

Diary from St George's Bristol: 'This is the last-chance saloon'

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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The show must go on: musicians playing on the steps of St George's | CREDIT: Kat Kleve

It's been quite a week, with a deluge of changes and deadlines hitting from every direction. Hopes of a country-wide return to socially distanced live indoor performances were dashed last Friday as the Government announced a delay. The sound of brakes screeching as concert halls performed hand-break turns could be heard for miles around. My own relief at having stuck with outdoor concerts during August is short lived as I now face the dilemma of what to do about the events we have scheduled for September, not least pianist Paul Lewis. Do I abandon them once again or plough on regardless?

I head into the office on Tuesday to discuss this with my Operations Director Trish Brown. It's also a chance to inspect the building to see how everything's holding up, and to view the newly installed protective screens in the box office and bar. We finish up in the gallery area of the auditorium, trying to figure out how to attach what is essentially a windscreen around its edges; a safety precaution to prevent people from coughing over the audience in the stalls seats below. Anything too intrusive risks diminishing people's views and our acclaimed acoustic. Fortunately, we're in good hands as it's being crafted by David Harraway, Production and Operations Director at the Bristol Old Vic. He's branching out from set design while the theatre is dark, no doubt doing brisk trade as venues rush to make themselves Covid-safe.

By Wednesday, guidelines in hand, we're planning how to apply to the government's £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund. Speed is of the essence as we have just two weeks to set out a convincing case. We must balance our fixed costs with meagre income in a seemingly impossible equation. This feels like the last chance saloon in terms of major funding options so I've un-furloughed the entire senior management team to work on this.

The scale of the challenge is daunting and the way forward appears to involve a new kind of hybrid event that combines live audiences both in the hall and online. This modus operandi is very much in step with what our artistic partners, such as Aurora Orchestra and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, are doing. We're embracing digital technology, and while I'm not convinced we'll be able to innovate ourselves out of this problem, we're going to give it our best shot.

All roads this week lead to Friday's garden concerts with the Bristol Ensemble. Temperatures are predicted to soar, every last ticket has been sold and a loyal supporter has made a donation to help pay the artists. A pop-up rehearsal of the ensemble performing Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* on our imposing front steps was captured by a passer-by on their phone and the video is generating great excitement. I freely admit that this music, premiered in Bristol 100 years ago, brings tears to my eyes each time I listen, and I suspect it is set to become something of an anthem for St George's.