

My SSB Story—by Jared Rawlings

*A flag appears 'mid thunderous cheers,
The banner of the Western land.
The emblem of the brave and true*
—John Philip Sousa

My journey through the music teaching profession has been shaped by many genres and styles of music; however, American Music (patriotic and otherwise) is what has resonated most frequently. Growing up in a family with parents who are educators and who also coach public school sports teams structures one's understandings of the rituals associated with our National Anthem. Consequently, my understanding of *The Star-Spangled Banner* was limited to a habitual view. One of the unifying goals in my life has been to professionalize the performance of our National Anthem, but unfortunately with little regard for the aesthetic behind such meaningful text. What I've discovered, is that the meaning makes all the difference—to musicians and listeners alike.

Americans take the performance of the National Anthem, without a doubt, very seriously. As I entered my freshman year in conservatory training, the stakes for perfection were heightened. The first year alone, I recall performing *The Star-Spangled Banner* a dozen times. At rehearsal every conductor would stress the fundamental importance of the anthem for any professional musician, saying "...if you can't play the National Anthem... you will starve." They also stressed proper execution: "You are either in tune or out of tune. Playing the notes and rhythms or not playing the right notes and rhythms." Still, I don't recall any discussion of the history of the anthem or any disseminated of the text.

My first experience of the emotional power of the National Anthem was in fall 2004 at my first home game as a field conductor for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Cornhusker Marching Band. More than 84,000 people attended the game; it was an overwhelming sight and the pressure of keeping the band together with the Director of Bands (DOB) put me in a vulnerable place. Every fan seemed to be singing in full voice along with the band. I had never experienced that before. As a musician, I hadn't really been open to such an emotional response to *The Star-Spangled Banner* because I was so focused on just making it right. As a conductor, I had to listen to the band and crowd, watch my DOB, and navigate musical phasing issues with fluctuating tempos. In that moment, however, I was open to the aesthetic experience of the anthem because I was really listening to the words of the poem.

It wasn't until I began teaching in the public schools that I realized that I didn't truly know the meaning behind *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Having just graduated with a wind conducting degree, where I was asked to analyze every piece before stepping foot on the podium, and faced with the challenge of conducting *The Star Spangled Banner* myself, I decided to study the text first. I metaphorically equate some parts of teaching to a person uploading or updating software on a machine. The band was our "machine" and I needed to update their knowledge ("software") about the context of this work. I didn't deliver a lecture on the National Anthem, rather I gave my students tidbits of information about the poet, the text, the Battle of Baltimore and attempted to deepen their awareness of the piece through a *comprehensive musicianship* approach. This multi-disciplinary approach to music was helpful for my students because it inspired them to reflect on their own past performances of the Anthem. Through this self-reflection process, the students were able to sustain a lasting individual and collective relationship with this piece.

Even though my musical life started with a myopic view of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, as most do, I have been fortunate to have the emotional power of the anthem inform my own teaching and performing of the work. In the Midwest, public school ensembles frequently have to deliver the National Anthem at sporting events (school and community related). Being one of those ensemble leaders, the pressure to perform the music and the existing ritual well stifles any effort to inspire students with the text and history of the song. I'm not sure that this will change much in the near future, but I certainly believe that infusing the story behind our National Anthem into student performances can have an enormous impact—on both the emotional power of the anthem and the views of our future citizens.