

Tri-M® History

In 1930, the Great Depression was just digging in. As businesses closed and people lost their homes, the future of public education looked grim as well. But in that year, high school music teacher Alexander M. Harley was challenged by his principal – who had just named him chairman of the music department – to turn Main Township High School into a “music center” for the Chicago suburb of Des Plaines. Harley did this by forming vocal and instrumental ensembles that performed in the community without charge. As the depression deepened, townspeople clamored to close the school for several years to save taxes; however, Harley’s free concerts were credited with not only publicizing the value of music but with keeping the school from closing.

Because he wanted to recognize the students who had given so generously of their time and talents by performing gratis for schools, churches, and civic clubs, Harley searched for a national honor society for students that excelled in musical achievement at the high school level. Although the National Honor Society honored academic achievement, the Quill and Scroll awarded journalistic effort, and the Forensic League highlighted success in debating, Harley found no such organization devoted to music. Finally in 1936, he drew up a simple constitution and bylaws for his new group, Maine Music Masters, dignifying it as an honor society that required its members to display academic scholarship, musical achievement, and service to school, church and community.

To symbolize all the values of this new honor society, Harley had a key emblem designed with a five-line music staff – each line representing the five points of selection (music, scholarship, character, leadership, and service). A lyre and scroll superimposed on the staff represented proficiency and service in the field of music. Above, a triplet figure in the shape of an *M* stood for the initials of Maine Music Masters.

After 16 years of growth at Maine, Harley’s honor society was noticed. Superintended of Schools Harry D. Anderson visited the school in 1951, attending the very successful fall induction ceremony along with several hundred parents and friends. The next day, Anderson asked Harley to share his organization with Illinois and the rest of the nation. A member of MENC, Harley went to MENC Executive Secretary Clifford V. Buttelman and offered himself and his wife as advisors to a national MENC-sponsored honor society based on Maine Music Masters. Buttelman welcomed the concept, but at that time MENC could not support it financially. Harley decided to incorporate his honor society as a nonprofit educational organization of January 3, 1952, with the approval of the Maine school board and administration. He changed its name to Modern Music Masters.

Einar J. Anderson, director of the Maine Township Adult Evening School, joined the Harleys as the third incorporating member, and helped to fund the venture for the first three years. At early meetings, held at the Harley home, they discussed the possibilities of extending the idea to the national level. Though several teachers agreed to form chapters in other schools, resistance among the students at Maine came as a surprise. As Robert D. Kuite, band director and co-advisor of the chapter at Maine High School in 1951, recalled, “everything was ready to roll except one thing – the kids did not like the idea of spreading Music Masters. They jealously guarded their membership.” When students in a newly formed chapter at Argo High asked to be inducted, Harley took a team from Maine to help with the ceremony. After doing this with other nearby schools, his team saw the great value of Modern Music Masters for other schools and communities, and the Maine students rallied around the cause.

By the end of 1952, after the May issue of *School Musician Director and Teacher* and the Spring issue of *Lyons Band News* had carried feature articles on the Modern Music Masters, 34 chapters in 21 states applied for charters. Membership was open to all students who met the requirements. In 1954, the name

Tri-M first came into usage. And for the first time, Tri-M materials were printed – rather than handwritten or mimeographed – although the central office remained in the Harley's basement office until 1979.

At a convention in St. Louis marking the 50th anniversary of MENC, Executive Secretary Vanett Lawler featured Tri-M on the regular convention program. Since then, Tri-M has been featured at many state, regional, and national conferences. Chapters have been chartered in public, private, and parochial schools in all 50 states and in countries such as Canada, Chile, China, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. Honorary Tri-M members include Arthur Fiedler, Howard Hanson, Bobby McFerrin, Sir Georg Solti, Shinichi Suzuki, Fred Waring, and Meredith Wilson.

Over the years, Tri-M chapters, as well as individual members, have been acknowledged for their achievements through the Tri-M Music honor society Recognition Program. Outstanding chapters compete for National Chapter of the Year scholarships annually. The Tri-M Leadership recognition (est. 1954), formerly known as Top-Notcher and renamed in 2002, is presented to Tri-M members who show exceptional contribution to their chapter. The Master Musician recognition (est. 1971) is presented to Tri-M members exhibiting exceptional musical ability. The Honor Ensemble Participation recognition (est. 1989) is presented to Tri-M members exhibiting exceptional musical ability. The Honor Ensemble Participation recognition (est. 1989) is presented to Tri-M members representing their schools in music honor ensembles. The Tri-M outstanding Service recognition (est. 2003) is presented to Tri-M members offering exceptional service to their community and chapter. And the Tri-M Alumni Achievement recognition (est. 2004) is presented to former Tri-M chapter members for their career successes and life accomplishments.

In 1983, the executive boards of Tri-M and MENC both voted to approve a proposal that Tri-M become affiliated with MENC. As of August 1, 1983, the Tri-M Music Honor Society became a program of MENC, and, in the words of Alexander Harley, "After 31 years of seeking this affiliation, my dreams have finally been realized. Tri-M has found its destiny!"

Tri-M® Quick History:

- 1936 – Alexander Harley and his wife Frances founded the Maine Music Masters at Maine Township High School in Des Plaines, IL.
- 1952 – Maine Music Masters became incorporated and was renamed Modern Music Masters.
- 1954 – The first individual member recognition, known as Top-Notcher, was presented. This recognition was renamed Tri-M Leadership in 2002.
- 1971 – First Master Musician recognition was presented.
- 1983 – Modern Music Masters became a program of MENC: The National Association for Music Education and was officially renamed the Tri-M Music Honor Society.
- 1986 – The first year Tri-M was recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) as an approved program.
- 1989 – The first State Conference Achievement recognition was presented to Tri-M members accepted to All-State Honor Ensembles. This recognition was renamed the Honor Ensemble Participant recognition in 2003.
- 2002 – The Top-Notcher was renamed Tri-M Leadership recognition.
- 2003 – The State Conference Achievement recognition was renamed the Honor Ensemble Participant recognition and was expanded to recognize Tri-M member participation in any music honor ensemble, including division and national groups.
- 2003 – The first Tri-M Outstanding Service recognition was presented.
- 2004 – The Tri-M Alumni Achievement recognition was established.