THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

EPISODE THIRTY-TWO
WAVING A BATON FOR CHANGE

HOST: SHAWN NASON
GUEST: TEDDY ABRAMS

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Shawn: Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Where bold leaders combine with big ideas to create game-changing disruption.

I'm Shawn Nason, your host for *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future.

We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us.

On this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*, we are honored to have Teddy Abrams, the musical director of the Louisville Orchestra and the Britt Festival Orchestra. A tireless advocate for the power of music, Abrams has been dedicated to exploring new and engaging ways to communicate with a diverse range of audiences through ambitious creative projects and by fostering many interdisciplinary collaborations. Abram's work with the Louisville Orchestra has been profiled on *CBS News* "Sunday Morning," *NPR*, and in the *Wall Street Journal*. His rap opera titled *The Greatest Muhammad Ali* premiered in 2017.

Celebrating Louisville's hometown hero and his recent collaboration with Jim James, vocalist and guitarist for My Morning Jacket on the song cycle, "The Order of Nature" was performed live with an ensemble of Louisville Orchestra musicians on "The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon." Abrams was a protégé of Michael Tilson Thomas from the age of 11 and studied conducting at the Curtis Institute of Music and at the Aspen Music Festival. He was the youngest conducting student ever accepted at both institutions. Abrams is also an award-winning composer and most importantly, a passionate educator. Teddy, welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles*.

Teddy: Thank you so much for having me. This is great to be here.

Shawn: So much to talk about. This is kind of like a geek moment for any musician and disruptor and I'm a mixture of both of those. You have definitely disrupted the music world and particularly, the orchestra world and conducting world. Before we dive into all of those amazing works that we talked about in your bio, I heard you say in an interview that you started playing music when you were three years old. Did you always know that working in music was what you wanted to do with your life and career?

Teddy: It's an interesting thing because in the world of, you could call it orchestral music or classical music, I tend to shy away from the word classical and we can certainly talk about that endlessly because there are a lot of issues around that phrase, but in that world, whatever it might be, there is kind of a closing window of opportunity to become a professional and work at the highest level just because almost like language, you have to have a very, very long and early start of a relationship with the art form. I think a lot of people that end up excelling at music or any kind of orchestral instrumental music, whatever you might call it, they start from a very early age. They have this kind of kinetic or magnetic connection to music making, but they don't necessarily internalize whether they wanna be a professional or have it be a part of their career.

It's almost a way of life from an early time, so you get a lot of people, and I put myself in this category, that, you know, when you're a little kid, you're seven or eight years old and you're playing music three, four hours a day and as a teenager, even more than that, you're not necessarily thinking about the professional ramifications, but you do feel like this is your life. I think I knew instinctively that this was going to be something I did up until I was nine and then I had a life changing actual experience that made me decide that I wanted to be a conductor forever. And so that was when I saw my very first orchestral concert, I decided on the spot, that's what I wanted to do. So that was the game-changing moment for me when I actually knew this was going to be the thing that I do both as a vocation and a profession.

Shawn: Well, let's dig into that moment because I believe, if I'm correct, Teddy, at the age of nine, you got to hear the San Francisco Orchestra for your first time and that's where you met your mentor, and I remember watching in an interview that you wrote him a letter and that he wrote back to you and you actually have that framed in your bedroom. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Teddy: Yeah. I think that like a lot of kids, they have these experiences seeing some crazy, amazing thing that they could potentially do with their lives. I had that when I was nine. And I'm sure for a lot of people, it's being an astronaut or a firefighter or whatever it might be, and for me, a little more unusually, it was being a conductor. And I hadn't thought at all about conducting until that point. I'd never even really considered that element of the music world, but I was very serious on the clarinet and the piano and serious enough that my parents, who didn't really take me to any concerts on a regular basis up until that point, thought I should probably go to see what a real professional orchestra sounds like because I'd never experienced that before.

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And this is kind of my little, you know, origin story as I call it but when I saw this free outdoor concert played by the San Francisco Symphony, I was mesmerized by the first second. As soon as I saw the downbeat of the conductor, I just felt like that was what I had to do forever. And it wasn't an aspirational thing where I thought, "Oh, that's so cool. I'd like to be a conductor." It was a total like change in how I understood the world. I could still remember that moment to this day, where it was a feeling of, "That's what I'm going to do." And I don't know why. I can't explain that. I think we all have those life-changing moments and they probably come somewhat unexpectedly. But that was certainly the pivotal moment for me in figuring out my relationship to music because as much as I loved playing clarinet and piano, there was something about the act of watching this conductor bring all these other musicians together and produce a unified sound, which I thought was pure magic.

I think it was the closest thing to an actual magical like almost supernatural experience that I'd ever seen at that point. And that inspired me to do anything that it took to actually become a conductor, which I had no idea as a little kid what that meant. So, I started simply enough, I thought, "Well, I like the conductor that I saw at that concert, I'll write him a long letter." And I did. I wrote him a very, very long, probably a little crazy, letter, but I was nine so you could probably forgive me, and I didn't expect to really hear back because, you know, I mean, you write celebrity letters and they usually don't write you back. But sure enough, a couple of weeks later, I got a letter back from Michael Tilson Thomas who was the music director of the San Francisco Symphony and he gave me my first encouragement and told me about how I could start thinking about being a conductor.

I had asked him for real conducting lessons, but he very generously offered some great advice that got me started, and that's the letter that I have hanging up on my wall. It serves as a reminder that that act of generosity and kindness on his part, which he didn't have to do, he could have written back just a basic form letter or nothing at all, but he took that extra step to reach out to me and that gave me my very first sense of assurance and affirmation that I could do this with my life.

Shawn: What an awesome story. You really have blown up that conducting world too, like people think if you go see the orchestra and the conductor is going to be dressed in a beautiful black tuxedo and you're gonna hear these amazing classical pieces but as a tireless advocate for the power of music, what do you believe, Teddy, is the true power of music to people?

Teddy: Well, the common phraseology is that music is the universal language. And that's a mantra that people use liberally to kind of justify music making, not that it needs inherent justification but it's something that people use all the time like a slogan. And the other thing that they say is that oh, music brings people together. And I think those are lovely things to say. They're great little talking points. But they don't really mean anything unless you do something about it or actually use the power of what those things suggest. So, in other words, if music is the universal language but all you do is tell people that to kind of get them to either interface with your music making or buy tickets or whatever, that's not even scratching the surface of what the power of that statement actually means.

The same thing with bringing people together. If you just tell people, maybe your supporters or on a grant application that music brings people together but you're not actively living by that principle, then again, you're not ever going to achieve what's possible with this language and its inherent power. And I think about this a lot because music is this ancient part of our lives. There is this, you know, continued history that you could trace back thousands and thousands of years because music plays an essential role in building community, in building a sense of identity, in sharing the things that cannot be shared in words. It's always been complementary to language. In fact, the way music works in the brain is the same essential mechanism of language itself.

It follows the same syntactical systems that language follows. And because of that, because it's essentially hardwired into the brain, but it's not based on locality the same way that cultural language has developed, that's the reason that it's universal. That's the reason that while musical styles may differ between China and ancient Greece and modern American pop music, the same system that makes those musics all work is at play. And it's, as I said, it's hardwired into our brain just like the capacity for language and speaking but it doesn't have those cultural signifiers that make it impossible to understand if you don't come from the same background. That's the cool thing about it.

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So, this is all to say, for me, if you start with that definition, if you start with that understanding of the ultimate power of music to cut through backgrounds, to break down walls, to actually literally offer a path forward for human beings to find common ground and common ways of celebrating or of commiserating, of doing all the emotional things that we so deeply need as a society, then you can start to build a platform for how you want to arrange your life and music. And there's no wrong way to do it. There are transformational musicians that maybe, you know, the total number of people that they reach and change is quite small and there are people that have a global platform that they can actually create emotional transformation

amongst populations of millions. There's no wrong way to do it as long as the underlying concept and meaning of why you're making music is sound and I think is true to yourself.

And, of course, you get on the outside of this thing, this encroaching duality of well, in one area, especially on the classical side, you get all these people that are simply doing something more as a tradition. They're kind of upholding tradition versus really remembering that passion of sharing something essential and that starts to eat away at it on the kind of the classical left-hand side. And on the right-hand side, the pop side, you get another kind of viral attack from the consumeristic and commercial qualities which can also eat away at that same essential desire to just share something that's deeply important about life. So that, for me, is kind of where I try and put my mind in the place of remembering what the deepest power of this music is and to try and live honestly in a way that lets that flow from me to the people that I care about.

Shawn: Wow, powerful stuff. You know what I love about what you were just saying there is I kind of live a life and surround myself with people that love to blow shit up. And really, you have blown shit up. Let's be real, you came to Louisville as a conductor of the orchestra when the Louisville Orchestra had filed bankruptcy.

Teddy: Yes.

Shawn: And there seemed to be no hope in sight for the Louisville Orchestra but you came there… Why?

Teddy: Well, that's a great question. First of all, if you're talking about the full time, full size orchestras in the country, it's kind of like the NFL. It's one orchestra per city and some don't even have one. And if you wanna be the conductor, the music director, you know, not just a guest conductor but the permanent music director of one of those orchestras, you can't just choose any one you want and say, "I'm going there." You know, I go, "I want New York." New York probably has a music director at any given time. It's not uncommon for music directors to stay in a single position for 10, 20, it used to be 30, 40 years they would stay. First of all, just starting off, it's, as I said, a little bit like the NFL. If you wanna be head coach, you know, you have to, A. Find a team that's looking for a head coach but, B. It has to be the right team.

And for me, the right team is both the right orchestra and the right city. By becoming a music director of an orchestra with a city's name in it, whether it's San Francisco Symphony or LA, Phil or Chicago Symphony or Louisville Orchestra, you're taking on a civic leadership role. Whether

you want that or not, you are. Every city has a few people whether it's the mayor, the chancellor or president of the biggest local university, you know, heads of the hospitals, the superintendent of the schools, music director of the orchestra, these are civic positions. Even if they're not actually elected or appointed positions, they still are civic positions. And it's very important that the city that you are then going to represent is a place that you can honestly get up and tell people you believe in and that you love. And I was very lucky that both things aligned, that, A. Louisville was looking for a conductor after a very challenging time.

As you said, they had been bankrupt, on strike, lockout, I mean all the things just piled on top of each other. But at the same time, I came to Louisville when they were looking at me and frankly, I thought this is crazy. I mean I was 26 I think the first time I came here and during the trial period and, you know, you just don't have 26-year-old music directors of orchestras. It's nuts. And so, I just came to kind of explore and see what it was like and I fell in love with the city. I thought this city was amazing from the first time I got here. And I remember thinking, "I would love to live here." In fact, I walked down the street on which I live right now, I'm standing in my house that I passed the very first night I was here. I took a walk and I said, "If I get this job," just, you know, thinking out loud and fully expecting to not get this job, I said, "I'm gonna live on this street,". I believe in the city. I really do. And so, I could go on and on and on about how we actually then tried to, as you say, disrupt and deal with the situation but it starts with that. It has to be the right place.

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Shawn: What I wanna call out there, though, Teddy is you said something around as the conductor of the orchestra, it's actually civil leadership. I am telling you as a musician, as someone who has seen some of the amazing orchestras in our country, I would vouch to say that there's not many who would take that stance and take that way of approaching it into what they do. So, I commend you for that. Leading into that, I've heard you say that your responsibility as the leader of this institution is to reach the whole population of Louisville. And I watched a video actually of you again at your Yamaha keyboard and you were teaching refugees, I believe, a song you had written. So why is making music inclusive and bringing it to the entire community so important to you personally and what do you hope to achieve by exposing more people to that?

Teddy: Well, it's a reflection of the fracturing of society that we live in right now and it's a pathway towards remedying that. And, you know, I personally feel like part of my life's mission is to try and use this language to rejoin all these broken bonds in our world and in our city. I think that it's enough if I could just try and deal with Louisville and the challenges here. But

because I have that civic role, this potential leadership role where you can make a lot more out of the job than simply putting on concerts, I feel this deep underlying sense of responsibility to try and, in whatever way I can, address the challenges and the problems and the inequalities in our community here because I know that music might not heal everything instantly, it might not solve the problems, but it's a pathway towards understanding. It's a pathway towards connecting with your fellow human being.

And the challenge is that it's so easy, especially in the classical side of things, to only serve the people that care about you right now, which generally is a particular looking audience, wealthier, older, and whiter audience. But we all know fundamentally, music crosses all those barriers. The music that we love, you turn on any station or you play any kind of music made today, the derivative elements of that music come from everywhere. You can't separate them out anymore. It comes from the most powerful communities in human history and some of the poorest and most forgotten. The music that's been made is, you know, once you hear something that's good, you can't unhear it. And so anyway, that's just the philosophy behind what I believe in right now, is taking that same essence and applying it to your work.

And for me, that work is sharing music with everybody regardless of what their background is. Because I think if you live in a city like Louisville and let's say you come from a community that feels disenfranchised, and then suddenly, your orchestra shows up and offers a musical experience that totally connects with maybe your heritage or your background or the music that you love and care about, you feel like you belong. It inspires a sense of belonging. And whether that's refugees or people that don't have the financial means to maybe attend concerts a certain way, our job is to break those things down and to not limit the way that we make our music and for whom we make it. Because each time you give people that sense of belonging and that sense of connection to their community, you improve the community. It may be a slow, long game that we're playing but if you don't do that actively, every day of your musical life, then you cannot build on the power of what this art form can actually do.

Shawn: Yeah, it's not real common for symphony conductors to write a rap opera. You did that to pay respect and honor to Muhammad Ali. And so, I so appreciate how you look at that and actually how you use music for social justice. So let's not just talk about how wonderful it's been. So, what's been your biggest challenge on this journey in Louisville and your journey as a conductor, your biggest challenge?

Teddy: There are a lot of deep challenges and some of them are kind of macro and some of them are micro. I can tell you that when I started this position, as I said, I was very young. I was

27 my first season. And I think like any really, you know, energized, excited young person starting on a big job that's kind of maybe several notches bigger than they would have expected to have at a moment like that, you have all kinds of big, crazy ideas that you wanna get done. And you have to, as a leader, recognize the assets and the skills and the challenges that you have and know how to work with those elements to achieve a vision that you've been dreaming up. And my vision was crazy huge. My dreams were crazy big. And one of the challenges along the way was having to learn how far you can push before the car starts to kind of break down.

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And I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that you're working with human beings. This is not a machine, even though I just used a machine metaphor, but an orchestra is a living, breathing group of human beings who all have their own stories and histories. And I'm talking a little more internally right now about the dynamics within the orchestra but there are members of the orchestra who have experienced the Louisville Orchestra for 50 years. We have a person who's been in the orchestra for over half a century. And there are others who've been here 30, 40 years, and there are people that I just hired this season. And figuring out how to bring all those different personalities and perspectives along so that they believe in what your vision is and trust you is a huge challenge, especially in our industry which is very slow moving, it's very scared of change.

It's not just scared of change, it's suspicious of change because so many times, people have promised change. They promise, "Oh, look, the programs, they're gonna be different or we're gonna attract all these new audiences or we're gonna revolutionize the world of classical music," and they so frequently fail. Or they make a splash for a year or two and then they fizzle out and you're right back to where you were. So, people are suspicious of that and rightly so. And I had to learn along the way how to lead in a manner that makes people believe in what you're trying to lead them to and gives them agency in that process, that they feel empowered to actually make the change with you rather than you kind of dragging things along. My instinct was, "Let's just change everything right away. We can do it." But that's not possible and I learned a lot that way.

And on the other side, the more institutional side, the biggest challenge is definitely recognizing that the model of modern arts organizations in America is really, really tough because so much of it relies on fundraising, which, you know, fundraising has nothing directly to do with the quality of your artistic vision. There is a connection there but it's not direct. I mean, an organization with a terrible artistic vision and not doing anything interesting could have a donor that passes away and leaves them $10 million and that's just because it happened to be in a will

that might have been worked out two decades ago. So, the model is really, really tough and that was something that I had to learn to work within the financial resources that we had but also to be able to sell a vision to people that can fund it because that's not something they teach you at music conservatory.

They don't teach you how to raise millions of dollars a year and it's frankly not really the job of the music director, but I figured, well, we can't wait around for it to get done if it's not gonna get done and that's the only way the organization is gonna grow. So that's been a huge challenge because Louisville is a tough fundraising environment, very, very tough indeed but I think we have done our very best and I'm proud of what we've been able to accomplish on that front.

Shawn: Wow, let me say that. A couple of things there. I love what you said that they don't teach you in conducting school how to be a businessman. At the same time, though, since you've been there, Teddy, you've seen an increase of over 30% in the audiences so you're doing something right. And, you know, I am a person that believes in like, as I said, blowing shit up and doing it fast but I also respect what you have said, like you wanted to go in and do that but there's this thing called humans... life would be so much easier if we didn't have humans to have to always work around, right?

Teddy: Yes.

Shawn: But we all are, and we all have emotions, and we all have steeped traditions. So ultimately, what do you want to accomplish within the world of music in Louisville, in your life? I just think that in 50 years or 100 years, people are gonna be talking about the impact that you have made. What is that impact that you really want to be known for?

Teddy: The ultimate thing in this job, you know, I mean, as an individual, there are other elements to my music making and the work that I do but thinking about the position in Louisville specifically, what I would really like to do is something that I don't think has happened to our industry in particular in America yet. I would love to turn Louisville into a city that is regarded as the most exciting, interesting musical city, you know, the way that Nashville and Austin and, of course, in their own ways, New York or Chicago or LA have their music industry that defines them, and you think of music, you know, completely associated with a city like Nashville. Well, what if first, you know, whether you call it classical or orchestral or just great music made by a lot of incredible musicians, whatever it is, if that genre could have its home as

the most exciting place to find it in Louisville, Kentucky, we would really have accomplished something.

If composers start flocking here and moving here away from Brooklyn, away from San Francisco, away from Chicago, because this is the hotbed of creative music making, then we'll really have accomplished something. If people say, "Yeah, Louisville is the place where if you wanna hear the most interesting music by the most fascinating, talented composers," they're all coming to Louisville right now to work with the Louisville Orchestra because they're creating a real civic definition. They're redefining what Louisville might be. And I think we have a shot at doing that and a lot of it has to do with the people here. It's the coolest thing about this place, that the people of this town, they love to hear new things, to hear something that they'd never thought of or considered before.

A lot of other cities, they don't wanna hear anything new. They want the same thing played over and over and over again, what's comfortable. And it's one of my favorite things about Louisville, it's why I fell in love with the city, that our audiences will go with you on a journey. They'll take a leap. And we've built that trust, but I think there's something even deeper that makes people desire that. And that's the kind of city that could actually become a music city. It might not be a country music city or a jazz music city, but it could become a creative music making city and we would hopefully be at the center of that. That's the vision that I have, and I think we actually have a shot as crazy as it sounds.

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Shawn: I firmly believe that if anyone can do it, Teddy, you can do it. You've done amazing things during your short time and I have a deep, you know, respect for Louisville. My family is from there, I just live up the road in Cincinnati, and so I'm so excited to be able to see this come to life. And so what is the one thing you would want our listeners to take away from your personal story and what you've shared with us today around the Louisville Orchestra?

Teddy: Well, I think in the end, because my journey, you know, is not by any means over, and I don't think that there ever is a sense of over especially as an artist, I think that the one thing I'd like people to leave with, especially if they're not from Louisville, is to consider that in the landscape of America right now where cities like Louisville and states like Kentucky are so often either demonized or forgotten or only talked about for one specific news story that comes up at a time, to consider that this is the kind of place that's supporting what I think is one of the most exciting, interesting orchestral revolutions in the country right now. And I say that as only a part of it, that so many people are making that happen. And that's a model for what this city is. This

is a place that's worth talking about and considering and including in what the shape and future of America is going to be.

And I think that when we start extending the way we think about our fellow Americans and what the definition of our country is to ourselves and we start changing that and growing that to be far more inclusive, we're gonna get a better country out of it and we're gonna be much better citizens. And I know this sounds a lot broader than simply the Louisville Orchestra but if ever there was a metaphor for what the potential sources of power and creativity might be in this country, it's this in the middle of the country here in a city that's usually not talked about unless something bad has happened in the national press. This orchestra is trying to change our community and be a total creative model at the very first rank. I think there's some real potential for that to serve as just a little model for much bigger thinking as to how a city like ours can be a part of the national conversation and transform and change its image for the better.

Shawn: I can't wait to see that lived out and so thank you for sharing that call to action, Teddy. So, it's come to that point in the podcast that we call our “Combustion Questions”. So, I'm going to ask you three random questions and want you to go with your gut, quickfire answers to them, and let's have some fun with it. So, the first “Combustion Question” for you Teddy is, you go into a convenience store that has a large candy and snack aisle. What candy or snack can you not resist?

Teddy: Oh, god. I wasn't expecting that. Oh, yeah, that's a weakness. That's why I don't go into that aisle. I think it's the Reese's. It's the Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

Shawn: You are my brother from another mother. Absolutely. I don't care what it is Reese's but still, it's just the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup is the best.

Teddy: It's the best.

Shawn: All right. “Combustion Question” number two. Would you rather have a magic carpet that flies or have your own personal robot?

Teddy: Oh, magic carpet for sure.

Shawn: Why?

Teddy: I prefer the magic to the singularity of the robots frankly. I'm not a Luddite totally but if it's a choice between magic and tech, I'm taking magic all the way.

Shawn: Love it. Love it. All right, your last one. Now this one might take a little bit of thought for you here. What do you think about popcorn?

Teddy: Popcorn? I'll tell you...here's what I think about popcorn. If it's caramel corn, then it's really doing what it's supposed to do but I always get disappointed with popcorn. It's never quite what I was hoping it would be every single time I eat it after about three bites.

Shawn: Yeah, yeah. Again, caramel corn. That's my go-to as well. Well, Teddy, thank you so much for spending time with us and I just can't wait for our listeners and for us to see your journey at the Louisville Orchestra and can't wait to be down there and watch you do your magic and what you bring to society. So, until then, Teddy, thank you and be safe and be well.

Teddy: Thank you so much for having me on this. This has been so much fun. Thank you.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles.*

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Stay safe and be well.