

Calendar

Thick Sound

Chamber-Sized Mariachi

Where in San Diego can one hear good, authentic mariachi music? "What you have in San Diego are tons of groups with between four and six players," says Jeff Nevin. "That's a standard size, very portable, and it's a huge part of mariachi. The best place to hear a group like that is probably Old Town. Some of the best players are in the restaurants down there. Unfortunately, they don't play onstage."

Mariachis in Old Town stroll from table to table, of course. "And

LOCAL EVENTS

you won't have much time to enjoy the music, because

they'll be going on to somebody else's table soon enough."

Nevin is a professor of music and director of mariachi activities at Southwestern College, where students will soon be able to get an associate's degree in mariachi. He is also a mariachi trumpeter.

In Tijuana, bigger groups — 10 or 11 players — perform onstage, says Nevin. "Up in Los Angeles, several restaurants have large mariachi groups. The whole purpose of those restaurants is to offer that sort of entertainment." The restaurants are built to accommodate the musicians, not the other way around.

Is larger always better? "Well, it's different," says the 35 year old, who grew up in Tucson and has played in mariachi groups since age 15. "There's so much more music you can do with a large group. It's a much thicker sound; it sounds more like an orchestra than a string quartet. There's nothing wrong with string quartets, but they don't knock you down with a huge mass of sound. These large mariachis really do."

Small groups do one thing better than larger ones. "They tend to have a better repertoire. They often get hired to play so-and-so's 50th wedding anniversary, and they'll just be playing in the back yard, and people will request songs from their hometown in Mexico, their dad's favorite song, or the song they remember from childhood. These small mariachis have a repertoire, easily, of a thousand songs." The bigger groups, by contrast, customarily have a fifth that number. "And only 50 of the songs sound amazing; the rest aren't as well-rehearsed, because the group is designed to put on a program, whereas

the smaller groups are designed to be a sort of live jukebox."

Nevin is speaking by phone from his home studio in Bonita, where he is arranging two upcoming concerts to be performed by the unique group he founded six years ago. "It comes in three sizes," says Nevin, and each brings mariachi and symphonic music together. "Symphonic Mariachi Champaña Nevín has 15 players. That's really as big as any mariachi in the world. And in that group we have a cello, which no other mariachi has on a regular basis."

The smallest group, Chamber Mariachi Champaña Nevín, has five or six players. "It's more intimate, better

for small concert halls." Some members of the group are strictly symphony orchestra players. Nevin joined an orchestra the same year he started playing mariachi. "So I've always done both. Since I started combining the two, I can do them simultaneously. It means I don't need to carry around so many clothes. Literally, I used to have mariachi performances in the afternoon and orchestra performances in the evening."

Nevin is also a composer. "The first time I wrote something to bridge the two things I've always done separately was five years ago, when I wrote the 'Concerto for Mariachi and Orchestra.'" It will be performed by the

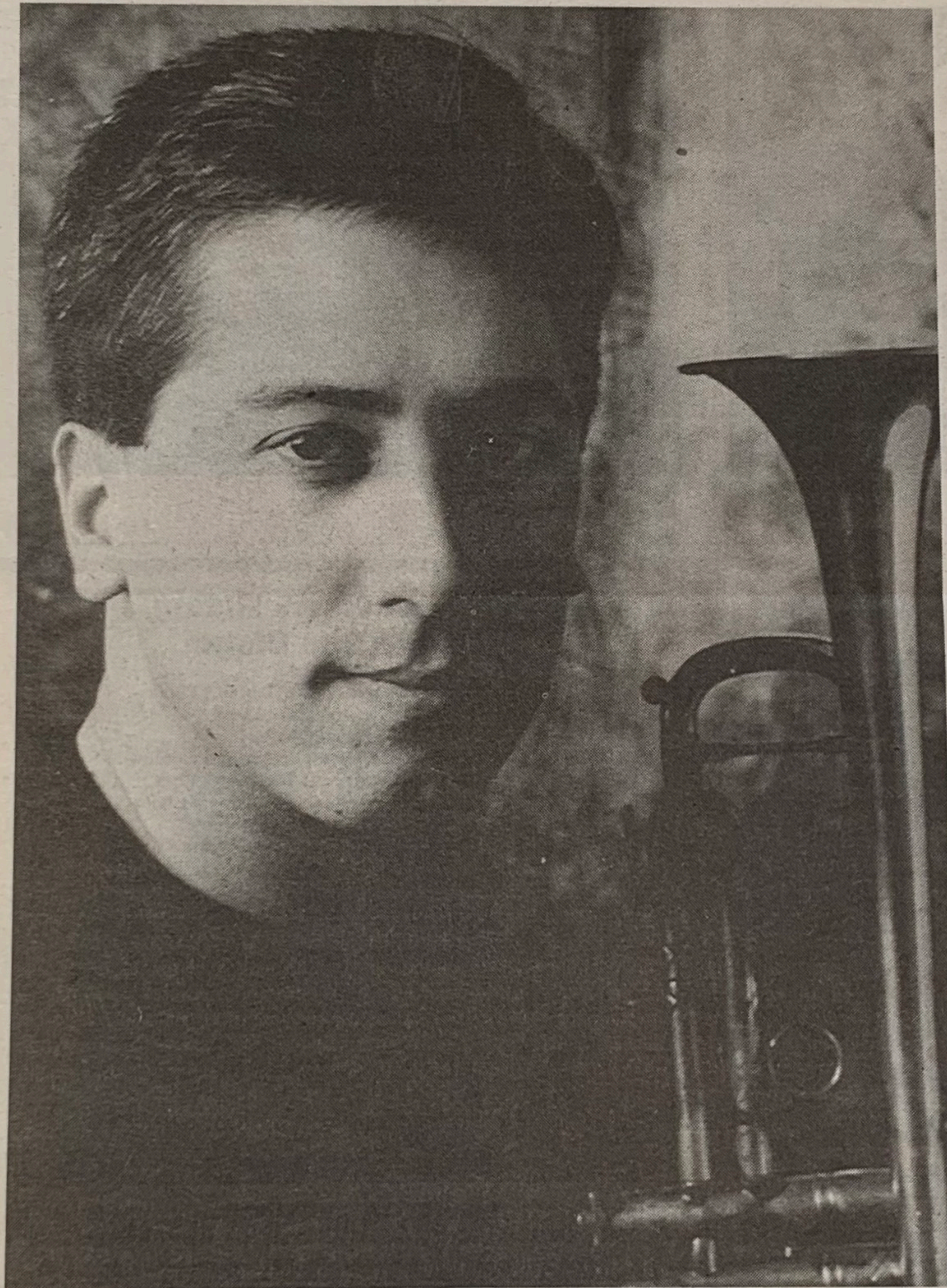
largest version of his group and the San Diego Symphony Orchestra next month. "The full orchestra will be behind us, and we'll be standing in front. That's 80 musicians onstage."

Born in Chicago, Nevin grew up in Tucson. He characterizes himself ethnically as "an American mix, no Mexican: Russian, Swedish, and Irish." A Mexican native, Lourdes Vivanco, will solo with Nevin's chamber-sized mariachi this weekend. A ranchera-style singer, Vivanco lives in San Diego now. Ranchero or ranchers' music is defined by Nevin as "the style of singing that made mariachi famous." It is, in fact, what one hears at the restaurants. It is one of the simplest forms of mariachi, which has more than a dozen others. Many are as complex as jazz and someday will be as widely and as well-respected as jazz, Nevin predicts.

The various forms of mariachi began, just like other folk music, in rural isolation, "defined by the region that it came from," says Nevin. When its musicians migrated to the cities, the forms combined and evolved. Some sound like polkas, because of German influence; others draw from Spanish, French, and African sounds.

"Mariachis are always playing cumbias, the style that originated in Colombia," says Nevin. "They play them especially in California, where, for some reason, the most requested song is 'El Mariachi Loco' — you know: 'The Crazy Mariachi.'"

— Jeanne Schinto



Jeff Nevin

Chamber Mariachi Champaña Nevín

Sunday, January 18, 2:00 p.m.
The Neurosciences Institute
10640 John Jay Hopkins Drive,
Torrey Pines Mesa, La Jolla
\$10-\$20;
children 5 and under, free.
866-436-8744 or
www.SeagateConcerts.org

Symphonic Mariachi Champaña Nevín
Friday and Saturday,
February 27 and 28, 8:00 p.m.
Copley Symphony Hall
750 B Street, Downtown
\$15-\$60
619-235-0804 or
www.sandiegosymphony.com

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