

Diary from St George's: 'If the worst happens on Monday, we won't bow out quietly'

In her weekly diary, the chief executive of St George's Bristol charts the efforts to ensure this beloved concert venue survives Covid-19

By Suzanne Rolt

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Photo Credit – Evan Dawson

It's been a tough week. Last Friday, just as we were counting down the final days and hours to the outcome of the [Government's Culture Recovery Fund](#), we received news of a week's delay. No one doubts the complexities involved in ensuring a fair distribution of funds, but down here on the ground, morale levels are sagging and a week feels like an eternity.

The Emergency Response Funding we secured earlier in the year ran out on Sept 30 and it will now be mid-October before we know where we stand, so hopes of a controlled transition from one funding lifeline to the next have evaporated. This hasn't been the only letdown this week. Our funding bid to a major Charity Survival Fund has been unsuccessful – hardly surprising given that an £18 million pot was overwhelmed with applications to the value of £174 million. As if to rub salt into the wounds, [our elation at reaching the finals of the RIBA South West Awards 2020](#) proves to be short-lived too. With the growing threat of countrywide lockdowns hindering the jury's site visits, this year's awards are being delayed and combined with the awards for 2021.

In a bittersweet twist, the slow-moving sales for our indoor concerts prove to be a blessing as it turns out that we have fewer seats than we thought. Our rudimentary ventilation system, which involves wafting air through doors and windows, doesn't make the grade. It's insufficient to offset the risk of people sitting only 1.5 metres apart – not unless we keep all doors open throughout the concert and ask audiences to keep warm by wearing winter coats as well as face masks. As concerts are supposed to be a pleasurable, not punishing, experience, we respace chairs out to 2m and accept the reduction in capacity and ticket income. On the plus side, in one swift move we've achieved a near sell-out position for all concerts.

On Tuesday, I watch with sadness the poignant Let Music Live demonstrations in London and Birmingham. An orchestra performs music from a cutback version of Holst's The Planets to highlight the desperate plight of thousands of freelance musicians. It ignites my own fighting spirit and spurs me on.

Despite the uncertainty, I approve our head of programmes' plans for a concert series with the locally based Bristol Ensemble, Exultate Singers and Brandon Hill Chamber Orchestra. We release two further Beethoven concerts with the Piatti Quartet and pianist Janina Fialkowska, and a new weekly series of relaxed music sessions in our bar area featuring young, contemporary artists. To mark Black History Month, we donate the hall throughout October to music charity Live Music Now, which is recording music by black artists to be streamed to patients at North Bristol NHS Trust as part of a Fresh Arts programme.

If the worst happens on Monday, St George's won't bow out quietly. We'll go out in a blaze of soaring strings and a chorus of voices celebrating the power and value of music.

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