

For release: January 7, 2026

Terence Blanchard to curate The Cleveland Orchestra's fourth annual Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival (May 15–24)



Terence Blanchard's first Severance Music Center appearance at the Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival in 2024 (Photo credit: Kevin Libal)

Theme of 2026 festival is *Courage*, centered around three concert performances of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, conducted by Music Director Franz Welser-Möst

Genre-bending opening night features opera, jazz, and film music, led by Terence Blanchard with Will Liverman, the E-Collective, Turtle Island Quartet, and projections by Andrew F. Scott

Festival events include spoken word with Tarriona "Tank" Ball, a keynote by Bryan Stevenson, the return of *The Moth Mainstage: Live from Severance*, and a program with works by Adolphus Hailstork, Bacewicz, Jüri Reinvere, and Dvořák

A new Halim Flowers exhibition, created in Cleveland especially for the festival, explores courage as a visual language for unconditional love

CLEVELAND — The Cleveland Orchestra has announced the fourth edition of its annual [Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival](#), running **May 15–24** at Severance Music Center and partner locations throughout Cleveland.

The 2026 festival explores the theme of *Courage* through a variety of musical and cultural programming centered on three concert performances of Beethoven’s only opera, *Fidelio*, conducted by Music Director Franz Welser-Möst.

At the heart of the festival is a new creative partnership with Terence Blanchard, a celebrated artist whose extraordinary contributions to jazz, groundbreaking work as an opera composer, and deep commitment to using music as a bridge beyond language all embody the festival’s theme of *Courage*. In this capacity, Blanchard has curated a variety of programs and conversations—including an opening-night experience featuring opera, jazz, and film music—that explore *Courage* through the breadth and boldness of his eclectic and genre-spanning musical scope.

“The 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival is about courage,” said **Terence Blanchard**. “The courage to speak your mind, to listen and truly hear, and to make space for every voice as we come together as a community. I’m excited to serve as this year’s Festival Curator because it gives us the opportunity to use a range of musical and artistic experiences to explore who we are as human beings, who we need to be moving forward, and how we can reconnect with our shared humanity.”

Blanchard’s breadth of experience transcends the limitations of any one label. For more than 40 years, he has made a name for himself as a sought-after jazz musician. As both a sideman and bandleader, his talents and collaborations with artists such as Wynton and Branford Marsalis and Herbie Hancock have taken him around the world and earned numerous awards, including eight GRAMMYS®. His devotion to jazz, and music more broadly, has led to administrative and educational positions at institutions including the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz—which he personally lobbied to have moved from Los Angeles to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—UCLA, and the Berklee College of Music.

“Over his legendary career, Terence Blanchard has shown a constant commitment to artistic excellence, creative risk-taking, and using his work and network to expand who is seen and heard on our stages,” said **Cleveland Orchestra President & CEO André Gremillet**. “He has long reminded us that, even in our greatest institutions, there is always more work to be done. I can’t think of a better curator for this year’s festival theme, *Courage*, and I’m excited to share his visionary artistry with Cleveland.”

As a composer, Blanchard is especially well known for his film scores—notably, his 18 collaborations with Spike Lee including *Malcom X* and *BlackKkKlansman*, the latter of which earned Blanchard his fifth GRAMMY® for Best Instrumental Composition (“Blut und Boden [Blood and Soil]”). Blanchard made history in the 2021–22 season, when his already-successful opera *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* was staged by The Metropolitan Opera; the Met had never before staged a work by a Black composer. His 2013 opera, *Champion*, was staged by the Met in the following season; both operas have earned GRAMMY® Awards for Best Opera Recording.

“The Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival was created to explore questions that shape our civic and cultural life,” said **Jehuda Reinharz, President & CEO of the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Foundation**. “This year’s festival invites community members to engage with the concept of *Courage* not just as an artistic theme, but as a human and civic practice. We are proud to support a festival that continues to deepen dialogue, expand perspective, and reflect the complexity of the world we live in, and we look forward to the new ideas and artistic vision that Terence Blanchard will bring as Festival Curator.”

The detailed program listing of Cleveland Orchestra events as of January 2026 can be found below. The full festival lineup, including additional Cleveland Orchestra and partner events, will be announced in March 2026.

Tickets for the 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival are now on sale. For more information, visit clevelandorchestra.com/festival, email boxoffice@clevelandorchestra.com, or call Cleveland Orchestra Ticket Services at 216-231-1111.

Logos and photos for the 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival are available for [download here](#).

About the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival

Expanding on The Cleveland Orchestra and Music Director **Franz Welser-Möst**’s tradition of innovative opera presentations, the Orchestra launched the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival in May 2023. The festival’s inaugural edition was praised by *The New York Times* as a “compelling proof of concept” and “an ambitious achievement.”

The 2026 installment, curated by **Terence Blanchard** and centered around the theme of “**Courage**,” marks the festival’s fourth edition, following “**The American Dream**” in 2023 (Puccini’s *The Girl of the Golden West*), “**Power**” in 2024 (Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*), and “**Reconciliation**” in 2025 (Janáček’s *Jenůfa*).

Calendar Listing and Program Information (As of January 2026)

Halim Flowers: “It Takes Courage to Love All Unconditionally”

Thursday, April 9, 2026, through Sunday, May 24, 2026

Severance Music Center

Free Festival Exhibition

In “**It Takes Courage to Love All Unconditionally**,” celebrated artist **Halim Flowers** unveils a new body of work created in Cleveland expressly for the Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival and drawing its energy and vision from the festival’s central theme of *Courage*.

“The works in this special exhibition explore courage as a visual language for unconditional love. When courage leads, empathy deepens, giving rise to a sense of closeness that invites viewers to move beyond fear and toward a more generous, compassionate way of being.” — Halim Flowers

Presented in partnership with **District Gallery**, the exhibition channels Flowers’s signature blend of vivid color, vulnerability, and radical hope. Extending his vision beyond the exhibition walls, Flowers is also

collaborating with youth culture brand **Xhibition** to craft exclusive festival apparel inspired by the theme of *Courage*.

About Halim Flowers

Halim Flowers was born in Washington, DC, and at age 16 was sentenced to two life terms for a crime he did not commit. His story—later 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 celebrated artist, writer, and advocate.

While in prison, Flowers discovered poetry as a means of survival and expression; after his release in 2019 under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act, he quickly emerged as a powerful voice for justice, sharing his work publicly within days. His artistic practice has since expanded into vibrant, Basquiat-inspired visual art now exhibited internationally.

A Halcyon Arts Lab Fellow, Echoing Green Fellow, and 2025–26 Obama Foundation Leader, Flowers has delivered a TEDx Talk, studied through Georgetown University’s Prison and Justice Initiative, and contributed to MoMA’s landmark *Marking Time* exhibition. His work continues to champion human rights and illuminate the transformative power of art.

Presented in partnership with District Gallery and Xhibition



[The World\(s\) of Terence Blanchard](#)

Friday, May 15, 2026, at 7 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Mandel Concert Hall

Ticketed Event

Step inside **The World(s) of Terence Blanchard**, the genre-bending opening night of the 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival, curated by the visionary and versatile trumpeter and composer himself.

The evening opens with arias from his groundbreaking opera ***Fire Shut Up in My Bones***, featuring Will Liverman, the E-Collective, and the Turtle Island Quartet. In the second half, the stage transforms for Blanchard’s electrifying ***Malcolm X Jazz Suite***, drawn from his unforgettable score for Spike Lee’s film *Malcolm X* and paired with immersive projections by Blanchard’s longtime collaborator **Andrew F. Scott**—a powerful, cinematic journey through sound and image.

[United in Song! A Community Choral Celebration](#)

Saturday, May 16, 2026, at 2 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Mandel Concert Hall

Free Event, Tickets Required

An afternoon of joyous vocal performances at Severance Music Center representing the rich diversity of the Greater Cleveland choral community.

Details of performers and programming will be announced in March 2026.

[Beethoven's Fidelio](#)

Saturday, May 16, 2026, at 7 p.m.

Thursday, May 21, 2026, at 7 p.m.

Sunday, May 24, 2026, at 3 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Mandel Concert Hall

Ticketed Event

The Cleveland Orchestra
Franz Welser-Möst, *conductor*
Malin Byström, *soprano* (Leonore)
David Butt Philip, *tenor* (Florestan)
Tomasz Konieczny, *bass-baritone* (Don Pizarro)
Martin Summer, *bass* (Rocco)
Dashon Burton, *bass-baritone* (Don Fernando)
Ashley Emerson, *soprano* (Marzelline)
Owen McCausland, *tenor* (Jaquino)
The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus

BEETHOVEN *Fidelio*

Franz Welser-Möst lifts The Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus and an all-star cast of soloists to the life-affirming heights of Beethoven's only opera, a testament to courage and human nobility. Motivated by a desire for justice during a time of European turmoil, *Fidelio* decries corruption and sounds a clarion call for freedom in a riveting story that asks the question: How far would you go to save someone you love?

[Courage and Poetry: An Evening with Tank Ball](#)

Sunday, May 17, 2026, at 4 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Reinberger Chamber Hall

Ticketed Event

Tarriona "Tank" Ball brings her spellbinding blend of spoken word and poetry to the festival with a performance that digs deep into the meaning of courage: how we claim it, carry it, and reshape the world with it. Known for her fierce lyricism and emotional clarity, Tank won her first GRAMMY® in 2025 for Best Spoken Word Poetry Album with her band, Tank and the Bangas. For this special event, she is joined by fellow Grammy-winning composer, trumpeter, and this year's Festival Curator **Terence**

Blanchard, whose music adds depth and dimension to her storytelling. Together, they create an unforgettable evening where courage becomes a shared, intimate experience of voice, rhythm, and imagination.

[Bryan Stevenson on Courage](#)

Monday, May 18, 2026, at 7 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Mandel Concert Hall

Ticketed Event

Bryan Stevenson on Courage brings one of America's most powerful moral voices to the Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival stage. In this keynote address, acclaimed civil rights leader, bestselling author of *Just Mercy*, and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative **Bryan Stevenson** reflects on the meaning of courage: how we confront injustice, stay proximate to suffering, and choose to hope in the face of overwhelming odds.

Stevenson's remarks will be followed by a moderated Q&A, offering an extraordinary opportunity to hear directly from a visionary changemaker whose work continues to shape our national conversation on justice and humanity.

Presented in partnership with The City Club of Cleveland



THE CITY CLUB OF CLEVELAND

[The Moth Mainstage: Live from Severance](#)

Tuesday, May 19, 2026, at 7 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Mandel Concert Hall

Ticketed Event

Following its sold-out Cleveland debut last year, **The Moth Mainstage** returns to Severance Music Center for a night of live storytelling and unforgettable personal journeys. In this two-part program, punctuated with musical interludes, five extraordinary storytellers share true stories inspired by the festival theme of *Courage*. Through tales of risk and resilience, of stepping into the unknown, and of finding courage amid fear, this quintessential Moth experience offers an evening of intimate connection and shared humanity.

"When it comes to engaging and brilliant storytelling, The Moth never disappoints. Moth performances are the go-to for anyone who has ever wanted to hear the best of the art of storytelling." — *Forbes*

Presented in partnership with Ideastream Public Media



[Hero's Song](#)

Friday, May 22, 2026, at 7:30 p.m.

Severance Music Center, Mandel Concert Hall

Ticketed Event

The Cleveland Orchestra

Franz Welser-Möst, *conductor*

Leila Josefowicz, *violin*

Trina Struble, *harp*

ADOLPHUS HAILSTORK *Epitaph for a Man Who Dreamed*

BACEWICZ *Symphony No. 4*

JÜRI REINVERE *Concerto for Violin, Harp, and Orchestra* (World Premiere; TCO Commission)

DVOŘÁK *Hero's Song*

The fourth annual Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival wraps up as **Franz Welser-Möst** leads The Cleveland Orchestra in Dvořák's *Hero's Song*, a symphony in miniature that bears the composer's distinctive style and irrepressible Bohemian spirit. **Jüri Reinvere**'s *Concerto for Violin, Harp, and Orchestra* receive its world premiere with virtuoso violinist **Leila Josefowicz** and TCO's own Principal Harp **Trina Struble** alongside Bacewicz's stormy Fourth Symphony and Adolphus Hailstork's moving elegy for Martin Luther King, Jr.

Additional Opera-Related Programming

Opera Curious?

Wednesday, February 11, 2026, at 5:30pm

Severance Music Center, Reinberger Chamber Hall

Free Event, Tickets Required

Step behind the curtain and experience the world of opera through the eyes of Barbara Hannigan, a world-renowned soprano whose international career as both singer and orchestra conductor defies convention. Through discussion and a musical interlude, the event explores opera as a powerful art form, and the courage required to pursue an unlikely artistic path. This engaging experience celebrates the beauty, drama, and storytelling at the heart of opera and vocal music, and the artists who are its champions.

This special event is open to the public and is supported by The Cleveland Orchestra's Opera Club.

All programs and artists are subject to change.

With Gratitude

The Cleveland Orchestra's 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival is supported by the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Supporting Foundation.

The Cleveland Orchestra thanks the following donors and members of the Opera Club for their support of the 2026 Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival:

Paul M. Angell Family Foundation
Ms. Viia R. Beechler
Mel Berger and Jane Haylor
Robin Dunn Blossom
Mitchell and Caroline Borrow
David and Julie Borsani, in memory of Marissa I. Borsani
Drs. Wu-Shung and Amy Chuang
Ted and Donna Connolly
Judith and George W. Diehl
Tamara Durn
Dagmar and Frederick Fellowes
Dr. Michael Frank and Patricia A.* Snyder
JoAnn and Robert Glick
Agnes Gund*
Iris and Tom Harvie
Malcolm and Vivian Henoch
Robert and Linda Jenkins
Karmendot Fund
Mr. and Mrs. Dennis W. LaBarre
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Dr. Alan and Mrs. Joni Lichtin
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In honor of Emma Skoff Lincoln
Mr. and Mrs. Alex Machaskee
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Ms. Nancy L. Meacham
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Mr. and Mrs. Forrest A. Norman III
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Mr. David A. Osage and Ms. Claudia C. Woods
Peter M. Padegimas, in memory of Beverly A. Padegimas
David Reimer and Raffaele DiLallo
James and Marguerite Rigby
Mr. D. Keith* and Mrs. Margaret B. Robinson
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Ms. Beverly J. Schneider
Astri Seidenfeld
Katie Shames

Drs. Charles Kent Smith and Patricia Moore Smith
Ms. Linda L. Wilmot
Tony and Diane Wynshaw-Boris
Anonymous

The Cleveland Orchestra's performances of *Fidelio* are generously sponsored by Jan R. Lewis.

Malin Byström's performance is generously sponsored by Ms. Cathy Lincoln.

Miloš Repický, Repetiteur, is generously sponsored by Dr. Michael Frank and Patricia A.* Snyder.

Ashley Emerson's performance is generously sponsored by Jane Haylor and Mel Berger.

Trina Struble's performance is generously supported by The Jean, Harry, and Brenda Fuchs Family Foundation.

**Deceased*

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