

Diary from St George's Bristol: 'The arts sector has been brought closer together'

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

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Jerome Gamble playing in front of a balloon, at the launch of 'Sky Orchestra' | CREDIT: JonCraig

Silver linings have been few and far between of late, but the one sunny spot in this pandemic has been the way it has brought the arts sector closer together than ever before. Barriers are down, breakthroughs freely shared, and one-upmanship has been well and truly banished from the room. For once, no-one is looking solely to the large cultural institutions to lead the way. Instead, smaller venues like St George's are uncovering their own solutions, forming new local and national partnerships.

Musicians are the lifeblood of our programme, but the bigger name artists can seem a little remote, bound to demanding diaries that offer little chance to engage with concert hall staff until the day of their concert. This too is changing. While the relaxing of schedules due to lost work is far from ideal, we're developing closer relationships with individual artists and enjoying the freedom of devising bespoke projects together. Agreements are being sealed on the basis of trust rather than on carefully negotiated contracts, and our sector feels less of an industry and more of a shared vocation.

The late August Bank Holiday always signals a key turning point in the year, a moment to look forward to the new season. It feels purposeful and full of possibilities, but is underscored by looming challenges and tensions. Thank goodness we've been buoyed up by one of the busiest weeks since March. On Monday, the Events team watched an online performance by singer-songwriter Lady Nade, with Kit Hawes and Aaron Catlow, as part of the hugely successful Folk on Foot Festival. Lady Nade's session was captured on film at St George's in August and it looked and sounded wonderful. Others agreed and the festival raised £45,000, shared between artists and the charity Help Musicians UK.

Hot air balloons have become something of a cultural symbol for Bristol, and artist Luke Jerram - who created the glass Apollo sculpture that hangs in our foyer - chose Tuesday evening to launch his new surround sound artwork, 'Sky Orchestra - A Moment in Time'. Loudspeakers were attached to a convoy of seven balloons and, with young guitarist Jerome Gamble playing live from one of the baskets, they floated off over a city park, serenading people below with music by award-winning composer Dan Jones. It was an impressive, photogenic example of the ever-inventive ways that artists are finding to bring music into our lives while showcasing the creative talent of the city.

Back on the ground, we've just made a statement of our own. Emboldened by the success of earlier outdoor concerts, we have announced a further four which includes a string quartet of players from the orchestra of Welsh National Opera. It's not the full-blown opera production we're used to, but the glorious music of Puccini, Mozart and Massenet promises to hit the high notes as effortlessly as any great prima donna.