



The Music Of Life : Artist Commission

Artworks responding to the history of music therapy at The Horton

The Horton Arts Centre is commissioning a minimum of two and maximum of three panoramic artworks for the internal window niches along its main corridor, inspired by the history of music therapy at Horton Hospital — the first programme of its kind in Europe, and the foundation of the clinical specialism practiced today.

The Music of Life Project is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Artist brief · The Horton Arts Centre, Epsom

We welcome applications from artists and designers working in collage, print, drawing, painting, photography and photogravure, and from anyone whose work might suit the brief. The artwork proposed does not have to be 2D.

The site

The Horton Arts Centre is the former chapel of Horton Hospital, and the only part of it left standing. The hospital opened in 1902, one of five built by the London County Council on a single estate at Epsom, together holding around 10,000 patients, most sent from London. The estate had its own farms, and patients were expected to work for their keep — growing food, doing the laundry, repairing shoes. In January 1957 Horton held 1,514 patients.

Music therapy began there in 1955, for patients who had responded to no other treatment and who would previously have been sedated and secluded. It made national headlines. Horton became the leading hospital in the UK for the practice, other Surrey hospitals took it up, and the approach developed there formed the basis of the clinical specialism available today.

It was introduced by Dr Henry Rollin, the hospital's deputy superintendent, and led by women — professional musicians of international standing whose achievements have gone largely unrecorded. Its staff and its patients included refugees from Nazi Europe. Staff came from Ireland, Nigeria, the Caribbean and Mauritius, and later decades brought Mauritian sega and reggae to the hospital's dances.

In 1961 a third of the chapel was converted into a concert hall — Europe's first dedicated music therapy centre. It was named Harewood Hall in 1963.

The hospital closed in 1997 and the chapel was abandoned for forty years. It was restored — ceiling, Victorian tilework, organ pipes — and reopened in 2022 as a venue for arts and heritage, winning that year's Surrey Heritage Award. It is Grade II listed.

The Horton now runs live music, theatre, dance, exhibitions and workshops, with a café, gardens and a permanent exhibition on Epsom's Hospital Cluster. Entry is free. The former Harewood Hall is its performance space, and the corridor where these artworks will hang adjoins it.

The artwork location

- There are three window niches, each approximately **210 × 74 cm**, elegantly framed by plaster mouldings. The artwork sits within the recess, so the finished piece will be around 200 × 65 cm. We would welcome a proposal that used either two or all three of these niches — the number is something we'll settle with the appointed artist, and it won't affect shortlisting.
- Deep moulded recesses, the base of each niche approximately 1.5 m above the floor. The back of each niche is boarded, so it will take a panel rather than a heavy object.
- The corridor is 132 cm wide. The works need to read clearly from above eye level and from along the corridor.
- Lit by a concealed light above the niche.
- The medium is open, and surface treatments that catch the light would sit well here. As the site has some depth, we would be interested to hear proposals beyond 2D.



We envisage each artwork as a panoramic scene, gathering several strands of the history into one frame so a viewer reads across it like a frieze.

The historical research

Two scenes are described below, in rough. The first covers the beginning of the programme and the second its subsequent years. They are a starting point — the detailed evidence will sit in an accompanying website, so we don't expect the artworks to be a literal representation of the text.

The historical research behind them is led by The Horton's research partner, King's College London, drawing on Surrey History Centre, the Guildhall, the London Picture Archive, the London Archives, Bourne Hall and the British Film Institute, and recording a handful of new oral histories. The archive is partial, but holds some excellent imagery of Dea Forsdyke, of the buildings, of nurse-patient interaction and of music therapy sessions.



H. R. Rollin, "Music Therapy in a Mental Hospital," *Nursing Times*, 18 September 1964, pp. 1219–1222.

Scene 1 — Silence then Noise, 1955–61

“Musick is a roaring-meg against melancholy, to rear and revive the languishing soul.” — Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621; the epigraph chosen by Dr Henry Rollin, the hospital’s deputy superintendent, for the first published account of the Horton programme.

In 1955 Horton employed its first music therapist: Mair Brooking. Her instrument was an old piano dragged out of a ward and patched up “to its inferior best”; her room was the Main Hall, a cavernous Victorian space “large enough to house a fleet of mammoth aircraft,” echoing and nearly empty. Into it she gathered nine male patients who were chosen because music had once mattered to them. Most had not touched an instrument in many years. She began gently: gramophone records first, then her own piano playing, then each man coaxed to try “something — anything.” What she was after, she said, was not performance but to “find the person inside the patient and keep tight hold.”

The work grew. Women’s groups followed; within a year more than thirty patients were taking part.

Case study: Mrs E. H., a pianist trained in Bulgaria, came to music therapy after years of insulin and electric-shock treatment; as her playing returned, her delusions and hallucinations “perceptibly fell away,” and she became a soloist before leaving to live and work on her own in London.

Case study: Mr G. W., kept on a closed ward, became “the cornerstone of the various small ensembles.”

Case study: Mr F. M., a professional violinist admitted destitute, had pawned his violin; a loan was arranged so he could “redeem his own instrument from pawn,” and he left to lead a ship’s orchestra.

In 1956 the battered upright piano was replaced by a Steinway grand — no small thing in a state hospital — secured through Yolanda Merö-Irion, a concert pianist in New York whose “long and benevolent arm” reached across the Atlantic to lean on Steinway of London for a special price. By 1957 the therapy had a first room of its own: a corner of the hospital chapel, screened off

behind panels “painted by a patient.” The music stayed deliberately plain — simple rhythm, straightforward melody, elementary harmony — so that anyone could join.

By the late 1950s the work was reaching the patients who had responded to nothing else — the long-stay and the withdrawn, described in the hospital’s own papers as the least hopeful element in it.

Scene 2 — Performance and Professionalisation, 1961–67

By the 1960s the music therapy had a proper concert hall. A third of the chapel was converted, and on 7 December 1961 the Countess of Harewood opened it; in 1963 it was named Harewood Hall in her honour. This scene is that hall at its most alive and public. Picture it dressed for an occasion: tea and sweets laid out, patients in their “best dresses and suits,” a party got up out of a hospital ward. There were the patients’ own concerts, ambitious and rough-edged — “perfection was not aimed at and certainly not attained,” but that they were performed at all “was in itself an achievement,” and the performers “glowed as they took their bows.”

Music therapy could call on the hospital’s resources: Horton’s gardeners, carpenters, printers and electricians built the staging and printed the programmes for the patients’ concerts. Nurses and patient leaders assisted in every session. Occupational therapy students attended as part of their training.

By now Horton’s music therapist was Dea Forsdyke — herself a professional violinist, and sister of the celebrated art historian Ernst Gombrich. Her principle was that “everyone must be invited to join in,” and that for the unskilled, “mistakes must not be pointed out” — a position music therapists at other Surrey hospitals openly disagreed with.

And there was the hall’s one unforgettable night. She brought her family to play: the Gombrich Trio, with Dea on violin, her brother Ernst on cello, and his wife Ilse, a professional pianist, at the keyboard. They drove out from Hampstead on a raw November night in 1965, refused any fee, and played to a packed hall. Many of the patients in the audience were refugees who, like the Gombrichs, had fled Nazi Europe; afterwards they crowded round the players, thanking them in English or German.

Scene 3 — in development

The third option scene covers the later decades, and the research is still under way.

The accompanying website

The finished artworks may also be reproduced online, on a site optimised for tablet and phone, where parts of the image could be selected to open the archive material behind them.

Each scene needs discrete elements — a violin, a screen, a doorway, a pair of hands — clear enough to identify on their own.

None of this appears on the artwork itself: no numbers, no markers, no captions.

What we’ll give you

- Final versions of the scenes. The descriptions above are rough drafts, written while the research is still in progress; the appointed artist will be given the completed versions.
- Key archive sources.

- Photographs and measurements of the niches.

Fee and timeline

Artist fee: £2,350 per artwork scene. £4,700 for two (the minimum). £7,050 for three. This is inclusive of expenses.

Plus up to £500 costs per artwork for production, materials, mounting and installation. Maximum total £1,500.

The selected artist will be responsible for production and install. You'll know what your work needs better than we would, and it's paid from this budget rather than out of your fee. Whichever way you work, we'll need a high-quality digital reproduction of the finished artwork for the accompanying website.

Paid concept stage: £250 each for three shortlisted artists — for submitting a rough sketch of Scene 1, with detailed description of the treatment and a production budget.

One of the three will be commissioned to make **the artworks**.

Applicants are invited to visit the Horton Epsom and the artwork location during opening hours:
<https://thehortonepsom.org/visit/>

Deadline for expressions of interest	30 August, 23.59
Three artists notified	3 September
Deadline for paid concepts	13 September
Selected artist commissioned	18 September
Site visit for selected artist	TBC
Artwork progress review	mid-October
Completion of artwork	16 November
Installation of artwork	18 November

To apply

Send up to three samples of relevant work, by email, and tell us:

- Why you're interested in the commission.
- What medium you would propose, how you would produce and mount it at this scale, and which bureau, printer or installer you would work with. Having worked at this size before isn't a requirement.
- Your availability September to November. The final artworks must be completed by 16 November, for installation on 18 November.

We request that you do not use artificial intelligence to generate the artwork.

Laura Khan Mitchison, Interpretation Project Manager, The Music Of Life Project, The Horton Epsom

Email: laura@on-the-record.org.uk

