

St George's diary: 'We've now set our sights on a 27,000 seat stadium'

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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Suzanne Rolt, chief executive of St George's Bristol | CREDIT: St George's Bristol

It is six months ago to the day that we closed St George's in response to the pandemic and, as we continue to live with the restrictions, reinvention has become the name of the game.

Last Friday, we put on sale our two final garden concerts of the summer, with Exultate Singers, and they sold out in 20 minutes. It's not as if we're having to fill an arena, but it mirrors the experience of other halls around the country, and underscores the growing demand for live music performances. It was tempting to schedule a further two concerts, but it's always better to go out on a high, rather than to fade away. Besides, we need to conserve our energies for reopening the main hall.

On this front, our head of programme is in something of a head spin as he works through all the changes needed to launch an autumn season at short notice. The upside is that after months of soul-destroying work, cancelling concerts and bearing bad news to countless musicians, he can finally turn his hand to building, rather than dismantling, a programme.

Before Covid, our artistic planning cycles extended across months, often years. Now, with R-rates on the rise and uncertainty hovering over any events scheduled for more than a few weeks ahead, a “seize the day” mentality is emerging. Out go spreadsheets calculating suitability and risk, and back in comes good old-fashioned professional instinct; the ability to sniff out an opportunity and to act decisively at speed.

During a call to the manager of pianist Eric Lu, winner of the Leeds International Piano Competition in 2018, we decide his January recital date should be brought forward and held in four weeks’ time. Eric lives in the States but is based temporarily in London and Germany while salvaging what he can of his autumn diary. It makes sense to invite him to St George’s while air travel and quarantine rules still allow, so we agree repertoire and timings and the details are shared with audiences that same afternoon. The whole process is rather exhilarating, with not a hint of red tape in sight.

On Tuesday, I head off with my operations director to Ashton Gate, a 27,000-seater sports stadium in the heart of Bristol. It’s more accustomed to major music acts like Rod Stewart and the Spice Girls, but I’m envisaging something that’s never been done there before: a classical orchestral concert from one of our resident orchestras. After months of delivering small-scale garden events, we’re all feeling slightly giddy at the prospect of planning a socially distanced event for an audience of 2,500. But, if not now, when? An orchestral concert for 125 in St George’s makes no sense financially; in a stadium, it might just work. There’s no better time to take courage and think not only outside the box, but outside the venue.