

Diary from St George's: 'It's a huge relief to welcome back staff in key areas'

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
31 July 2020 • 7:00am

It's been nearly five months since we last held a public concert at St George's. Now we're about to start making up for lost time. On Monday, I'm up early for my weekly catch-up with other Bristol arts venues. All the talk is of resuming activity in September and the practicalities involved.

There's the need for strict counting of people in and out, prominent floor stickers and separate channels to ensure orderly audience flow – and providing safe access to an adequate numbers of loos. Everyone accepts that the work and costs involved in putting on an event for 50-100 people in these circumstances are double what's required for a normal concert of 500. You need extra staff to ensure social distancing and have someone stationed outside every loo. It's not a sustainable model, but it is a start.

This week, we're making full use of the flexible furlough arrangements that allow part-time work, and it's a huge relief to welcome back staff in key areas such as the box office and bar, even if it is for just one or two days. The office boasts a full four people, including a new events manager who's faced the unenviable task of planning a relocation from London to Bristol during lockdown.

With our outdoor concert debut just over a week away, there's plenty for her to get her teeth into. She is learning from the best, our operations director Trish Brown, an expert troubleshooter who can wire an amplifier as easily as marshal a team of volunteers, and is utterly indefatigable even in the face of an event checklist that expands by the day.

Inspired by the giant heart shapes painted in Bristol parks to keep people two metres apart, we're adopting something similar for the seating arrangements on our own lawns. The first thing is to get the grass cut as it's sprouted up half a foot during the recent showers. We place an order with a local supplier, 6 O'clock Gin, not to restock our bar's spirits range, but to secure bottles of the specially distilled hand sanitiser they've been producing. On hearing of our al fresco plans, they offer to lend us some deckchairs too. All we need now is someone to guarantee the sun. Either that or some sponsored umbrellas.



Folk singer and guitarist Jim Moray, who's coming to St George's to record

Behind the scenes, we're seeing a surge of interest from musicians interested in hiring the hall. Musicians Pete Judge and multi-instrumentalist/composer John Baggott rehearse on Monday and, on Tuesday, we have recordings with folk singer Jim Moray and then pianist James Oram. Everything is then wiped down ready for the arrival of eight musicians from the Bristol Ensemble who are recording an arrangement of Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*. With its evocation of a skylark singing the most transcendental of songs, it captures perfectly a spirit of hopefulness that resonates for so many of us during these difficult times.

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