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Halim Flowers art exhibit to open at Severance Music Center as part of The Cleveland Orchestra's 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival



CLEVELAND — The Cleveland Orchestra is counting down to the opening of “It Takes Courage to Love All Unconditionally,” a special exhibition by artist **Halim Flowers**, on view at Severance Music Center April 9 through May 24, 2026. The free exhibition features a new body of work created in Cleveland specifically for The Cleveland Orchestra's [2026 Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival](#) and inspired by its central theme: *Courage*.

Through vibrant color, layered symbolism, and emotionally direct imagery, Flowers explores courage as a visual language for unconditional love and human connection. Presented in partnership with **District Gallery** in Shaker Heights, the exhibit channels Flowers's signature style while extending beyond the gallery walls. As part of the collaboration, Flowers is also partnering with Cleveland-based youth culture brand **Xhibition** to create exclusive festival apparel.

Born in Washington, D.C., Flowers was sentenced at age 16 to two life terms for a crime he did not commit. After his release in 2019 under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act, he emerged as an internationally recognized artist, writer, and advocate. His story, which was featured in *Kim Kardashian-West: The Justice Project* and the Emmy Award–winning *Thug Life in D.C.*, traces his transformation from incarcerated youth to creative voice for justice. Today, Flowers creates vibrant, Basquiat-inspired visual art exhibited worldwide and continues to champion human rights through his work.

“This festival celebrates courage, reflecting the personal journey I’ve been on for quite some time. Many choices I made in my childhood led to consequences that were not a result of my being a ‘bad kid,’ but rather due to my inability to overcome negative peer influences and community pressures,” **Flowers** said. “I believe in love, especially in a world that often encourages us to hide our authentic selves. It takes immense strength and courage to embrace who we truly are and to love ourselves. This body of work represents an extension of my identity and self-worth. I had to learn to love myself, even when society labeled me as a menace and treated me accordingly. The colors in the pieces I created for this exhibition emerged organically; they chose me. I usually don’t work with earth tones or neutrals, but this time, the mediums — my tools of mass construction — were paintbrushes, oil sticks, canvas, and fashion. The colors arrived uniquely and unexpectedly.”

“District Gallery’s collaboration with Halim Flowers and The Cleveland Orchestra brings Flowers’s powerful work into the festival, engaging a broader conversation about art, justice, and social transformation. The partnership connects the gallery’s ongoing work with Flowers to the festival’s larger themes, creating a meaningful dialogue between art, fashion, music, and community,” said **Karen Chaikin**, gallery principal at District Gallery.

“It Takes Courage to Love All Unconditionally” will be on view in the Bogomolny-Kozerefski Grand Foyer at Severance Music Center during Cleveland Orchestra performances. In addition, there are two free public open houses: May 10 from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. and May 16 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

This is The Cleveland Orchestra’s third year presenting an art exhibit as part of the opera festival. In 2024, the Orchestra paired Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* and the theme of power with *The Magic Lens: A Photographic Journey by Chuck Stewart*, displaying dozens of images by the legendary jazz photographer. The following year, Janáček’s *Jenůfa* and reconciliation got a closer look through *Re-membering Community*, which centered sculpture, painting, photography, and mixed media works by Ohio-born or based artists.

Flowers’s exhibit is part of the fourth edition of The Cleveland Orchestra’s annual Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival, taking place May 15 through 24, 2026 at Severance Music Center and partner locations across Cleveland. The festival features three concert performances of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, with Music Director **Franz Welser-Möst** leading The Cleveland Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, and a talented lineup of vocalists.

At the heart of the festival is a creative partnership with composer, trumpeter, and bandleader **Terence Blanchard**, who serves as curator for the 2026 edition. Blanchard’s programming brings together opera, jazz, and dialogue to explore courage through a broad range of artistic perspectives. He helps kick off the festival on May 15 with *The World(s) of Terence Blanchard*, a night with music from his groundbreaking opera *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* and *Malcolm X Jazz Suite*, drawn from his unforgettable score for Spike Lee’s film *Malcolm X*.

More information about the 2026 Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival is available [here](#).

Media Assets

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