



Music to the ears: St George's pristine sound is among the best in the country

## YOU ARE NOT ALONE

# Local hero: how one venue is fighting Covid

**Ivan Hewett** introduces our new weekly bulletin from St George's, a concert hall in Bristol

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**A**t last, the message is getting through: the arts are in dire straits. People are starting to shout about the disastrous effects of the lockdown on big arts institutions such as the Southbank Centre. Even Prince Charles has spoken of his worries for the Royal Opera House.

But the concern for flagship companies has overshadowed the hundreds of smaller arts institutions without friends in high places which are quietly heading for disaster. Among them is the circuit of middle-scale venues that host music, theatre and literature events. They are a vital part of the country's cultural fabric, and to lose even one would be tragic. But unlike those big prestigious companies, which are handsomely subsidised, these smaller venues operate on a proportionally much smaller subsidy.



Scaling up: St George's Bristol unveiled a multi-million pound extension in 2018

*The Telegraph* has decided to promote the cause of one such venue: St George's in Bristol. This architectural and musical jewel has been presenting top-class classical, folk and world music concerts since 1976, as well as theatre, literature and educational events. It has a pristine, warm sound which some say is the best in the country for small-scale music, and an intensely serene atmosphere, harking back to its original use as a church. It has a flexible seating capacity of up to 580, and a programme of around 250 events a year, run by a staff of 20.

As well as being a centre of excellence for the arts in general, St George's also has a mission to respond to the history of its home city which over the past week has made headlines. One of its residents is the BAME-majority orchestra Chineke!, which last year performed a new work by the young black composer James B Wilson called *Free Man*, celebrating the life and work of one of Bristol's most iconic civil rights activists, Dr Paul Stephenson. The work was commissioned by St George's.

The venue has grown over the years. In the Nineties, it raised money, through the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery funds, for the first redevelopments. The crypt was completely transformed and the pews replaced with seats. A decade later, the need to haul St George's into the 21st century became obvious – it needed improved disabled access, and a new building to stand alongside the original, that could be used for educational projects and also be rented out on a commercial basis.

An Arts Council England (ACE) grant of £2million provided about a third of the cost, with the rest being raised from charitable trusts and local supporters. The new building finally opened in 2018, winning a Riba award.

St George's currently receives a share of a four-year £1.3million Arts Council grant via Bristol Music Trust, plus money from Bristol City Council, but this only accounts for six per cent of its total funding (compare this to the South Bank's ACE annual investment which is 34 per cent of the centre's income). Crucially, the lockdown has cut off St George's income from the box office and all other commercial activities at a stroke. Losses until September will be around £650,000, more than a third of the annual turnover of £1.8million. The venue is thus in emergency mode.

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## The shows must go on Suzanne Rolt, Chief executive

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When the lockdown was announced we had to move immediately into shutdown mode. We had to think fast about what action to take with the hundreds of dates in the diary. Should we cancel them, or move them into autumn? The challenge was to make decisions in the face of uncertainty and, at times, a total absence of anyone knowing what was going to happen! So you're trying to communicate with staff, artists and audiences but not really knowing whether to say: we'll be closed until May... June... September?



Suzanne Rolt, Chief executive, St George's Bristol

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Like most venues, we assumed a September opening was possible so we went for the latter. It meant co-ordinating our diary with hundreds of different promoters and artists. Then I had to decide: how many staff do I furlough? In the end I reduced the office staff to just two – me and the finance director – which meant taking on the work of other departments. I budgeted to bring some staff out of furlough from time to time, for short periods, but that's a drain on our resources so I can't do it often.

As the Government's plans became clearer it was obvious we weren't going to reopen in the autumn after all, so we had to push all the dates we'd just reorganised back into 2021.

The other urgent thing was to replace all the revenue streams we'd just lost. We had to prepare a bid for Arts Council emergency funding, which we'll hear about next week, and rack our brains to think of any other source. We've been in touch with the city council, which has been really supportive, and charitable trusts, which are relaxing their rules to support us even though we're not presenting any work. We've been in touch with local supporters, who give between £40 and £2,500 a year. They've been fantastic. No-one has cancelled their donation.

Meanwhile, we've had to look after the building. "Mothballing" isn't just a matter of locking the doors and walking away. We have to keep an eye on a precious historic building like St George's, which is vulnerable at a time like this. There was all the stock in the café, which had to be disposed of, and unforeseen things to deal with. We've had a gas leak and a water leak in the past month.

I'm desperately keen to reopen as soon as possible, and I've done a lot of work with local architects on how we could reconfigure for social distancing. At two metres we can get 125 people into our building, which holds 580. With one metre it goes up to 175. These are tiny numbers, and not really financially viable, so we've thought about presenting the same short concert twice, to different audiences. Then there's the problem of cleaning surfaces between events, which you can't do in 20 minutes. It's a day's work. I'm not saying we're not willing to try it, but we'll need extra help to make up for the losses we'd incur.

We've also been doing our best to stay in people's minds, by creating an online presence. We don't have the resources of the Wigmore Hall and the BBC, so our online events can't be as slick as theirs. However, we have a YouTube channel, which many of our musician friends, such as Stephen Hough, have donated performances to. We're also part of Bristol Arts Channel, an online platform of organisations like the Bristol Old Vic theatre and Watershed cinema where we can create content of all kinds, as part of a month-long pilot project.

We can't just be focused on preparing for the future, we have to remind our audiences we're still here and doing our best to serve them, so they'll come back to us when all this is over.

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*To donate to St George's Bristol, visit*  
[stgeorgesbristol.co.uk/support-us](http://stgeorgesbristol.co.uk/support-us)