

Diary from St George's: 'Will we get a last-minute reprieve?'

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

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3 July 2020 • 7:00am



Suzanne Rolt, chief executive of St George's Bristol

Like a catchy tune you just can't shake, my brain has been on constant replay all week, turning over the possible outcomes of the emergency funding application we submitted in May to Arts Council England, along with many other arts organisations. We applied for around £150,000, and it's absolutely vital just to support the hall's basic cash flow. Next month, we have to start contributing to employees' salaries as the furlough scheme is wound down, and frankly we don't have the wherewithal to do that. Who can tell if it will be an upbeat overture to a last-minute reprieve for St George's, or a mournful refrain as its life as a concert hall comes to an abrupt end?

At times like this it's best to keep busy, and there's no shortage of things to do. This week, we took another tentative step forward with our first live, ticketed event since March, launching an online edition of a series we've run in the past with our philosopher in residence, Julian Baggini. He guided audiences through the headlines in the weekend papers, and if ever we were in need of a philosophical take on world affairs, it's now. Our nerves were a little jangly beforehand, but audience members popped up one by one on the Zoom screen, and we made it through to the end without technical mishaps. The audience loved it, and what started out as something of a novelty now feels as if it could be part of our longer-term future.

A few days later came our most ambitious online event to date, featuring Europe's first majority BAME orchestra Chineke!, one of our resident ensembles. In practice, it meant assembling photographs and excerpts of past concerts, and weaving them seamlessly through an extended interview with the orchestra's founder, Chi-chi Nwanoku. We were keen to have it ready for the last weekend of broadcasting of the Bristol Arts Channel, which is finishing its trial run, and it was a desperate scramble to get it finished in time. With its emotionally charged closing performance of Deep River, it's become one of our most talked-about events.

Amid all this, the day of the funding announcement passes hour by slow hour. The waiting is excruciating. I flick through our summer concert brochure, tormenting myself with thoughts of what might have been. The season's climax should have taken place today, a performance of La Traviata with picnics and champagne in the gardens. I try to console myself with the fact that it's grey outside and the ground is probably far too wet for picnic blankets.

By late afternoon on Tuesday, I'm bracing myself to expect the worst but when the email finally arrives it informs me the decision has been delayed until next week. My resilience levels have already taken a knocking so it takes time to mentally adjust to the prospect of St George's remaining in limbo for yet another week. I'm at a loss as to what to do next, so I whisk the dog off for a brisk walk. When I return I pour myself a large glass of wine, pick up my pen and force myself to contemplate the very thing I have tried for so long to avoid: the question of just how deeply I will need to cut our remaining resources if St George's is to be saved.