

Diary from St George's Bristol: 'We face an agonising wait'

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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Rising talent: Georgie Ward playing with Will Gregory's Moog Ensemble

After months of fire-fighting, my week's holiday in Rome has been the perfect pick-me-up. It's provided an escape from endless Zoom meetings and restored a sense of perspective.

I arrive back in Bristol to news that indoor, socially distanced concerts have resumed. The prospect holds less fear than it once did: if British Airways can transfer 150 passengers across three countries to land safely in Italy, I'm quietly confident that my team can guide an almost identical number of concertgoers around our hall. Other venues are already picking up the pace and publicising events, so there's no time to waste if St George's is not to be left behind.

With the rush to submit our application to the government's £1.57 billion Cultural Recovery Fund now over (we've asked for £280,000 to cover losses until the end of the financial year and to upgrade our IT capacity, among other things), we can now take stock of what lies ahead over the coming months. I set about salvaging what I can of our abandoned Beethoven 250th Anniversary plans. With international tours collapsing and orchestral visits out of the question due to prohibitive costs, I'm forced to reduce a dozen concerts down to just three.

If I can't make a big splash to celebrate Beethoven, I'm determined to create a few ripples, so I contact pianist Paul Lewis, inviting him to launch this mini-series. Paul is a global classical star, but even his schedule has been torn apart by Covid and he's sensitive to the pressures we're facing. He readily agrees to a shortened concert length of 75 minutes so that we can dispense with the logistical complications of an interval and schedule two concerts in one day. On this basis, and factoring in a visit from Steinway to ensure the grand piano is in peak condition, a sell-out won't make money, but neither should it lose any. In my book, this counts as a small victory and beats hibernation hands down. It's an approach supported by the Piatti String Quartet and Moscow born pianist Boris Giltburg so, within days, our series is emerging, small but perfectly formed.

Others are looking to the future too and, calling in at St George's later in the week, I encounter Georgie Ward, a young, classically trained pianist-composer who studied at Bristol University. Since graduating in 2014, she's been forging a successful career, touring internationally with the Will Gregory Moog Ensemble, but all her performance work has been cancelled. She's not giving up though and is here to take advantage of a new initiative where we hire out the hall at highly discounted rates to local musicians. She records and films a short taster set for solo piano and synthesizers that she can use to promote her work and help secure new bookings.

Georgie is one of the freelance musicians who've been so badly hit by this pandemic, and I'm moved by her determination and can-do attitude. Perhaps it is holiday induced optimism, but this seems to me to signal the emergence of fragile but undeniably green shoots of a recovery. I feel a greater sense of hope than I have in quite some time.