

# Diary from St George's: 'The daily threat of closure has been banished'

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

By Suzanne Rolt  
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With Arts Council emergency response funding secured, St George's now has a short-term financial safety net in place. The money has an immediate and positive effect: it will allow us to introduce measures to make the venue Covid-safe; to order PPE and measure up for safety screens to install in the café/bar and box office area.

The daily threat of closure has been banished and our gaze has now shifted from cash flows and empty income sheets to a renewed focus on why we're here: to make and share music. With this in mind, my first call of the week is to welcome back our head of programming, Ben Spencer, expanding our core staff team from trio to quartet.

Our salary budget only stretches to two days of Ben's time but he offers to split this into four mornings to help stretch it further. He certainly has his work cut out. With some funding now secured, does he concentrate on developing digital content and small-scale classical outdoor concerts with local players, or instead schedule live performances in the main hall? It's essentially a holding pattern, based on our getting the green light to reopen for socially distanced events in the coming weeks. There's no clear answer right now, although it's obvious that we'd require a miracle to get a Steinway piano down the front steps and out into the gardens.

Given the continuing advice around non-essential travel, the team agrees that local musicians will be the key to rebuilding our programme in the short term. We're fortunate to have nurtured close relationships with many over the years, professional and amateur, and are now offering generous discounts to record or rehearse in the hall. One of these, composer-musician Lloyd Coleman, is with us today, recording a new score for a BBC Radio 3 drama.

Meanwhile, a welcome diversion arrives in the form of a callout for proposals for a British Council UK/Australia music season exploring the theme "Who are we now?". The neglected artistic cogs start to turn and we begin dreaming about Australia and what it might be like to design a programme of concerts around expansive, open spaces rather than the ever more confined ones that we've found ourselves operating within.

On Tuesday, our operations director, Trish Brown, mobilises a team of volunteers to carry out a major clean-up, recycling vast quantities of redundant leaflets and posters and disinfecting surfaces ready for the eventual return of staff and, hopefully, concertgoers. It reminds me of how St George's first started out, some 40 years ago, relying on the efforts of a committed team of volunteers who had the vision to see how a concert hall could spring from the embers of a redundant church. This same spirit remains, just proving that many things in life have a habit of coming full circle.

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