

Diary from St George's: 'I predict a land grab'

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

24 July 2020 • 7:00am



I've missed many things over the past few months and a sense of routine is one of them. It's the nature of concert halls that our lives are regulated by the ebb and flow of the artistic season. By July, we would usually be well into the delivery phase of our autumn programme. The marketing team would be nervously monitoring sales and putting the finishing touches to our Christmas events packages. Now there's a new pattern emerging, one where out-of-the-blue announcements routinely catch everyone unawares.

This week, the entire staff team is taking a strategic week's holiday, but this proves to be bad timing as last Friday afternoon Downing Street declared that concert halls and theatres will be able to reopen for socially distanced live performances from August 1. The pilot projects have clearly gone well because we have accelerated through to the penultimate step in the recovery road map for culture.

So no holiday for me now. The question is: should we change direction? It's been a little over a week since we were given the green light for outdoor concerts and we have our hands full managing these. Our head of programme has been progressing plans with the director of a local professional chamber orchestra, the Bristol Ensemble, and the wheels are now in motion for a series of small-scale garden concerts throughout August. We'll start with two concerts each Friday and increase numbers if demand picks up.

After a panicked discussion with my operations director, we decide to keep to this original plan. Next week, when our core team returns, we'll explore how best to reintroduce indoor events from September onwards. The stumbling block remains that whichever way you cut it the finances simply don't stack up on reduced-capacity events, so we'll need to be creative as we can ill afford to lose more money. I'm envisaging a pared-back programme of solo piano recitals, trios and quartets, certainly not our usual roller coaster of back-to-back events.

In the meantime, our head of development, Verity Slater, has drafted a funding application to a London-based charitable trust that has launched a £10 million charity survival fund. It's a critical bid because, while the recent Arts Council emergency grant has stabilised our position through to October, our business model still depends on being able to generate income at pre-Covid levels. So this is currently one of the only means we have of staying afloat beyond this time and securing resources to present a limited programme of work. It requires a personal letter from me setting out how St George's will use its support.

It's all good practice as we will soon need to make an application to the government's £1.57 billion rescue package for arts and culture. Given the scale of redundancies being faced across our sector, the Culture Secretary will need to demonstrate the wisdom of King Solomon to ensure a fair and effective distribution of funds. In the absence of this, I predict a land grab.

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