

Diary from St George's Bristol: 'Those not on furlough have had to cover their colleagues'

This week, the head of programme charts the efforts to ensure this beloved concert venue survives the Covid crisis

By Ben Spencer

21 August 2020 • 7:00am



Socially-distanced scenes at a Nest Collective gig at St George's Bristol | CREDIT: St George's

Last week we were in [a strange limbo](#), waiting to see whether the government would ease the lockdown. They finally relaxed the rules at the end of the week, so we've been making plans for a re-designed autumn and spring cultural offering.

Of course working with 20 per cent capacity [isn't viable in the long term](#), but in the short term it can have benefits. When you're bound, financially, to always aim at full or near-full capacity, that rules out certain artists straight away, but when you're aiming to fill only 100 seats you can take a risk on really interesting but less well-known artists.

We can also focus on more local artists (such as Dizraeli and Kitty Macfarlane, presented by The Nest Collective this week in our gardens), alongside the famous ensembles who perform regularly here such as Chineke!, the Aurora Orchestra and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

The other positive thing is that this has become an opportunity for us to develop our digital content; that will surely affect the way we do things in the future. We're also planning to do one or two hybrid events, meaning that they'll take place in front of an audience, but we're filming them for an online audience at the same time.

One great thing about holding our first live event last week is that we got to meet our loyal audience, who we haven't really seen for months. We've been doing some research on how they feel about the lockdown, and like most venues we find they have a real hunger to get back to live events.

But there's also a need for reassurance that anything we offer will be done in a safe way. People are obviously concerned about their safety, and they want to know the details of exactly what we're doing about Perspex screens, one-way systems, revised seating layouts, cleaning schedules.



Ben Spencer, head of programme, says the venue is working hard to survive | CREDIT: Ben Spencer/St George's

For me the hardest thing about the job in the past few months has been the uncertainty. I spend the first few weeks frantically cancelling everything in the diary for the spring and rescheduling it for this autumn and next spring. Now I'm busy moving all those events for a second, sometimes third time, into later next year. My personal hunch about the way things will go is that we'll have to continue with social distancing into next summer, maybe even into next autumn.

All this means that morale has been a bit up-and-down. We were very reliant on the first tranche of Arts Council emergency funding, and waiting for the decision was a very tense time. We're now going to have to live through that all over again, with the second funding application.

Also, for colleagues who are not furloughed, it's been so tiring because they've had to multi-task for their absent colleagues. Trish Brown, our director of operations, has been working on the box-office, dealing with programming enquiries, helping with the digital content, and of course her own job hasn't stopped, because the building still has to be looked after.

It's that, plus the uncertainty, that's so challenging at the moment.

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