to Ballet Folklorico "Quetzalli de Veracruz"

### Some Basics

The Ballet Folklorico "Quetzalli " (kets-AH-lee) de Veracruz is a very special group of young people who enjoy the traditions and cultures of their native country, Mexico. In particular, they enjoy performing the traditional music and dances of their home, Veracruz. The company is made up of more than 30 young singers, dancers and musicians, who perform this beautiful art for people all over the world, including in Japan, Europe, Mexico and the United States. We hope that you will enjoy their presentation in your school and also hope that you will learn something from having seen them perform.

### New Ideas

What do you think of when you hear the words "Ballet Folklorico"? Tutus and toe shoes? Do you imagine dancers in tights doing leaps and twirls? Ballet Folklorico actually means simply *folk dancing* or *dancing of folks-people*. A good definition of folk music or dance is music or dance which is created for the enjoyment and expression of the performer and not for the public. Do you perform folk music? Have you ever created music or dance only for your own enjoyment? Watch the movements of the dancers and see if you can find real-life people or things created by their steps.

One of the most common themes in folklore is what is found in one's surroundings-nature. Animals, plants and the land are all part of nature. All are reflected in the dances performed by Ballet Folklorico de Veracruz. See if you can recognize different animals interpreted from the stage. How do the performers get you to imagine that you can see animals?

### Vocabulary

<b>el toro</b>	- the bull
<b>el zopilote</b>	- the buzzard
<b>la iguana</b>	- the iguana
<b>los gallitos</b>	- the little roosters
<b>zacate</b>	- hay
<b>el buey</b>	- the ox
<b>la bruja</b>	- the witch

### Preparations

Have the students write or discuss their thoughts about dance, and what they expect to see from a folk dance program. What sort of dance do you expect from Mexico?

### Additional Activities

1. Plan a "trip" to Veracruz. Look at the map provided and decide how you would get there and what types of transportation you would use. What kinds of people would you expect to meet?
2. Determine what kinds of movements in the dance program are common to other types of activities- sports, exercise, other kinds of dancing, or walking. Create your own folk dance. Use elements around you, and interpret what you see.
3. Have the students write to the Ballet Folklorico and share their thoughts on how the program was good or bad. What sort of things did they see that surprised them? What did they learn from the program? Mail the letters to the sponsor of the event, asking them to forward them to the Dance Company through their agent, SRO Artists.
4. Draw a picture or do a collage of your impressions of the performance.

## Mexican Dance

The history of Mexican dance starts with the ancient cultures, which flourished in the country during the 3000 years preceding the arrival of the first Europeans. As early as 1500 Bc, we find, in the zone of Tlatilco (near what Mexico City today) highly refined representation of shamans (medicine men or those who worked with the supernatural), acrobats, musicians and dancers. In fact, a great number of pre-Columbian musical instruments have been found all over Mexico. Whistles, flutes, trumpets, ocarinas, drums (composed of metal, wood and clay), bells, rattles and scrapers all accompanied the dances and song of the religious and festive ceremonies. Today, in many regions of Mexico, we can see dances of Pre-Columbian origin, such as the *Dance of the Deer*.

The Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519 AD, and added new ingredients to the culture. Along with the language, the Spanish added new songs, new dances, and of course new musical instruments, which contributed to the diversity of expression. For example, Spanish Renaissance songs have been preserved in Mexico. These ballads, or romances, took new shape and character and became the typical "corridos".

In the music and dance of *sones* (the generic name given to folk melodies) such as those of Veracruz, one more element is present, the influence of African rhythms. They were contributed by slaves who worked the sugar cane in colonial times. Thus, the famous *sones jarochos*, of which *La Bamba* is the most universally known, combine Mexican Indian, Spanish and African elements.

Each region of Mexico has its own dances, corresponding to its physical climate and traditions. For example, there is a great difference between the smooth *Zandunga* of Oaxaca, in which the women wear embroidered costumes, and white lace headdresses, and the dynamic, joyful *jarabes* of the states of Jalisco, with its Charros and Chinas stamping the floor to the accompaniment of a typical mariachi band. There is also a strong contrast between the *Dance of the Quetzales*, of the central state of Puebla, which derives from the ancient Aztec rites, and the vigorous dance of the northern region, neighboring the United States. These dances are popular versions of such 19<sup>th</sup> century European dances as the Polka, taken to Mexico at the time of the French Intervention.

## Mexican Folk Music

Present-day Mexican music incorporates features going back to pre-Columbian music, mainly in relation to the percussion instruments, which are used to accompany dances. Little is known about the music of the Indians, but it evidently played a major role in dances and singing of cultural significance. The Aztecs, for example, had a "House of Song" or *Cuicacalli*, in which children received a compulsory musical education from the age of 12. Poems were always sung or declaimed with a musical accompaniment. The principal instruments used were percussion instruments, drums of terracotta, wood or tortoiseshell, rasps of notched bone or wood, various kinds of rattles and also simple flutes or conch shells, which were also used for transmitting orders during military operations. Some of these old instruments are still used, mainly on the occasion of ceremonial dances, by a few Indian tribes including the Seri, Yaqui, Huicholes and Tzotziles. The flutes now used, made of bone, clay or reeds, differ very little from those of the pre-Hispanic period.

Today's Mexican folk music also uses more modern instruments, such as brass trumpets, guitars, violins, and harps and in the south, marimbas. The marimba, based on West African models, consists of a series of strips of wood of different lengths with gourds as resonators. Although almost untouched by European influence, the folk music of the isolated Tarascans of Michoacan and the Yaqui and Seri Indians of Sonora is strikingly melodious.

The traditional songs and melodies of the various regions consist, for the most part, of a mingling of Spanish and Indian elements. In some cases, Moorish, African and non-Spanish European influences can be detected. As any visitor will soon discover, the Mexicans are very fond of singing, and they have a wide range of songs. Notable among these are the popular ballads known as corridos, used for the diffusion of news, before the coming of the mass media. The wandering bard retails a variety of local gossip, but he also sings on historical themes and about love and death. Many of the old *corridos* have remained popular to the present day. From this type of ballad, there developed the *cancion ranchera*, a melancholy song that takes as its themes sorrow, violence and unrequited love. The tunes are usually taken from 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish songs and "Mexican-ized" for the purpose. The songs of many regions, for example Jalisco, Veracruz, Oaxaca and Tehuantepec, have a ring of quite unmistakable individuality.

The best known type of Mexican folk music is that of the mariachi bands, which is of Spanish origin, with the addition of French and other European features. The name is probably a corruption of the French word "marriage", since the French troops in Mexico erroneously believed that these bands played mainly at weddings. The band, which may be large or small, usually consists of violinists, guitar players, trumpeters and a singer. Originally, these wandering musicians were found mainly in Jalisco state and particularly in its capital, Guadalajara. Now they can be encountered in most parts of the central highlands, wearing the traditional *ranchero* costumes.

## Mariachi Music

One of the most popular types of Mexican music is that performed by a group called the *mariachi*. The sound of the mariachi is unmistakable. It is created by combining violins, trumpets and guitars, with two unique, stringed instruments, the *vihuela* and the *guitarron*. The vihuela and the guitar form the rhythm section of the mariachi, while the guitarron serves as the bass. The violins and trumpets play the melody and the players also sing.

The mariachi, as just described, developed as recently as 1935, although its roots go far back in Mexican history. When the Spaniard arrived in Mexico in 1519, the Aztecs and other Indian people already had a highly developed musical culture. During the conquest and colonization, the Spaniards brought their own instruments and music. The two traditions, Indian and European, began to mix. A third type of music was introduced when African slaves were brought to the east and west coasts of Mexico in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. By about 1775, the time of the American Revolution, a new style of music had formed as a result of the combination of these three traditions. The music was called *mestizo* or "mixed" music. The instruments most commonly used to perform mestizo music consisted of a harp, one or two violins, the vihuela or other form of guitar, and voices. During the 1800s, in the villages and towns to the west of Guadalajara, in the state of Jalisco, this group became known as "mariachi".

In the early stages, the guitarron and trumpet were not included in the group. It was not until around 1890 or 1900 that the guitarron commonly took the place of the harp. It not only provided a stronger bass for the ensemble, but also could more conveniently be carried through the streets, as the musicians looked for customers willing to hire them. In the 1930s, the trumpet was added to the group, because it produced a better sound on recordings and radio broadcasts. After the trumpets were introduced, another guitar and as many as four or five violins were added to provide a more satisfactory musical balance. Today, the largest mariachis may have as many as 16-20 members, although the average is between seven and nine.

What kind of music does the mariachi perform? Originally, the most important song type was the *son*, which was used to accompany dancing. The son has driving, offbeat rhythms and humorous, tongue-in-cheek verses, sung between instrumental interludes. Shouts and cries given at certain times are called *gritos*, and are essential to the character of the music.

Besides sones, mariachis play other types of music. Some are instrumental pieces for dancing such as the polka and the waltz. Popular song types include the *ranchero* and *bolero*. Many other types of songs are played by mariachis, including *cumbias*, *danzones*, *paso dobles*, *corridos*, *huapangos* and even opera overtures.

Today, a professional mariachi may know a thousand pieces by memory in order to fulfill all requests made by the listeners. The musicians must develop excellent memories, since they perform without written music. Of all the different types of music played by the mariachis, the *son* is the most special to the group. It requires the most skill from the players and is enjoyed by everyone who listens to mariachi music.