

Diary from St George's Bristol: 'Moths are already trying to eat the piano'

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

By Suzanne Rolt

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St George's Bristol under lockdown

My personal mantra through all this is “don’t look down”, because if you do, you become overwhelmed by the existential crisis facing the music sector. We’re part of a delicate ecology of musicians, arts professionals and then a whole raft of people involved in the supply and delivery of support services.

The moving parts are numerous and all need to be synchronised if we’re to get back on our feet. I’m working by focusing on three-month blocks at a time, hoping to leap from one life raft to the next and not trying to look too far into the future.

This week, I went for a Covid-19 test. I have been feeling unwell for a few weeks but put it down to simply working longer hours than ever before and struggling to find the off-switch for home working. My overriding concern is the impact a positive result would have on my ability to lead St George's if I become incapacitated. I wonder if I should issue myself with a furlough notice and bring back a senior manager in my place.

I had never thought too much about the meaning behind the term “mothballing” until this week. Our long-standing piano tuner offers to come in without charge to check over our two Steinway Concert Grands. The moths it seems have wasted no time in settling down among the piano felts. Thankfully he catches them in time, lays specially treated papers among the hammers, wheels them back to the side of the stage and promises to return in a few weeks' time.

Midweek and I'm already exhausted. For this week only, I have a full four staff members on board, more than I've had since the pandemic began. Our finance director returns to oversee the payroll and update the cash flow. There's a red column that sounds the alarm when cash runs out, and it's getting closer.



Suzanne Rolt, chief executive of St George's Bristol

I try to focus on the positive: the unsolicited donation we received for £250 and the big-hearted generosity of musicians who have signed up to contribute to a weekly online lunchtime concert, where they perform from their own homes. It takes a week of work and repeated cries for tech help from my teenage daughter to produce 45 minutes of music. Never again will I complain about the work involved in presenting a live evening performance, which feels like a walk in the park by comparison.

It's Thursday already, and time for the latest in our series of streamed lunchtime concerts from musicians' bedrooms, which we launched two weeks ago. As always I'm nervous. Will the stream work? Will anybody tune in? Today we've a focus on young performers, which I'm pleased about, plus star violinist Rachel Podger, who's a regular here.

We've had really great feedback, and good listener numbers in the thousands (ie, 1,500 for the first, 3,500 for last week's). Listeners have been blown away by the talent of the performers and the passion they feel for their favourite hall. The musicians themselves are overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to perform, and no one complains when the donations I have to share out have equated to barely £15 per musician.