

# Diary from St George's Bristol: 'We face an agonising wait'

In her weekly diary, the chief executive of St George's Bristol charts the efforts to ensure this concert venue survives the Covid crisis

By Suzanne Rolt

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The best tonic ever: the Bristol Ensemble's outdoor concert was a welcome return for live music

Our return to live performance in our garden last Friday was a joyful affair that brought a new sense of optimism to the whole organisation. It was hard work to set up – not least chalking bass clefs at two-metre intervals for social distancing – but witnessing how [musicians](#), staff and audiences reunited over their love of music was the best tonic ever.

I wasn't entirely surprised when rain stopped play midway through the Bristol Ensemble's afternoon concert, but nothing could dampen the spirits of an audience determined to enjoy every moment. There was an audible sigh as the rapturous violin solo in Vaughan Williams's Lark Ascending (played by Emil Huckle-Kleve) sailed upwards into the sky. It was five months to the day since the Ensemble last played at [St George's](#) and its director, Roger Huckle, was unable to quell the tears as he expressed just how wrong it felt to be playing outdoors while, only metres away, our acclaimed hall remains empty of music. It was a sentiment endorsed by our audience – one member sent in a cheque for £5,000 to help put this right.

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On Tuesday our trustees met to review our financial position and our application to the £1.57 billion government Cultural Recovery Fund. We've been working on it solidly for the past week, well aware that our future depends on it. There are just four deceptively simple questions, but each one requires days of thought and analysis that must be distilled into 350 words of pitch-perfect prose. It needs to convey the vital nature of our cultural programme while making a convincing case for our ability to manage our finances in a fog-obscured future. After submitting it, we face an agonising wait while staring down the barrel of a Plan B – drastic cuts and even closure – that could strip away the past 40 years of achievements.

While we wait, our contemporary music curator, Phil Johnson, is busy conjuring up events to tempt audiences back as soon as we can reopen. There's a new "Music Rebels" series, building on the worldwide attention Bristol has received over the Edward Colston statue controversy. It examines protest, rebellion and the revolutionary spirit, ranging from Beethoven to Bob Dylan, and Shostakovich to Marvin Gaye, whose great protest album What's Going On has its 50th anniversary next year. Meanwhile, many of our returning artists are thinking creatively, even offering to share songs around a campfire.

As at many other venues, red lights are being trained on our building as part of a national "Red Alert" campaign to highlight the plight of the thousands of freelance arts workers who've lost their livelihoods. At 9pm on Tuesday a fierce crimson glow erupted across our façade, signalling solidarity with our colleagues. Let's hope the message is noticed, otherwise we face a less colourful future – in total darkness.