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## Requiem for an Asylum; At a Deserted Mental Hospital, Finding Closure With Bach

**BYLINE:** Tim Page , Washington Post Staff Writer

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Northampton State Hospital, a vast Victorian brick structure that is in equal parts imposing, dreary, frightening and magnificent, has stood on a hill high above Smith College for more than 140 years. One of the oldest of American mental institutions, the hospital, which eventually grew into many buildings, reached a peak population of about 2,500 in the 1950s. Since 1992, it has been deserted altogether, a genuinely haunted house, and it is now slated for demolition.

On Saturday afternoon, the hospital was the site of an extraordinary commemoration. At the close of a two-day symposium at Smith titled "Beyond Asylum: Transforming Mental Health Care," former patients and employees of Northampton State, along with at least 1,000 other observers, were invited to take the steep climb to the hospital once more. There, from deep within the bedrooms, lounges, offices and service areas of the main building, 102 state-of-the-art loudspeakers played conductor Philippe Herreweghe's Harmonia Mundi recording of J.S. Bach's celestial Magnificat to the winter day. It was artist Anna Schuleit's final tribute to the hospital and the thousands of men and women who passed through its doors.

"I propose an unusual and unprecedented way of honoring this hospital, of triggering our remembrance on one single day before its removal. . . . I WANT TO MAKE THE BUILDING SING."

--Anna Schuleit, proposal to the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the State of Massachusetts (1999)

It began with a walk Schuleit took in 1991, when she was still an aspiring art student at the nearby Northfield Mount Hermon School. "I wandered through the hospital and marveled at the architecture," Schuleit, now 26, reflected last week. "It was created with such care, such amazing attention down to the smallest detail. It was obvious to me that the people who built the hospital were idealists, that they thought it was going to be a great place--a real contribution to human happiness and fulfillment. And it all went bad so quickly."

Indeed, on the day the cornerstone was laid--July 4, 1856--Edward Jarvis, one of the most influential psychologists of his time, spoke of the hospital with evangelical fervor: "You of this town and the counties can and will do much for the prosperity and the comfort of this new Institution. You can cheer, support and strengthen it, you can pour the oil of joy on its machinery and give the power of confidence to its operations and, we doubt not, you will do so, and then this Hospital will ever have reason to rejoice that it is placed in the midst of an enlightened and a generous community."

Drenched as it is in cockeyed Emersonian optimism, Jarvis's speech now comes across as both naive and authoritarian. And, of course, the "oil of joy" was always in short supply at Northampton. By definition, such hospitals are not happy places, and much past treatment of the mentally ill seems downright barbaric today. (As late as the 1950s--a full century after the cornerstone was laid in Northampton--one Washington psychiatrist used to provide his patients with ice-pick lobotomies in an office just west of Dupont Circle.) Moreover, the state of Massachusetts never had enough money to keep the hospital properly maintained; by the time it closed it was in such wretched condition that it was condemned outright.

In 1997, years after the last patient had left the premises, Schuleit revisited Northampton. "What struck me then was the incredible silence," she said. "It reminded me of an indrawn breath. Here was this place where people had lived and worked, had struggled and suffered and sometimes gotten better for more than 100 years. Now it felt like the end of the world."

And so Schuleit became obsessed with what she calls the "hospital's call for tribute." "I couldn't find a way to express my thoughts about Northampton in my paintings, drawings or photographs," she said. "Something quite different was needed. And so I returned to the idea of taking a walk--and inviting as many people as possible to take it with me." She joined forces with J. Michael Moore, a local historian, and set to work.

The resulting project, "Habeus Corpus," was, in Schuleit's words, "a call for remembrance before returning to our modern homes and gardens, our cities and towns and a new century. A call for celebrating human existence, for creating a ceremony for the uncounted anonymous who lived and died in this and many more such institutions. A ceremony for mistakes and impossible efforts to correct our inherited share of 'insanity' and 'madness.' "

Since Northampton State Hospital is owned by the state, cutting through bureaucracy was not easy. Schuleit was backed with letters from the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the Massachusetts Cultural Council and even former governor Michael Dukakis. When permission was finally granted, she was told that spectators would not be allowed within the building itself. "I signed a 13-, 14-page document promising that only 30 people could go inside," she apologized to one of many who wanted to venture past the weather-beaten doors on Saturday. Still, it was more than sufficient to stand outside, as the building exploded into glorious sound, as enveloping as headphones, and continued ringing for the full 28-minute duration of the Magnificat. It echoed from the walls, it came from the sky, it seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere. Those in attendance, including a

goodly number of children and dogs, were invited to wander around outside the labyrinthine building, and many did. An elderly, immaculately dressed woman stood off to one side and wept quietly throughout, tears cracking through her makeup. Meanwhile, a young man, as skilled and articulate as many a radio correspondent, read eager reports into his cassette recorder, describing "Habeus Corpus" as the "event of a lifetime."

And so it may have been. The faces in the crowd wore an infinity of expressions--ranging from the blissful and philosophical to the curious and, occasionally, the frankly bored. This was a mass event that was also intimately personal; it seemed appropriate to greet your neighbor but not to watch too closely for any reactions. Far better to swim your own course through the sound and spirits.

When one spends more than two years planning for an outdoor event that, by its very design, can never happen again, it is helpful if nature cooperates. And, for these particular purposes, the weather on Saturday couldn't have been more ideal. All was cold and clear under iron-gray skies, with tattered curtains flapping in open windows, the ground carpeted with brown leaves with a few red and orange stragglers still clinging to the trees. Purest November. There was some gentle hail, the first of the season, early in the Magnificat, and when the sun burst through in the chorus "Fecit potentiam," the effect was so perfect that it might have been dismissed as a Hollywood touch if it hadn't been so wonderfully, palpably real.

Schuleit considers "Habeus Corpus" an opportunity to "honor the rituals of care and treatment, and to excuse the mistakes before a new century and millennium sweep over them." She knows full well the nightmares that took place within the walls of such places as Northampton but wants to acknowledge the hospital's "peculiar dignity as a building with a good cause at its core."

"There was one woman I met who worked at Northampton and wanted to quit every day because it was so horrible," Schuleit said. "Instead, she stayed 35 years. She was devoted, and determined to do good, and this was her life. My piece isn't one of those so-called permanent memorials for a building--you know, those little plaques they put up that are quickly overgrown with grass and weeds. This is something different. But I hope it will linger in the memory."