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# The New York Philharmonic Is Helping Harlem 'Take a Breath'

The Phil is collaborating with Mother AME Zion Church and Northwell Health, to uplift a community using music.

BY DEBBIE KOENIG  
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NY Phil musicians performing at Harlem's Mother AME Zion Church April 2, 2023 (Chris Lee)

"What does it look like when a church, a famous performing arts group, and a healthcare organization come together?" Rev. Dr. Malcolm Byrd, senior pastor at Mother AME Zion Church in Harlem, asked himself that question as he sought a new way to soothe and enlighten his

community. The answer was found through a collaboration with the New York Philharmonic and Northwell Health: Take a Breath, the series on which the three organizations are partnering, which kicks off February 9.

In the free series at the historic church—the oldest African American church in New York City—NY Phil musicians join experts from Northwell Health and Harlem-based performing arts partners to explore topics related to wellness, such as family health, grief, and mindfulness. Each of the season's themed sessions will feature performance, discussion, and group activities.

The NY Phil introduced the series last season in David Geffen Hall. The Orchestra felt that holding it at home rather than basing it where people live was a lost opportunity. "The New York Philharmonic is committed to supporting the urgent needs of our community while celebrating this city's rich cultural tapestry," says Gary A. Padmore, the Orchestra's Vice President, Education and Community Engagement, The Sue B. Mercy Chair. "Both needs could be fulfilled by moving Take a Breath to Harlem, and by developing the programming in partnership with Northwell Health, a valued health institution, and Mother Zion, which has been a spiritual and cultural beacon for the community for over a century."

Padmore found a like-minded partner in Dr. Byrd. "Music has transformative qualities. You can shift the mood, you can shift people, simply by playing the right song," the pastor says. "It's my hope that this series will bring to the people of Harlem inspiration and edification, for people who've been torn down all week."

Northwell Health's interest is rooted in research that reveals a direct link between music, mental health, and overall wellbeing. Studies have found that listening to music can not only lift spirits and elevate mood, but it can also improve heart rate and give the immune system a boost.

Long before there was scientific proof of music's ability to uplift and soothe, it played a central role in the lives of Black people. "African Americans have traditionally, throughout the diaspora, used music and the arts as an anchor in the community," says Dr. **Maurice Franklin**, a social scientist and public policy expert who serves on Harlem's Community Board 10. "It inspires feelings of joy."

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Harlem particularly hard, and in some ways the neighborhood still hasn't recovered. Health surveys reveal that mental health and wellness top the list of issues residents grapple with, Dr. Byrd observes.

"Many community members were robbed of the chance to have funerals, to say goodbye to loved ones. A process of extended grieving is happening, but hasn't been addressed," said Lauren Azalea Hanna, MD, director of Global Mental Health at Northwell Health. Dr. Hanna will be facilitating the April session titled "Music, Grief, Healing, and Celebration," which will explore how music can be part of the restorative path toward healing.

The free Take a Breath series is being introduced on February 9, at an event hosted by Harlem-based Unsung Collective, an organization devoted to celebrating the Black experience through contemporary music. That occasion, titled “An Unsung Symphony,” includes a preview of what’s in store, with NY Phil brass players performing with Unsung Collective. The series launches in earnest on March 9 with the first of the season’s three Saturday-afternoon sessions, each featuring a performance by Philharmonic musicians and guidance offered by practitioners from Northwell Health and cultural partners from within the Harlem community.

Dr. Byrd sees Take a Breath as a powerful partnership. He points out that Northwell Health has been serving his community since the early days of COVID, “not just for tests and vaccinations,” but as a partner to improve wellness.

As for the NY Phil, Take a Breath demonstrates that the Orchestra is sticking around to listen—to see how the Philharmonic can be of greater service to our community.

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