

# “Beethoven’s Egmont Overture, Op. 84”—Modesto High School Band (1930)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Steven Pecsek (guest post) \*



“Over half of the instruments in my band are Conns. In using them at the National Contest, I found them to be in most perfect tune and attribute a great deal of our success to the use of Conn band instruments.” This is the statement of Frank Mancini, director of the Modesto, California, High School Band, winners of second place in class A at the National meet. This fine band has won the championship of the state of California in 1924, 1925, 1927, 1928 and 1929, an unusual performance in consistent musicianship.

On 11 April 2006, the Library of Congress announced the 50 added items to the 2005 National Recording Registry. Number 13 on the list was Beethoven’s Egmont Overture, Op.84, recorded by Modesto High School Band on 11 May 1930. This is the story of the band and the recording it made nearly 80 years ago.

Modesto High School had an orchestra, but did not have a band in 1920. This would soon change. William Whilman Higgins, a native of Dexter, Maine, was involved in various musical activities since he moved to Modesto around 1910, including reorganization of the Modesto Band in June of 1919. The 1919 Modesto Band was most likely comprised of all adults.

On 15 May 1920, Higgins began to organize a boys’ band hoping to have them “trained for concert work” by September. The Modesto Boys’ Band was apparently trained very well because they won first place in the boys’ band contest on 12 September 1920 at the State Fair in Sacramento.

As members of the boy’s band began their fall semester classes at Modesto High School, they asked if the school could have its own band. Edna Barr Love was put in charge and rehearsals were held Wednesdays after school. Twenty students attended during the fall semester and starting in the spring of 1921, band became a regular class.

In the fall of 1921, the boy’s band again took first place at the State Fair. Unexpectedly, Higgins died from tuberculosis on 1 April 1922. Carl Payne, one of the students, led the band until Frank Mancini became the group’s music instructor. The Modesto High School Band continued to be directed by Love until 2 May 1923, when Mancini, former clarinetist with the Sousa Band, signed a contract to teach music in the Modesto schools.

The eldest of six children, Mancini was born on 13 January 1886, in Serramonacesca, Italy. He studied with hometown musicians and learned to play the clarinet. In 1905, he joined the Chieti Band, then the Royal Italian DeVita Band, and toured Europe. In 1907, he was asked to join the Channing Ellery Band, also known as Ellery’s Royal Italian Band, and came to America. By 1910, Mancini was performing with the Conway Weber Band, the Thavieu Exposition Band, and

several other organizations. He settled in Oakland, California, in 1910 and performed for many different musical organizations throughout the San Francisco area.

He joined the Thaviu Band for the opening as well as the closing of the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. It was during this same exposition that Mancini also performed with the Sousa Band. On 26 June 1916, Mancini purchased a 40-acre ranch just south of Modesto, along the Tuolumne River. He married Ione Kahlow the following year in Oakland. He continued to work in Oakland and San Francisco until 1921, when he and Ione moved to their Modesto ranch.

About two months after Higgins's death, Mancini agreed to instruct and lead the Modesto Boys' Band, which won second place at the California State Fair. His success with the band secured a teaching contract with the school.

### *First Competition at the State Fair*

The Modesto High School Band's first competition was at the State Fair, where the band, led by Mancini, took first place on 7 September 1924. The high school band placed first again on 13 September 1925 at the fair. The band did not compete in 1926.

On 7 May 1927, the band won first place in the state band contest held in San Francisco. It also was awarded the right to represent California in the second National High School Band Contest on 28 May 1928 in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Modesto's send-off to the band is best left to the local newspaper story:

*Sped on their way by cheers and tears, the Modesto high school band left yesterday for Council Bluffs, Iowa, to take part in the national high school band contest.*

*Ovation after ovation was given them, both at the high school and the Tidewater station. So soul-stirring was the departure from a general assembly at the high school that Frank Mancini, director of the band, left with tears in his eyes and wept into retirement for a brief while.*

*No Modesto athletic team was ever given such a send-off as the one given the band as more than a thousand students, many of them forced to stand, crowded into the high school auditorium.*

*The high school song was sung with great feeling. There were many cheers. Mancini was presented with a brief case, a gift of the students, and told to carry music in it to Iowa, but to bring the prize home in it.*

*The members of the band – 62 boys and girls – stood in rows on the stage during the assembly, which was held just before the departure for the Tidewater station.*

*As they filed out of assembly all went on the high school lawn to bid the band farewell. Two big school buses were filled with members of the band. They proceeded towards town, led by four motorcycle officers sounding their sirens, and by Chief of Police Lee H. Smith in an automobile.*

*At the Tidewater station a large crowd of Modesto citizens, many of them parents of the band members, had gathered.*

*The departure marked the end of a stirring three-day campaign during which more than \$6,500 was raised to send the band to Council Bluffs. The drive got a late start, due to a feeling by many leaders that the Red Cross drive, just completed, had left generous people of Modesto unwilling to undertake another even larger task.*

The band was missing ten required instruments because the funding available to purchase them was not available. However, they hoped to make up any points deducted through better tonal quality and leadership. But that was not to be the case:

*Modesto High School won third place in the national high school band contest last night in Council Bluffs, Iowa, according to Associated Press dispatches.*

*Modesto competed against twenty-two bands, the finest that the high schools of America could produce. In the elimination contest held yesterday, Modesto was one of the six qualifying for the finals.*

*Modesto players were competing under a severe handicap in that they lacked the required number of instruments.*

*Interest here was intense yesterday afternoon and evening. Telephone calls poured into the News-Herald office constantly, and a crowd of Modestans gathered about the Associated Press telegraph operator waiting for news.*

Two days later another newspaper article from Council Bluffs, Iowa, explained Modesto's third-place standing:

*Inspection of the judges' score sheets following the national high school band concert here discloses that the Modesto band, which placed third, would have won first place had it not lacked in instruments.*

*The Modesto band had the most perfect score of all in five of the six points scored. It won in interpretation, intonation, tonal and harmonic balance, tone quality and precision, rating near perfection in these divisions, but had been marked down so far in instrumentation that it placed third when the final average was taken.*

*Popular sentiment gave the Modesto band first place. The applause following the performance of this band was a remarkable demonstration. The judges themselves expressed their amazement at the performance. Hard figures told in the end, however, and the lack of sufficient instruments of certain classes was too great a handicap to be overcome by excellence in performance.*

The Modesto band was penalized 2.5 points for lack of instrumentation but still ended up only 0.7 points behind Joliet High School Band and 0.2 point behind Council Bluffs High School Band. Upon arriving in Modesto on Wednesday at 5:00 p.m., the train was met by hundreds of people. The band members assembled and paraded through downtown Modesto playing several numbers, including "I Love You California" as a finale.

The band showed its winning streak again in 1928 when it became the reigning champ at the state band contest. Its budget issues continued, though. So, once again it had to scramble to raise funds for the national contest that would take place in less than two weeks in Joliet, Ill. The band, now 72-members strong, needed as much as \$10,000.

This time, the band was armed with all of the required instruments. However, it placed third again. Joliet High School Band was first with the Senn High School Band of Chicago in second place. Judges for the contest were Edwin Franko Goldman, John Philip Sousa, and Captain Charles O'Neill. J.E. Maddy from the University of Michigan was the judge of sight-reading.

Again, there was a parade through the streets of Modesto.

The band continued to reign supreme in California in 1929 when it took first place again in the state band contest in San Francisco. This time \$8,000 was raised to send 94 band members to Denver, Col., on a five-car Southern Pacific train. The local newspaper fondly described the band's journey:

#### MODESTO BAND SCORES HIT ON ARRIVAL IN DENVER

*A clash between the East and the West for championship honors in the fourth annual national high school band contest was predicted here tonight as thirty-one aggregations from all parts of the country were keyed to high enthusiasm for the event which begins tomorrow morning.*

*Arriving here in late afternoon the high school band of Modesto, Calif, ninety-four strong, indicated it would offer stiff competition to all contestants, particularly Nicholas Senn High School band of Chicago.*

*The latter group of 120 members arrived simultaneously with the western champions. Good naturedly, like friendly fighters about to engage in the battle of their lives, the two groups eyed over each other speculatively at Union Station.*

#### MODESTANS SCORE

*Then there was a rush from newspaper photographers and reporters. Modesto won the first round here. Its pretty girls in their snappy uniforms were the object of all eyes, cameras were clicking busily for many moments. Contest officials last night said the championship "on paper" probably would be between Modesto and Senn high schools.*

#### KEEN INTEREST

*Tremendous interest in Denver over the event and packed houses are expected in huge auditorium seating 12,000.*

*Saturday all bands will march one mile through the city streets to civic center for a mass band concert. Virtually all Denver will declare a holiday to see the best high school bands of thirty-seven states perform.*

When the contest ended the Senn band had won first place, but the Modesto band had played better. "In spite of a score of 92.6 percent, Senn nearly lost in 1929, and won only because the Modesto, California, band scored low in sight-reading. Only four tenths of a percentage point separated the two bands."

The Modesto band played without mistakes in the final competition. Carl Busch, the composer of the contest piece, "Chant from the Great Plains," gave Mancini and his band the greatest compliment by stating that he liked Mancini's interpretation better than his own. Will Earhart, supervisor of music in Pittsburgh, Penn., "stated that the playing of the Modesto Band was the most artistic he had ever heard."

There were eight judges in the 1929 contest and three of them gave Modesto first place, but when all the votes were counted, Modesto came in second. This time, when the band arrived back in Modesto, a crowd of more than 2,000 greeted the band members as they stepped off the train. Again, a parade was organized that ended in Courthouse Park where a rally was held and speeches were given. Mancini told the crowd that the next competition would be 22-24 May 1930, in Flint, Mich., and the contest music would be the Egmont Overture by Beethoven.

The Northern California School Band Contest took place on 26 April 1930, in Sacramento with 20 bands competing. However, the Modesto band was ineligible for further competition after winning first place for three years in a row. The band could perform only as an honored guest.

The Modesto band found a place of permanence in 1930 when it made its first recording. This milestone was documented in the following articles:

The "Modesto News-Herald" (Saturday, 10 May):

### SCHOOL BAND TO GIVE CONCERT AT SAN FRANCISCO

Modesto Players to Have Record Made Of Contest Piece on Sunday

*The Modesto High School band has been invited to play at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium on Sunday evening at 9:30 o'clock, it was announced Friday. The invitation has been accepted.*

*"We consider this an unusual honor," Prof. Frank Mancini, director of the band, declared.*

*The Modesto band will play at a special program honoring mother's day and the American Legion. It is to be a part of San Francisco's observance of music week.*

*"There will be no admission charge, and we hope a large number of Stanislaus County people will attend," Mancini said.*

*The band will go to San Francisco earlier in the day and will have a phonograph record made of its rendition of this year's national contest piece, Egmont.*

"The Awgwan" (The Modesto High School newspaper, Friday, 16 May):

### HAIL TO OUR BAND!

*Mr. Mancini and the Modesto High Band are to be highly complimented for their work this year.*

*Since last year when they received second in the national contest at Denver they have known that they might not go to the national contest again this year. They were not eligible to compete in the state contest at Sacramento either, because they had won this contest for the past three years.*

*However, even though the band could not compete in any contest this year, Mr. Mancini and the band have continued hard work, and it is now better than it has ever been before, the music authorities say.*

Musicians Record Egmont Overture for Phonograph

Appear On San Francisco Music Week Program

*As the climax to their activities of this year, the Modesto High School Band has preserved their music for posterity. The band traveled to San Francisco last Saturday, and recorded the Egmont Overture by Beethoven for the Sonora Phonograph Company.*

*The recording of the selection was a long and arduous affair. Approximately three hours was taken for the process. Due to the extreme sensitiveness of the recording apparatus the records are easily ruined and much time is needed for the most exacting tuning. It is expected that the records will be available this week.*

*After the completion of the record, the band closed the Music Week in San Francisco by playing several selections on an excellent program held at the Civic Auditorium.*

*The band played the following selections: Chicago Brooks March, Egmont Overture, First Hungarian Rhapsody, and Echoes from the Metropolitan Opera House. As a final selection the band played Stars and Stripes Forever by Sousa.*

Although the “Awgwan” article states that the record was made for the Sonora Phonograph Company, it was actually made for MacGregor & Ingram Recording Laboratories in San Francisco. The record is a 12-inch double-sided disc with label numbers MI 557A (part 1) and MI 558A (part 2). The matrix number on part 1 is the same as the label number while part 2 has no visible matrix number. Beethoven’s Egmont Overture featured on the record was arranged for concert band by Clifford Page.

The “Awgwan’s” 12 June edition reported on record sales:

Manager Reports 150 Band Records Sold To Date

### *STUDENTS URGED TO BUY*

*The music department reports that the Modesto High School Band records are going fast. Almost one hundred and fifty of them have been sold due to the efforts of the many band members under the leadership of Isadore Brachman.*

*The price of \$1.50 is quite reasonable, according to Mr. Mancini, for a limited number of records always sell for at least eight dollars each. The tonal rendition of the recording is good considering the difficulty in the making, he believes.*

*Brachman urges everyone to purchase a record and support the band.*

The Sycamore, the school yearbook, had some different comments regarding the 1930 band contests and the phonograph record:

*“Wanted-new ways and means of gaining the great American dollar!” This might be termed the slogan of our band, for since the “battle of harmony” was held in Flint, Michigan, this year, our band did not enter, due to financial difficulties.*

*In May, at San Francisco, the band made a phonograph recording, copies of which were sold about the campus.*

Not all of the records were sold and--78 years later--several un-played copies were still sitting on a shelf in the band director’s office. This was the status of the record until 20 October 2001, when the 50 Plus Club of Stanislaus County honored the memory of Mancini with a dinner and musical program. Following the program, CD copies of the 1930 band recording were sold as a

fundraiser. The transfer to CD was apparently made from a badly worn copy of the record, but it did demonstrate the quality of the performance.

Since I was a member of the Modesto High Band Boosters at the time, I received the band director's permission to borrow one of the un-played copies of the record to try to make a better transfer to CD. The recording was then transferred to CD format to be sold as a fundraiser for the Modesto High School Band.

### *Mancini And Modesto*

Mancini had several more accomplishments. He was founder of the Modesto Symphony Orchestra and conductor from its beginning in 1930 until his retirement in 1962. With a population of no more than 18,000 in 1930, Modesto was possibly the smallest community in the nation to have its own symphony orchestra. In 1941, Mancini and Harold Bartlett co-authored a series of Band Training books for 15 different instruments. The Historic Roll of Honor of High School Concert Bands 1920-1960, published by the John Philip Sousa Foundation in 1986, included only 23 bands and only one from California: Modesto High School Concert Band conducted by Mancini. On 5 February 1994, he was posthumously elected into the National Band Association's Hall of Fame of Distinguished Band Conductors located at Troy State University in Troy, Alabama. In her book, "Frank Mancini Modesto's Music Man," Kathleen M. Gooch told the story of Mancini's life and accomplishments but recognized the inclusion of his recording with the Modesto High School Band into the National Recording Registry as his greatest honor.

Mancini died on Nov. 15, 1964, at his home in Modesto. His wife, Ione, died 19 days later on 4 December. In their will, the Mancinis left their 23-acre ranch to the City of Modesto to become one of the city's largest parks. Their will also left more than \$400,000 to be set up in a trust fund to provide scholarships for students aspiring to become teachers.

The Mancini legacy is still evident in Modesto today. The Modesto Symphony Orchestra, now fully professional, performs numerous concerts every year. The Modesto Band of Stanislaus County (formerly the Modesto Boys' Band) performs six summer concerts annually in Mancini Bowl, an outdoor amphitheater in Modesto's Graceada Park.

Vito Susca, in his 1967 doctoral dissertation, summed up Frank Mancini's contribution to music: "Frank Mancini brought to his community, state and country his talent and experiences as a professional musician. He learned to communicate his knowledge of music to everyone, regardless of age or talent. Students and colleagues respected his zeal for the best possible instruction and performance in music. He left the thought that there was no limitation to the time necessary to develop the individual and his talents."

The Modesto High School Band is still active as a concert band and in marching band competitions throughout California and Nevada.

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