

# For 100 years, music memory classes have taught more than listening

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Mollie Gregory Tower, third from left, holding the music memory trophy from the original Austin contest, is part of a family of music educators, including, from left, daughter Debbie Tannert, granddaughter Christina Tannert and sister Peggy Brunner. Her father, Malcolm Gregory, was one of the first music memory students in Austin, and his love of the contest inspired her to revive it in 1979. Rodolfo Gonzalez/American-Statesman

By Addie Broyles

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Three notes.

Not just any three notes, but three of the same note, played in quick succession by a live orchestra on the stage of the Austin school district's majestic Performing Arts Center in the Mueller development.

That was the final challenge of last year's music memory contest, a University Interscholastic League competition for students to identify compositions and their composers in as little as three notes.

The students, in third through sixth grade, had learned the songs based on full-length recordings, but during the end-of-year test, 20-second snippets of the songs were performed live by the district's All-City Orchestra, comprised of high school students, some of whom started their musical journeys as music memory students themselves.

Limiting the selections to 20 seconds makes the test incredibly difficult. But that last three-note challenge left parents in the audience with jaws agape, looking at one another as if to ask, "Is that even possible?"

For more than 20 of the hundreds of students who spent months preparing for that moment, the answer was easy: "Symphony No. 1, Movement 3" by Zwilich.

By answering that final question correctly, those students earned the coveted Malcolm Gregory pin, the music memory contest's highest honor, named after an Austinite whose life was forever changed as a music memory student nearly 100 years ago and without whom the current Austin contest might not exist.

**Victrola on the porch**

Mollie Gregory Tower grew up surrounded by music.

The youngest of four children, Tower knew that her parents, Malcolm and Margaret, had met in the University Methodist Choir and sang with that group for the rest of their lives. She remembers how far they would go out of their way to attend countless symphony and opera performances. Tower and her siblings all graduated from the University of Texas School of Music, and three of the four became music educators, with her brother, Russell, becoming a professional choir director and organist.

In the 1970s, Tower taught music at Andrews Elementary, and in 1978, she was promoted to elementary music coordinator for the entire Austin district.

Not long after she got the job, her dad called. “My father was not a phone talker, but he said, ‘So you got the new job. Well, I need you to come and see me and I need to tell you something,’” she says. Tower drove over to his house and sat down to listen as he launched into a story that, despite those many years loving music as a family, she’d never heard before.

In 1921, when he was a student at Wooldridge Elementary, his music teacher was Katherine Cook, the woman who would become the namesake for Cook Elementary. Every Sunday afternoon, she would invite her students to her house in West Campus, where they would sit on the front porch and listen to songs played on a Victrola pointed out the open window.

Cook was training them for one of the city’s early music memory contests, a competition that first started in 1916 after New Jersey teacher Charles Milton Tremaine implemented a version of a parlor game he played at home that challenged guests to identify the names and titles of musical compositions.

The concept took off quickly, and by the early 1920s, similar contests were taking place in more than 500 cities around the country, including Austin.

Many students at that time had to go to their schools to listen and study, and often the city symphonies provided the music. The contest became an event celebrated by thousands in the public plazas and squares.

Though more than 50 years had passed since Gregory participated in Austin's contest — for which he earned a perfect score two years in a row — he could still recall the names of the pieces he studied on Cook's front porch.

But remembering the composers and titles of the songs wasn't what had the lasting impact on Tower's father. Gregory explained that it was during those afternoons on Cook's porch when he discovered how music moves something inside of you, a part of himself that he didn't know existed.

Tower says that as the youngest of seven children in a household without much money, Gregory didn't have the chance to listen to music in the same way that students do now simply by flipping on a radio or searching for a specific song on the internet.

Listening intently to those songs so that he could identify them during the test encouraged him to think critically about the different instruments and time signatures, how the parts of the songs could sound so varied, even within the same piece, and what kinds of emotions we might associate with those passages.

Although Gregory became a businessman, music was always part of his life. "Listening to a piece tapped into a special place inside of him," Tower says. The music memory contest "taught him how to use music for the rest of his life."

But music memory contests had all but disappeared by the late 1970s. Despite being hugely popular before the Great Depression and World War II, the contests started to fold during the war and in the post-war era when pop and rock music began to take over the public consciousness.

Before her father could even ask the question, Tower was thinking about how she might revive the contest.

With this origin story never far from her mind, Tower laid the foundation to bring back the contest that had been so transformative in her own father's life.

By the spring of 1980, Tower had launched the contest in six schools. By the following year, it had expanded to 40 schools and featured a live orchestra at the final contest. It was such a success that the University Interscholastic League board re-established a statewide contest, and over the years, before he died in

1999, Malcolm Gregory was able to watch his beloved music memory contest expand to hundreds of schools across the state.

In May, on the 35th anniversary of the revived contest, Tower sat proudly in the audience as she watched her granddaughter, Christina Tannert — Malcolm’s great-granddaughter, a third-year music teacher at Doss — proctor the exam from the stage, while Tower’s daughter, Debbie Tannert, who was retiring after 29 years as a music teacher in Austin, coached her final group of students.

As she sat next to her sister, Peggy Brunner, who taught music at Texas State University for 46 years, Tower imagined her father as a 10-year-old sitting on that porch listening to Mozart on a Victrola and could feel four generations of music vibrating through her.

### **Modern music memory**

Tower left the Austin school district in 1997 and started working with a music education company in Connecticut, where she focused on developing music memory curriculum. In 2014, Tower purchased the music memory portion of the company to start Austin-based Mighty Music Publishing, which publishes curriculum that is now used by more than 1,700 schools across 14 states.

One of the biggest changes that Tower made to the contest preparation is the development of listening maps, which help students visualize the songs with lines and images.

Tower recalls her teacher training: “The way we had been taught to teach listening meant talking my way through the music. You’d start with Beethoven’s Fifth and say ‘Here it comes! Here comes the French horn solo! Get ready ... here comes the oboe!’ But when you were talking, you were blocking people from listening,” she says.

She decided to find ways to use other senses to enhance the learning, including those listening maps and, now, kinesthetic activities for students who learn by doing.

“When your body changes how it moves, your mind is soaking it in. Just like the visual pictures change to help you hear, see and understand, your body helps you

feel the music when it changes,” she says. “You’re not choreographing a dance; you are moving to learn the music. You might do one thing during the ‘A’ theme and then do a different movement to the ‘B’ melody.”

Tower has five part-time employees, some of whom are also teachers or retired teachers. The curriculum for the 20 songs each year is 480 pages.

The music memory contest is just one of dozens of UIL academic contests that provide an athletics-inspired avenue for intellectual competition. Last year, UIL expanded the program so that second-, seventh- and eighth-graders could also participate. “Orders are coming in from bumps in the road, and what a thrill to realize that children even in the smallest schools are hearing Mozart and Bach because of it,” she says.

Although Tower and other educators in Austin chose which songs to include for the first years of the competition, an UIL committee now makes those decisions.

The contest still includes plenty of compositions that predate even students’ great-great-great grandparents: Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor,” “The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba” from Solomon by George Frideric Handel and “The Heavens Are Telling” from Joseph Haydn’s masterwork, “The Creation.”

But Tower, who admits appreciating contemporary music more than her father did, has long been an advocate for making the annual list as diverse as possible. Last year’s contest included Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer,” “Mambo” from “West Side Story” and a movement from the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Symphony No. 1” by modern composer Ellen Zwilich.

“The committee put ‘Sing, Sing, Sing’ on last year’s list, which just blew me away,” she says. Written by Louis Prima and performed by Benny Goodman, that song — famously performed during a jazz concert at Carnegie Hall in 1938 — can teach kids more than how to identify a swing beat.

“Classical music is just awesome, but jazz is the only true American form of music. Everything else we borrowed. I feel it’s critical that we educate children about our own contributions,” she says. “Take Zwilich. We need to know her name.”

## **Teaching more than music**

In decades of teaching music memory, Patton Elementary music teacher Jacque Fowler has enjoyed watching the variety of music expand to include modern pieces that the students can relate to. Just last week, she played the first song of this year's selections for her students: John Williams' "Cantina Band" from the original "Star Wars."

Fowler has been teaching music memory material in her classroom since she started in 1981. Even though Fowler was in her first year as a teacher, Tower asked her if she could help write some of the curriculum, including the listening maps. "I remember thinking, 'If I had this in college, it would have made those music history classes so much easier.' It was a real 'aha' moment," she says.

Fowler has been at Patton Elementary for more than three decades, and all of her students learn the songs, not just the six per grade who are chosen to compete on the school's official team.

"Kids are an open book," she says. "Not all the kids are exposed to this kind of music, but they don't come to us with a lot of preconceived notions of what is good music. There's a lot of content in there, and they learn to listen, analyze and evaluate what they are hearing."

By also studying the historical and cultural context of the songs, Fowler helps the students make connections with what they are learning in other classes.

Learning and talking about the songs becomes a family affair, Fowler says, especially in Austin, where we spend plenty of time in our cars. At the contest every year, she hears from parents and siblings who are as excited to take the test as the students who are competing.

Fowler says that another reason she loves the program is that it appeals to all kinds of learners. "It happens every year that there is a kid who is successful here who hasn't had this level of success in the classroom. It's amazing what that can do for their self-confidence because they realize they can do it," she says. "Even if they don't become music teachers or musicians, they will carry these lessons for a lifetime. It's exciting to see 35-year-old adults who talk about the fact that they still listen to that music."

Although many music memory students do eventually play music themselves in some capacity — including professional musicians such as Austin’s Gary Clark Jr., who was a student of Fowler’s and competed on her team for three years — they aren’t the students whom Tower feels most passionate about reaching. “By high school, only maybe 20 percent of the students perform music, and even fewer will continue after high school, but 100 percent of the students you teach will be music listeners for the rest of their lives,” she says.

Teaching them to become active listeners gives them tools to become even more perceptive in the world outside their music classes, too.

“Sometimes our elementary children grasp the meaning and emotion in music more than adults. They can cut to the heart of the thing so fast and not just let it pass over their heads,” Tower says. “They do not need everything to be upbeat and happy because they experience emotions more strongly than adults who try to cover them up.”

That’s a lesson her dad learned so many years ago on that porch, all because he learned how to listen to music and not simply hear it.