

Diary from St George's Bristol: 'Concert hall life has become precarious and unpredictable'

In her weekly bulletin, the chief executive of this beloved venue charts the efforts to ensure it survives the Covid crisis

By Suzanne Rolt

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The string players of Welsh National Opera performing outdoors at St George's

Whisper it softly, but I have actually quite enjoyed this past week. With staff returning to the office in small but growing numbers, and live performances on the rise, it has felt as close to normal as I've known for some time.

We are nowhere near pre-Covid levels of activity, but we have turned out a respectable six garden concerts and a live streamed event with our Philosopher in Residence. We have also seen the main hall back in action with two recordings, featuring jazz pianist Neil Cowley and the contemporary music band, Mammal Hands.

St George's finally has a pulse again. We are learning too that there's never a dull moment when it comes to promoting outdoor events. Our concert managers have to be on their toes and ready to deal with the unexpected – as one commented, it's a bit like returning to their student days and delivering fringe productions again.

Last Friday's concerts were rudely interrupted not only by a rogue fire alarm from a next-door restaurant, but by two intoxicated gate-crashers who stumbled in to see what all the "noise" was about. Happily, they left quietly when approached by our 6' 3" tall hospitality manager, Gary Hall.

Our audience's patience was rewarded by a bravura performance from a stray blackbird, duetting with the string players of Welsh National Opera during [Mozart's](#) Eine kleine Nachtmusik. With this uplift in activity, I'm now venturing into the office once or twice a week for updates and planning meetings. Masks are firmly on, while doors and windows are propped open to provide cheap but effective ventilation. Our bookings diary is starting to look rosier and we're attracting increasing interest from local ensembles in need of a regular, weekly rehearsal space.

The Fantasy Orchestra arrived to set up in the hall on Monday evening, followed by one of the city's finest choirs, Exultate Singers, on Wednesday. It's a modest but steady income stream that helps to bolster the bottom line. Audiences still crave events with the big-name, internationally renowned artists from the worlds of classical music, jazz and folk, and it is these who take precedence when we come to allocating prime dates in our schedule.

On this front, however, there's a new fly in the ointment: the threat of quarantine. With the easing of lockdown, musicians had been able to travel freely between countries, picking up work wherever they can. Now, their decision to accept engagements outside the UK must be weighed up against the potential loss of work on their return, when they risk encountering a 14-day performance exclusion zone.

With quarantine corridors sometimes closing at short notice on both sides of the Channel, it can throw carefully coordinated diaries and programme schedules for both artists and venues into a state of disarray. Our October Beethoven mini-series has already been nudged back by a week, and I'm keeping everything crossed that further changes won't be necessary. It's making concert hall life precarious and unpredictable; a veritable house of cards.

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