

VMEA President's Article  
Fall 2009

Quite a few years ago, a student gave me a t-shirt with the text; "Where words fail, music speaks." This short and simple quote from Hans Christian Anderson possesses incredible depth of meaning.

How often have we witnessed the power of music? If each of us took some time to think about this, I believe we could write our own books about the many times that music has spoken louder and more profoundly than words.

I had an experience this summer that drove home this point to me. I led a tour of 87 students to Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and France. The tour ended with an opportunity to sing during a ceremony at the American Cemetery in Normandy, France, overlooking Omaha Beach. The site for the ceremony was at a beautiful memorial, which stands above the cemetery, where some 9,000 American heroes are buried. This year marked the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invasion, and just being there was quite an emotional experience.

In attendance at the ceremony were people from all over the world. However, of particular note was a tour group of elderly Americans. Two of the tour participants were army nurses during WWII.

After our first selection, I had the honor of laying the wreath at the base of a statue. After we finished our 20 minutes of singing, the site manager said there would now be a recording of our national anthem, which would be followed by taps. Unfortunately, he was unable to get the recording to work. Since I teach a 4-part arrangement of our national anthem each September, my group was able to sing it, instead. I have never been so deeply moved by our national anthem. All around me, people were reduced to tears. What struck me so deeply, however, was the impact this had on the students. Here they were, singing our national anthem while facing the 9,000 graves of the very brave American soldiers who stormed Omaha Beach, just 200 yards to our right. When we finished, no one spoke. I witnessed students openly weeping and hugging each other. The adults who traveled with us, along with the many visitors to the site, were either crying or standing still in quiet reflection.

As I watched my students, it struck me that this most likely was their first time singing the national anthem that was not at the beginning of a pep rally, a sporting event, or a school ceremony. I realized that this was the first time for them...and perhaps for many of the adults, as well...that they realized the true meaning of our national anthem.

Afterwards, we had 90 minutes to walk through the cemetery and down to the beach—a great opportunity to reflect on how profound this experience was. When we returned to the parking area where our motor coaches waited, I knew I needed to say something to my students. Even though I'm not normally at a loss for words, I found it quite difficult to know what to say. I did, however, tell them that the next time we sing the national

anthem at school, it is up to us to educate others why it's important to be respectful when the anthem is played or sung. It is important for them to encourage their friends to not shout "O" in the middle of the anthem, and it is very important to stand with respect in honor of the anthem's true meaning. There were no words, however, that could have taught them the same lesson they had just gained through the experience of singing at Normandy.

Hans Christian Anderson's quote offers a lesson we all should share with our students and with others. Music is so much more than a means of entertainment, a career choice, or an opportunity to perform publicly. It has the power to awaken emotions within us. It can create joy, sadness, a sense of peace, or even anger, and more.

What we do as music educators is deeply profound. It is beyond preparing students for performances; it is beyond preparing the next generation of music educators. It gives us the ability to connect with others without using words. It empowers us to speak when words fail.

I wish you all a wonderful new school year, and may your music be plentiful and your words few!