

timesunion.com[print story](#) 
[back](#) 

The church lady

Composer finds perfect living and performance space in Valley Falls

By JOSEPH DALTON, Special to the Times Union
First published: Sunday, June 11, 2006

Ceilings 30 feet high, 4,500 square feet of space, seating for 300, a century-old working pipe organ and a bell tower. It's a place with a history of community and transcendence. Composer Mary Jane Leach just calls it home.

The site is the former Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church in Valley Falls, a Rensselaer County hamlet of 500 residents that lies just north and across the Hoosick River from Schaghticoke.

After Leach purchased the property from the Albany Diocese in May 2003, she spent her first nights sleeping in the choir loft. Since then, she has turned that area into her studio and made a comfortable living space for herself and two cats in the spacious basement. The sanctuary itself is on its way to becoming a concert hall, with the latest events happening this afternoon and Saturday, June 17.

"I was just looking for a small quiet place to live," says Leach, 56, who had lived in Manhattan since 1977. "But how could I not get it?"

Leach's property search gradually led her up the Hudson to the rural perimeters of the Capital Region. After a real estate agent suggested they check out a church, Leach spent a night dreaming of the possibilities.

She recalls saying to herself, "If it has an organ it would have to be a real dump for me not to want it."

The next morning, the agent volunteered, "You know it has a working organ."

"It turned out better than we could believe," says Leach.

Paying cash

Located just off Route 67 at the corner of Emily and State streets, the sturdy red brick structure dwarfs the surrounding houses. Its prominent cornerstone reads, "1883 OSA."

The founders, the Order of St. Augustine, also ran St. John the Baptist in Schaghticoke, where the priests for both parishes lived. Thus there is no rectory on Leach's one-acre lot. After the Augustinians left in 1997, the Albany Diocese finally closed Our Lady of Good Counsel in 2001.

"It remained available for a while, because you can't get a mortgage for a place like this," explains Leach, who sold her co-op apartment in Manhattan's Morningside Heights in order to pay cash for the full asking price of \$69,900.

"Everybody wanted to know who was the lady that was moving into the church?" recalls Karen Carlson, who has lived across the street for 10 years. "Who in their right mind would buy a church and live in it?"

The natural answer, of course, is a musician, since churches and musicians have always been in each others' orbit.

Leach is no exception. Growing up in Vermont, her mother was a church organist. "We were in and out of church all the time," she recalls. And though she does not write sacred music, Leach was also an artist-in-residence at a Jesuit church in Cologne, Germany, for two years in the mid-1990s. There, she lived a few steps from the vestibule. Now, her bedroom is beneath a former high altar.

"Musicians are used to going into churches and just playing (a concert)," says Leach. Nevertheless, she's in the process of removing most of the furnishings and ornaments left behind. Taking down the Stations of the Cross will eliminate most of the remaining iconography, while selling the pews will allow for a more versatile use of the space.

Some items are finding new uses. A wooden cabinet with numerous shallow drawers was once used for liturgical vestments. Now located in the choir loft, it serves as an ideal cabinet for oversized scores.

Intimate space

As a member of the East Coast contemporary music scene, Leach has no shortage of friends and colleagues to invite for a performance and

sleepover. (She's thinking of making one of the small rooms off the main altar area into a guest bedroom.) So far, the guest artists have come away not only admiring her chutzpah for staking claim on the space, but also praising the acoustics.

"It's got an intimacy and a resonance ... without the tubbiness that afflicts (the sound in) so many church spaces," says composer Dennis Bathory-Kitsz of Northfield, Vt. He participated in the space's inaugural concert in fall 2004 and will also be part of Saturday afternoon's event.

An experienced producer, Leach collaborated during the 1990s with another composer, Phil Niblock, in running the XI label, a recording offshoot of Experimental Intermedia, Niblock's own combination residence and performance space. Says Niblock: "It was time for her to leave the city, and it's the perfect thing for her ... a place where you can do acoustic music, small ensembles or soloists very well."

Traditional repertoire is already finding a home in the space as well. "I love the space; it's ideal for Bach," says cellist David Gibson, a faculty member at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, who will be performing three of Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suites this afternoon. After hearing Gibson's first installment of the Bach cycle last month at her venue, Leach says, "It's like you were in the middle of the cello."

Acoustical advantage

Long before she found such a richly reverberant space to call her own, acoustics were an important element in Leach's compositions, which are primarily vocal.

"An abandoned church is about ideal for the kind of music she does, which is voices in space and how they reverberate against each other," says Frank Oteri, editor of the online contemporary music magazine New Music Box. Mark Stryker of the Detroit Free Press heard an ethereal aspect in Leach's music, saying it "offers a spiritual recharge without the banalities of the new mysticism."

Now in progress from Leach is an evening-length feminist revisioning of the ancient Greek myth of Ariadne. Portions of it were recorded on an all-Leach disc issued by New World Recordings in 1998. But a local performance is not in the immediate offing, since bringing in a full chorus to Valley Falls would get expensive.

Audience events

Leach is more focused on events that bring together local audiences with contemporary music. For example, at a recent concert composer Daniel Goode performed a piece that draws on the calls of Northeastern birds. Leach said the sounds intrigued a neighbor, and that she wants to have more contemporary music programming of "things that aren't threatening or make people feel stupid."

For now, the space itself may be enough of a draw for audiences.

"I remember the first time she had a concert," recalls neighbor Karen Carlson. "It was eclectic music and modern and I was wondering who would attend ... but there was a huge cross section of people there, who were interested in supporting her or just interested in the music."

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

Upcoming concerts

- * Where: Former Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, 12 Emily St., Valley Falls (Rensselaer County)
- * What: David Gibson will perform the Bach Unaccompanied Cello Suites Numbers 2, 3 and 6.
- * When: 2 p.m. today; reception follows.
- * What: New and recent works from composers Dennis Bathory-Kitsz, Michael Farley and Daniel Goode.
- * When: 4 p.m. Saturday; potluck dinner follows.
- * Admission: By donation for both events.
- * Info: 753-0244. Learn more about Mary Jane Leach and her music at: <http://www.mjleach.com>.

All Times Union materials copyright 1996-2006, Capital Newspapers Division of The Hearst Corporation, Albany, N.Y.

[CONTACT US](#) | [SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEWSPAPER](#) | [HOW TO ADVERTISE](#) | [YOUR PRIVACY RIGHTS](#) | [FULL COPYRIGHT](#) | [CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT](#)