

The final Diary from St George's Bristol: 'I was so stunned that I could barely speak'

After a summer of high emotions and low expectations, the Government has offered the beloved Bristol venue a lifeline

By Suzanne Rolt

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The chief executive of St George's, Suzanne Rolt, signs off at last with some good news | CREDIT: St George's

When the pandemic struck back in March and [we were forced to close the doors](#) of St George's, we had no inkling whatsoever that they would remain that way for months on end. Staff worked quickly but calmly that week, cancelling upcoming concerts and reassuring musicians and audiences that we would be back in touch with new dates before too long. We had dealt with difficult situations in the past – snow, floods, ceiling collapses – and we assumed this would be no different: just a temporary lull in proceedings.

We held a “last supper” of sorts: a communal meal for the whole team, using up the food that would otherwise have gone to waste when we had to lock down our café at short notice. It was novel to have the building to ourselves, and while we were bewildered, spirits were high and there was an end-of-school-term atmosphere. Everyone expected to be back to normal in a matter of weeks.

Fast forward seven months, and it’s fair to say that I look back on that day with incredulity: how did we not foresee the scale and force of what was about to hit? As it was, we were knocked sideways by Covid. It laid waste to our artistic and commercial programmes, driving us to the edge of insolvency. In the six months from March to September, we lost virtually all our business. We cancelled 123 concerts and 43 commercial events, abandoned carefully constructed future plans, and recycled thousands of unread leaflets that promoted an artistic season that was never to be.

We fought back, rescheduling events and trying to stay on top of an increasingly out-of-control situation. But every time we moved a concert into what seemed to be a safe time period, Covid would extend its reach that little bit further and throw everything up into the air again.

Despite mothballing the building and doing everything possible to reduce overheads, our reserves were soon in freefall, and we were facing the very real prospect of running out of money. In May, in the nick of time, payments from the Chancellor’s furlough scheme started to flow through and we stepped back from the first of many cliff edges. Our team dropped to just three members, each one working around the clock to cover the work of nearer 30. We turned our hands to anything and everything, learning new skills and resurrecting some we hadn’t used for 20 years.

Like cultural organisations the country over, we found new ways to share our work, streaming concerts online. As a hall that was all about the experience of live music, we had always dismissed this as a pale imitation of the real thing, but there was no alternative. Artists recorded music in their homes on phones and laptops, and from these we stitched together concerts; a mixtape of all kinds of music and styles. What these concerts lacked in recording finesse, they made up for in intensity of emotion. Artists were increasingly desperate to perform and this really shone through.



St George's tried socially-distanced outdoor crowds as soon as they were allowed | CREDIT: Kenton Simons

When the rules finally allowed, we transitioned to socially distanced, outdoor performances with local artists. We turned our lawn into a concert platform, swapped formal seating for deckchairs and slathered everything in disinfectant and hand sanitiser. We gathered in groups of 50 people at a time, ignoring rain and traffic noise, gulping down every precious note. We gasped in unison during one magical moment when a blackbird duetted with a string quartet playing Mozart. Audiences cried, artists and staff cried, and the music sailed upwards and across the city, giving new meaning to the Bristol Sound.

On Monday, with the entire cultural sector on tenterhooks, we finally received the outcome of [the £1.57 billion Cultural Recovery Fund](#). St George's secured £564,916. It's a huge sum, the largest we've ever secured for our core work. I was so stunned, so relieved, that I could barely speak. It will put us back on our feet while we do our best to navigate through to the other side of this pandemic.

Every last pound of this fund has already been accounted for. A large part will pay staff salaries from the time that the furlough scheme ends up until April 2021. Everyone, from the top to the bottom, is going to be working reduced hours, but with unemployment set to soar and freelance artists still falling through the cracks, we don't underestimate how privileged we are.

We will invest in up-to-date equipment to record, edit and stream concerts and all kinds of commercial events, from meetings and conferences to graduations and awards ceremonies. Everything will link through to an enhanced website where we can communicate with audiences and share content as never before. This ability to create blended events that combine the live and virtual experience is the best insurance we can muster to protect us in the event of further Covid waves.



The full return of live indoor audiences continues to be keenly awaited | CREDIT: Philip Vile

We are certainly not out of the woods yet. We're conscious that this funding won't last for ever, but it will keep us afloat until late spring. Beyond this point, we need to shape a new business model that can generate income amid further restrictions, uncertainty and, most likely, a continuation of reduced-capacity events. We still struggle to make the economics work. Our Development team is already preparing to launch a major fundraising campaign in the run up to Christmas. We want to avoid at all costs the prospect of further cliff edges.

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Most importantly, this funding will enable us to restart the thing we do best: putting on live music. On Wednesday, we returned to live performance in triumphant form, with two recitals by world acclaimed pianist, Paul Lewis. He has played to empty halls during lockdown, but a musician cannot experience that same adrenalin rush or create those revelatory moments of music-making that arise through communion with an audience.



CREDIT – Evan Dawson

The hall is reawakening, slowly stirred back to life as we gain in confidence, planning new concerts and events, with artists from close to home as well as far and wide. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we should treasure the people around us and the things that bring a sense of joy and fulfilment to our lives. With the support and love of all the people around it, St George's lives to fight another day and vows to keep the music playing. Onwards and upwards!

If you have enjoyed following our journey and would like to be kept up to date on our events, please join the St George's Bristol mailing list at:

stgeorgesbristol.co.uk/mailling-list/

If you would like to donate or become a supporter of St George's Bristol, from £40 a year, please go to: stgeorgesbristol.co.uk/support-us