

CAN'T STOP THE MUSIC

Once a church, today one of the country's great acoustic venues, St George's Bristol has long struggled with a simple problem: the hall itself rocks but the rest of the place, not so much. Until now...

By WENDY LYNE

You'll know St George's, of course – since the 'Chapel of Ease' for St Augustine's Church, and of late a major concert hall, with classical performances a speciality – even if you maybe don't visit it all that much. Part of that might be because the music doesn't appeal, maybe – or, as happens occasionally with serious theatre too, because you're worried the atmosphere will be snobby and intimidating. And partly it'll be because the venue itself – while much celebrated acoustically – has long been in need of a bit of a facelift elsewhere.

The good news is that just such a refresh is now taking place under the 'Building a Sound Future' banner, with much of the money needed already raised. We caught up with Simon Parley, head of fundraising at St George's, to find out what needs doing – and what the timescale will be.

What makes this place so amazing acoustically? Is it accident or design?

A bit of both, actually. The building was designed by Sir Robert Smirke, the architect of the British Museum, and – being a church, originally – was created with words in mind. The size and basic shape of the building created the perfect space in which to carry the words of the vicar to the congregation, long before the age of microphones and speakers.

It opened in 1823, and – of course – acoustic design has developed greatly in the last 192 years. These days concert halls are much larger spaces, which need far more thought to get the acoustic right for musical performance, hence you see all kinds of odd shapes and appendages on the walls and ceilings of concert halls. Not so at St George's, which was crafted just right.

But what's not quite so right, these days, is the rest of it...

That's right. With these improvements, the actual hall will remain untouched,

beside necessary entrance and exit remodelling. The project is very much about improving the audience experience, and also broadening our offer as a world class music venue.

Due to the lack of space beyond the hall, we are presented with all manner of difficulties – not least with a growing team behind the scenes, and cramped public areas. A new building to the side of the existing one will allow us to spread out, opening up spaces for pre-concert and interval drinks, small scale performances, workshops and education/heritage activity, not to mention freeing up space in the existing structure for better artist and staff facilities. Without it, we would remain poor and unable to deliver the kind of activities we envisage, as a hub for music and ideas in Bristol.

You say it used to be a church, yes...?

The old St Augustine's Church has long since been demolished – part of the Marriott Royal Hotel now stands on the

How the new multi-purpose building to the side of the existing one will look, full of light and a sense of space

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site – but long ago St Augustine's decided it needed a burial ground for the parish, and the site on Great George Street was purchased with this in mind. Soon after, it was realised that a second space was needed for the growing congregation to worship too, so the money was raised to build the Chapel of Ease, now St George's.

Sir Robert Smirke was selected to realise his design, based on the Greek Revival style so popular at the time. From 1823 to the 1970s the Church of St George, Brandon Hill played a vital role at the heart of a small community, one which reduced in size to the extent that its future as a place of worship looked in doubt. The church finally closed its doors when its long-serving vicar, Canon Percy Gay, retired.

But that wasn't the end of the St George's story. A small group of music enthusiasts realised there was potential for live music performance here, and began staging chamber music concerts. The St George's Music Trust was born, and soon the BBC also bought into the idea that this was a

special building, with an acoustic worth hearing. The corporation invested in sound-proofing and broadcast facilities and, for years, St George's was the home of live and recorded classical music on BBC Radio.

Concerts still played their part through the '80s and well into the '90s. More money was raised, and major refurbishment works carried out, ready for the re-launch of the venue – now re-named 'St George's Bristol' – in 1999. That's the concert hall we know today. We still enjoy a good relationship with the BBC, hosting concerts, events and series with Radio 3 and Radio 4.

And some pretty famous names have played here over the years...?

Oh yes, from Mitsuko Uchida, Victoria Mullova, Itzhak Lapu, Alfred Brendel, Sir Simon Rattle and Paul Lewis to John Williams, Elvis Costello, Courtney Pine and Björk. Plus, we've had many of the leading quartets, ensembles and orchestras, such as the OAE. And we are just as proud to welcome Bristol schools, colleges and university students, plus emerging local artists and community choirs, throughout the year too.

The hall also has a life as a recording studio, and has seen some of the world's greatest classical artists – think Julian Lloyd Webber, Ludovico Einaudi, Yevgeny Sudbin and more – laying down tracks here.

So tell us more about the new extension, by award-winning UK architects Patel Taylor.

They've created a truly bold and contemporary design for the new building, but one which allows Sir Robert Smirke's original to shine, and continue to take centre stage, on Great George Street.

The new building, which nestles into the grounds – indeed, some of it is below ground level – sees the creation of light, airy and open spaces that are perfectly in tune with the surrounding greenery and terraced gardens. Visitors will enjoy easy access from both Great George Street and Charlotte Street, with the building fully accessible for wheelchair users for the first time in its history. There'll be a new bar, box office and multi-purpose room – to be used for performance, rehearsal or education – at the heart of our new garden pavilion extension too.

And how's the fundraising going?

We got off to a magnificent start last summer, thanks to an initial pledge of £1.95 million from Arts Council England, and that was quickly followed by major grants from the Garfield Weston Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Jr. Charitable Trust and >

a generous donation from the Sir Sigmund Warburg's Voluntary Settlement. Another huge boost came just last month, as we learned we had been successful in our bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund, which resulted in a pledge of £775,000. Our raised total now stands at £3.5 million, a good proportion of the £5.5 million we need to complete the project.

We are actively negotiating further donations from both public and private sources right now, and are confident of reaching our target in time for initial ground works to begin in Spring 2016. We hope to unveil the new building in Autumn 2017, and envisage that the venue will remain largely open throughout the building works.

So, what sort of events might we expect at the Improved St George's?

There's actually a busy and eclectic programme of live music events currently underway, which has in recent weeks seen the likes of Ian McCulloch (from Echo and the Bunnymen), pianist Paul Lewis, folk legend Martin Carthy and London's brilliant Aurora Orchestra take to the stage. Still to come is Bristol Folk Festival, two visits by the effervescent Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and then a special 'Evening with Julian Lloyd Webber' event in May.

Then, on 12 June, we are organising an exclusive 'Venetian Carnival' gala banquet, featuring vocal ensemble I Fagiolini,



How the existing building and the new one will work together (top), and the hall's interior space: simple, perhaps, but the acoustic is just right

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to raise funds for the appeal. We'll be programming more special fundraising events as the year progresses. In terms of the new building, we hope to present more in the way of spoken word events, pre-concert talks and workshops, school visits and increased Heritage Activity. St George's has a fascinating history, and we'll be able to share it with everyone who visits with permanent exhibits and special events.

And, with a bit of luck, we'll see the new St George's engaging even more strongly with the people of Bristol... As a building, St George's has long stood at

the heart of the community in this part of the city, and, since becoming a space for music, we'd like to think it has reached out much farther, into the rest of the Bristol and well beyond it.

That said, we know there are lots of people yet to discover what happens here, just off Park Street, and with our project plans in mind we hope that more and more of them will pay a visit in the future – and experience something amazing. **GL**

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