

YO-YO MA GOES UNDERGROUND WITH THE LOUISVILLE ORCHESTRA

Teddy Abrams, the ensemble's music director, has created a work about Mammoth Cave—and staged the piece inside its reverberating walls.

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The cellist has been performing at various national parks, under the banner of a project called Our Common Nature. Illustration by Lauren Tamaki



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To understand why Louisville, Kentucky, has a lofty status in the world of contemporary classical composition—a status reaffirmed the other day, when Yo-Yo Ma and the Louisville Orchestra presented a première inside Mammoth Cave, Kentucky’s chief natural wonder—you have to go back to 1948, when a singular character named Charles Farnsley became the city’s mayor. Deceptively folksy in manner, Farnsley professed nostalgia for the Confederacy and sported a Southern gentleman’s string tie. At the same time, he gravitated toward the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, dismantling aspects of segregation and promoting adult education. Most unusually, he adored modern classical music—the more dissonant the better. A writer for *High Fidelity* visited him in 1953 and found him demonstrating Ampex tape recorders at the public library. “Play me some Stravinsky and Villa-Lobos and some Edgard Varèse, boys,” he hollered.

In 1948, the Louisville Orchestra, which had been founded eleven years earlier, was in financial crisis. Farnsley, who had audited classes with the émigré Jewish-German musicologist Gerhard Herz, at the University of Louisville, offered a radical suggestion: Why not use some of the money that had been slated for celebrity soloists to instead commission new works? Supporting composers, Farnsley said, would be “a much greater, more lasting service to music.” More practically, he believed that such a policy would attract national press and boost the city’s profile. He even spoke of establishing a record label, which, he thought, would drum up revenue. Robert Whitney, the orchestra’s gifted and furiously hardworking young music director, endorsed the plan, although he wondered whether the audience would be able to keep up with Farnsley’s enthusiasms. The mayor, one associate reported, “doesn’t like any music that was written before 1920.”

Thus began the Louisville revolution, which riveted the classical world in the nineteen-fifties. After a decade, the orchestra had commissioned a hundred

and thirty-two scores and recorded about a hundred. No American ensemble had ever done anything comparable, and none has done so since. Illustrious international composers were featured: Villa-Lobos, Darius Milhaud, Carlos Chávez, Alberto Ginastera, Bohuslav Martinů. (Farnsley's dream of eliciting pieces from Stravinsky and Varèse went unfulfilled.) Leading Americans also came to town. In 1950, Louisville gave a triumphant account of William Schuman's "Judith," with dancing by Martha Graham. Schuman later commented, "The Louisville group never can sound as strong and full as some of the mightier Eastern orchestras. But I've never had my works better performed. . . . If you'll pardon the expression, they give more love to them."

The great experiment had its flaws. Farnsley's idea that the orchestra could sustain itself by selling records proved fantastical; instead, further funding came from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, which kept the commissioning series afloat but introduced bureaucratic and political complications. Many audience members, meanwhile, rebelled against the programming, particularly when it came to such strenuous fare as Elliott Carter's *Variations for Orchestra*. Most problematically, Farnsley and Whitney failed to institutionalize their philosophy; when they left the scene, energy ebbed away. In the early two-thousands, Louisville was hardly distinguishable from a dozen other struggling midsize orchestras. In 2010, the group filed for bankruptcy and seemed again on the verge of extinction.

Enter Teddy Abrams, an affable, curly-haired protégé of Michael Tilson Thomas, who became Louisville's music director in 2014, at the age of twenty-seven. In contrast to many on-the-rise conductors, Abrams took up full-time residence in his adopted city, and avoided rival commitments. He established a presence in Louisville culture, striking up friendships with local pop musicians (the singer-songwriter Jim James, the hip-hop artist Jecorey Arthur). A prolific composer, arranger, and improviser, he has an easy command of non-classical idioms. Sometimes he goes into busker mode, setting up a keyboard on the street and entertaining passersby.

Abrams's gifts as a conductor were evident at a gala concert in Louisville last month, at the Kentucky Center. He leads with a clear, fluid beat, somewhat in the Tilson Thomas manner. Aspects of the orchestra's Whitney-era sound remain—a straightforward, pungent, propulsive approach—but Abrams has fostered greater precision and vibrancy. Rhythmic zest lit up the final movement of Henk Badings's Seventh Symphony, a spiky Louisville commission from 1954. Ma took the stage for Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto, summoning its frenzied and desolate moods with equal conviction. The orchestra provided unfailingly alert accompaniment, resulting in an interpretation of real heft. Whenever I visit so-called regional orchestras, the story is the same: an influx of skilled younger players has raised technical standards to a startling degree.

Under Abrams's leadership, new music is again routine. The gala included Anjélica Negrón's "Fractal Isles," which had its première last year, at a festival of Latin American music. A study in perceptions of exoticism, Negrón's piece begins with an entrancing haze of insectlike instrumental activity and ends in an atmosphere of wistful retreat. Abrams also acknowledged the orchestra's vigorous educational arm by inviting a student hip-hop group, the Real Young Prodigys, to perform "CROWN," a celebration of natural hair styles. The Louisville Orchestra has joined with Hip-Hop N2 Learning, a local program, in launching Rap School, which encourages community activism. (The Real Young Prodigys have, in fact, successfully campaigned for a city ordinance that bans hair-based discrimination.) Abrams presided over this variegated feast with pep-rally gusto. When he dropped Farnsley's and Whitney's names, cheers rang out.

The venture into Mammoth Cave, which took place two days after the gala, is Abrams's most ambitious undertaking to date. Mammoth, the longest cave system ever discovered, is about seventy-five miles south of Louisville and is under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. Abrams's idea of staging a work at and about Mammoth intersected neatly

with Ma's current interests. In the past couple of years, the cellist has been participating in informal concerts and community events across the national-park system, under the banner of a project called Our Common Nature. Abrams won approval from park administrators and set about composing a ninety-minute oratorio that includes a series of instrumental soliloquies for Ma.

"Mammoth," as Abrams's piece is called, attempts to sum up the entire five-thousand-year history of human exploration of the cave: Native questers, enslaved Black miners, rival cave exploiters, and latter-day park rangers. The libretto includes poetic meditations from three writers associated with Kentucky—Robert Penn Warren, Wendell Berry, and Ada Limón. Abrams incorporates into his score preëxisting hymns, Appalachian folk songs, fiddle-band music, bugle calls, and a ballad in honor of the spelunker Floyd Collins, whose death at Mammoth, in 1925, caused a national-news sensation. Playing the part of Celebrant—essentially, a narrator with a singing role attached—was the nobly urgent bass-baritone Davóne Tines, who grew up on the eastern side of the Appalachian Mountains, in Virginia. Tines's longtime collaborator Zack Winokur directed the show, overcoming the logistical challenges of organizing a quasi-operatic event in an exceedingly unconventional space that allowed for only a few days of on-site rehearsal.

The beginning was intensely dramatic. Audience members, numbering five hundred, walked down the sixty-eight steps of the cave's Historic Entrance. Inside, voices floated out of the murk: members of the Louisville Chamber Choir and of the orchestra were singing a wordless, rising-and-falling chant that started out as a unison and then grew in polyphonic complexity. After walking a quarter mile or so, spectators took up positions on the sides of Rafinesque Hall, one of Mammoth's largest internal chambers. The orchestra was to one side; Tines and the choristers paced about; Ma sat at the center. The acoustics were, needless to say, reverberant, yet individual lines remained

distinct. Despite the damp, cool surroundings, the sound had an unexpected warmth.

Beyond the introductory processional, “Mammoth” offered several striking musical inventions. We heard a semi-Wagnerian evocation of primal waters carving out the caves, a tumultuous Ivesian collage of nineteenth-century musical material, a percussive impression of the great earthquakes of 1811 and 1812. As the work approached the hour mark, though, diffuseness set in. Abrams is a deft tunesmith and craftsman, but he has a weakness for vamping ostinatos and soundtrack-ready swells. The narrative sagged under the weight of overlapping agendas. Two monologues by park rangers, without musical accompaniment, sapped momentum. Ma, at times, seemed lost in the melee. The score made relatively limited use of his immense powers as an interpreter, often confining him to spells of plaintive songfulness.

Still, I came away somewhat awed by the occasion, which showed a renewal of purpose at one of America’s most resilient orchestras. The best thing about “Mammoth” was its intimate connection to the memories of its audience: all around me, I heard people recalling childhood visits to Mammoth and family ties to the communities above ground. Having never visited the cave before, I felt like an outsider at a local rite, which is as it should be. At moments, the piece achieved an uncanny timelessness, as when Tines, holding a flickering lantern, intoned lines from Berry’s poem “To Know the Dark”: “The dark, too, blooms and sings / and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.” He then extinguished the light, and Ma played a few searching phrases that shivered with fear and promise. ♦

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