



THE Q+A

BY
BRIAN
WISE

Teddy Abrams

A conductor builds bridges with fiddlers, banjo pickers, and hip-hop artists in tow.

→ **IN SPEAKING** with Teddy Abrams (Conducting '08), you might expect him to steer the conversation towards his more glittery work: his summer dates at the Hollywood Bowl and the Aspen Music Festival, his Boston Symphony debut—slated for March 2025—or the Grammy Award that he won last February with Yuja Wang (Piano '08) and the Louisville Orchestra (LO), where he has been music director since 2014 (and where his current contract runs through the end of this season). While all those things are part of the Abrams mix, he's just as excited to talk about visiting backwoods Kentucky towns as part of the LO's statewide touring program, or the Creators Corps, a project to commission new pieces rooted in Louisville history and culture.

A composer himself who is currently at work on the score to *ALI*, a musical about Louisville-born boxer Muhammad Ali (premiering in Chicago next spring), Abrams, who hails from Berkeley, Calif., is a fervent booster for his adopted home state.

I'm reaching you today at your home in Louisville. It isn't so common for conductors to actually reside in the city where they do most of their work. What have been the biggest benefits of living in Louisville, whether for you or the orchestra?

It's weird that that is such an unusual decision. It's actually a disappointing fact how music directors often interact with their cities. I try and be respectful: Every orchestra has its own expectations, and every city has its own relationships with its arts institutions, so I can only really speak to myself. It's been my personal mission here in Louisville to serve people in every way that I can as an artist and educator, and simply as a citizen. That requires a level of understanding of the community, which means having it be your home. I don't think I could understand the ways our community needs music if I didn't live amongst the people that we want to make music for.

Since 2022, you've taken the LO on a statewide tour through dozens of cities and towns. The Kentucky State Legislature recently provided an additional \$4.3 million to extend the project through 2026. What have you learned from playing in all these locales?

That has been the most important and meaningful work that I've ever done. It's not the most traditionally industry-oriented concertizing, shall we say. We are playing in sometimes very small towns and rural communities throughout Kentucky. But the experience has a very specific intentionality: We are going

there to make music so that we can bridge the many gaps in society right now. We're going to try and grow and learn ourselves. We're going to places that were the cradle of bluegrass, old-time music, or folk music that have become some of the most popular music that's listened to today. So, it is a shared experience. Performances in places like Harlan and Prestonsburg and Murray have blown my mind: Some of the most kinetic, dynamic audiences I've ever seen.

The Louisville Orchestra puts a distinctly local spin on much of its work, whether commissioning pieces based on Kentucky writers or performing your own rap oratorio, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*. How do you identify subjects or themes that will resonate with the public?

There are so many musical storylines that have been really fascinating. In a way, Kentucky doesn't fully inhabit its own musical background. Bluegrass obviously has a wonderful hall of fame



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here, and there are sites like the National Thumbpickers Hall of Fame, where [Merle] Travis developed that style of playing. In Eastern Kentucky, there are festivals that celebrate old-time music. But we haven't maybe fully represented ourselves as the cradle of so much of this music. So, the orchestra tries to feature that. We've toured with people like [mandolinist] Chris Thile, who is from Kentucky, and Michael Cleveland, who is one of the greatest living fiddle players. We want to showcase that music in unconventional ways.

You composed the theater work *Mammoth* for a LO performance in Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park in April 2023, joined by cellist Yo-Yo Ma and other musicians. What was challenging or surprising about playing there?

I wrote this piece for Yo-Yo [Ma] and for the orchestra and chorus, and for bass-baritone Davóne Tines as the celebrant, as I call him. It was like a non-denominational service that celebrated the cave as a sacred place. The most challenging thing involved the obvious logistics—the fundraising, the transportation of instruments into the cave, the temperature. For some reason, I started writing for two harps and I insisted on having the two harps. Leaving harps for two weeks in a 54-degree cave is not ideal for the instruments! There was so much percussion because one part of the piece recreates this famous earthquake that occurred in the early 19th century, the New Madrid Earthquake. But the most joyous thing was everybody was fully present there. There was no cell phone reception. Nobody was trying to film anything. People were just present themselves because they all knew this was once in a lifetime.

You had a seven-person film crew on site capturing the performance. What are the plans for the film?

We're trying to make it into a full documentary. We're hoping to release it, pairing the recording and the documentary down the road. It's an expensive thing. We've raised a little money, but we have more to raise.

You've performed the Barber Violin Concerto with your former Curtis classmate Ray Chen ('10) this fall, first in Louisville and then with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in December. Is there a different dynamic when working with fellow alumni?

I'm just excited to work with Ray because we went to school together. Ray was already super-talented and just a lot of energy and very fun to hang out with. He worked his butt off. Many of my closest friends and collaborators are from my class at Curtis: Harrison Hollingsworth (Bassoon '08), Gabe Globus-Hoenich (Timpani and Percussion '08), Nate Farrington (Double Bass '06), Johnny Teyssier (Clarinet '08), Yuja [Wang], of course. I'm sure it's common to every class and every generation at Curtis, but it's been enormous for my own sense of community that Curtis connects all these people. We went through those trials and joys and everything that Curtis is. And we've stayed together.