

Diary from St George's: 'We're back at square one – we can't hold larger scale commercial events'

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

By Suzanne Rolt

25 September 2020 • 7:00am



Suzanne Rolt

When we learned that Boris Johnson would be changing national lockdown rules yet again we feared the worst. Would weeks of careful planning have to be thrown out of the window? Would new social distancing rules reduce audiences down still further, and make performance even more difficult?

Fortunately when the announcement came on Tuesday it wasn't as bad as we feared. A 10.00pm curfew for pubs restaurants and venues shouldn't impact on us too badly, as we're programming short events that finish well before then. And the new tough rules about mask-wearing don't apply to us.

More troubling though is the government's reversal of its earlier decision to allow venues to hold larger scale commercial events such as meetings and conferences from 1 October. Now we find ourselves back at square one, with the numbers of participants limited to a maximum of 30.

Within a matter of hours, we lose three bookings that would have generated much needed income. These things don't add up to a body-blow, but they're not trivial either. With finances on a knife edge, this new period of turbulence is the last thing we need right now.

Thank goodness there's plenty to keep us cheerful. We held our final two garden concerts on Sunday and they could not have gone better. The sun shone, the rain stayed away, and the air was mercifully free of sirens and alarms. With its choir of thirty divided into five Covid-safe bubbles of six singers, Exultate Singers delivered the performance of a life-time.

Another cause for optimism is the fact that the hall is now in use every day. As the audience departs through our bottom gates on Sunday afternoon, Sky Arts is arriving at the top entrance. They're here to film a documentary, 'Beethoven and Me', with Director Ben Whalley and conductor Charles Hazlewood.

It examines aspects of Beethoven's deafness and possible autism, and draws on personal insights from members of the Paraorchestra, the ground-breaking orchestra bringing together disabled and non-disabled musicians founded by Charles and based in Bristol. Behind the scenes our Operations Director has been experimenting with seating set ups in the hall, and there's good news on this front too.

Government guidelines suggest that with the audience wearing masks, we need only space chairs 1.5 metres rather than 2 metres apart. This makes a huge difference, meaning we can accommodate nearly 200 seats, a far more generous number than the 125 we originally feared. On Wednesday, the hall is turned around once again and the black-out blinds lowered as we play host to theatre company, The Paper Cinema. Having created a unique retelling of Macbeth involving puppetry and live musical score, their plans to tour the show internationally have been scuppered by Covid.

Refusing to be defeated, they are instead reinventing the production as a film that can be shared digitally. It's a beautiful, utterly captivating testimony to the power of art, and the tenacity and boundless imagination of the artists that continue to make it, despite everything.