



Make a Difference



ONE YOUNG ARTIST'S APPROACH TO MUSIC-MAKING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY TEDDY ABRAMS

I have always felt uncomfortable with the word “career,” if only because I didn't want to be identified as someone who thought about this too much. Being a conductor only complicates matters; this vocation leads its practitioners through a notoriously murky and challenging “career” path. It's an ancient dichotomy that confronts all artists: balancing the pure artistic impulse with creating a life that one wishes to lead. Finding a solution has prompted me to ponder what it means to be a musician in this era, and to explore my artistic psyche in the process.

For years before entering Curtis I knew I wanted to be a conductor. I also identified very strongly as a “classical” musician. (What exactly “classical” meant was not entirely clear to me, but I wore the word as a badge of vague and misplaced superiority.) Arriving at Curtis, I experienced the dramatic expansion of the musical universe that I had brought with me as an 18-year-old. There, in an environment widely considered the bastion of traditional “classical” training, I had my first meaningful explorations into jazz, bluegrass, improvisation, and folk music from around the world.

I loved the sensation of making music, but increasingly it seemed critical to grasp the necessity and relevance of music's existence in human communities in the first place. This insight ultimately led me to a much more energized and defined understanding of what I hoped my life in music would be.

Top: The Sixth Floor Trio

Above: Teddy Abrams PHOTOS: KENNY CORBIN

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Michael Tilson Thomas, who has been a tremendously inspiring mentor for me since I was a teenager, speaks of our musical archetypical personalities: He is a “village musician”; another conductor is a “high-priest musician.” He once told me I was also a village musician—but from Mars! As I explored the underlying dynamics of musical communication while at Curtis, I came to see that his assessment was, more or less, accurate. Like him, I found myself deeply drawn to situations where music-making was somehow vital to “community.” I understood that part of my attraction to conducting (beyond the requisite and expected love of the music itself) was that this vocation, or career, could change and better community. It could be truly relevant.

NO APOLOGIES

But what kind of musician was I supposed to be? Perhaps not a “classical” musician, even though I felt just as passionate as ever about the brilliant composers of the past. Curtis faculty member Ford Lallerstedt reminds his students that while the human evolves technologically we don’t change psychologically as a species. I took this to be philosophical proof that Beethoven’s message, or the beauty of Thomas Tallis, or the universe of Mahler’s Third Symphony are as meaningful and relevant as they ever were. We need not ever apologize for great art, nor should we underestimate our audiences’ capabilities. The issue of our music’s relevance in the modern cultural environment lies with presentation, format, audience experiences, marketing, and engagement. Adjusting these elements is both enjoyable and rewarding, and in no way requires the sublimation of the art that we love. It requires only that artists be far more creative and entrepreneurial in how we present our art to the broadest public.

The final component of the artistic model I built for myself was civic-mindedness. Here I was influenced by my father, a lawyer who believes that success comes with a responsibility to build community. He spends a great deal of his time representing people who have no advocates, from children in California’s foster care system to death penalty clients in Alabama. Inspired by his example, I have made civic-mindedness a focal point of my musical initiatives.

Once I understood that my artistic mission would combine creative output, relevance to our modern society, and a commitment to community work, I was able to shed the uncomfortable concept of “career.” Following my artistic mission above all—and being willing to experiment, learn, and fail—has been immensely fulfilling and engaging.

In pursuit of this mission, I started a group called the Sixth Floor Trio with two of my closest friends from Curtis, Harrison Hollingsworth and Johnny Teyssier (and we are often joined by the delightfully rogue percussionist Gabriel Globus-Hoenich). We all have other positions and activities each season, so playing in the trio is essentially for fun, adventures, and experimentation. Our goals are twofold: to play the music that we love regardless of provenance or boundaries; and to develop projects that introduce our music to new audiences, wherever they might be. This amounts to a great deal of improvisation, composing, arranging, arguing, and exploration. The trio has served as a laboratory and fertile ground for creativity.

Working with my extraordinary friends has fueled everything else that I pursue artistically. Our projects have ranged from some 250 Random Acts of Culture around the country to starting a festival in Miami to break down musical boundaries. We have filmed two crazy but awfully fun TV pilots, written grant proposals and raised funds, been removed by security multiple times for misplaced Random Acts, and shared folk and “classical” music styles with the most unlikely characters in the most incongruent settings. When I contemplated “careers” as a teenager I would never have imagined this.

Together we aim to spread this doctrine of experimentation, self-challenging, improvisation, and broadening audiences to the next generation of musicians. Following our individual creative missions—and living a life that is artistic, relevant, and transformative to our communities—yields great and inspired art that can and will make a difference. ◊

Teddy Abrams, a 2008 graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, begins his tenure as music director of the Louisville Orchestra this fall.

Curtis Presents the Sixth Floor Trio

Teddy Abrams, Harrison Hollingsworth, and Johnny Teyssier formed the Sixth Floor Trio as they completed their studies at Curtis in 2008. They’ll perform at Curtis on November 2 at 3 p.m. Visit www.curtis.edu/Performances for more information.

More Online

Hear and see the Sixth Floor Trio at www.youtube.com/user/SixthFloorTrio



Teddy Abrams conducts the Louisville Orchestra. PHOTO: O'NEIL ARNOLD/COURTESY LOUISVILLE ORCHESTRA