

Richard Morrison

The £22 million battle to save London's finest concert hall



To say that the history of Smith Square Hall is as chequered as its famous marble floor is an understatement. Formerly known as St John's Smith Square, Thomas Archer's elegant Westminster church — one of the grade I glories of the English baroque — has been battered by misfortune since it opened in 1728.

In its first century it was almost destroyed by fire then struck by lightning. In its second it was partially blown up by suffragettes. And in its third it was bombed during the Blitz then left as a shell for 20 years. It escaped being turned into a car park only through the determined efforts of well-connected local people. Instead it was meticulously reconstructed and reopened in 1969 as a concert hall, greatly admired for its warm acoustics.

The challenge now is to get it over the line into its fourth century. Last November it was included for the first time in Historic England's "at risk" register. It needs serious restoration. And as a classical music venue it needs a new focus. In 2018 it came close to closure. With the opening of other medium-scale concert venues in London, notably Kings Place and Cadogan Hall, Smith Square was no longer regularly attracting top performers or capacity audiences.

A glimmer of salvation came in 2021 with an ingenious merger: the concert hall became one organisation with the Southbank Sinfonia, a highly regarded, privately financed orchestra of musicians just starting out on their careers (its 34 players change every year). And this week Sinfonia Smith Square, as the combined organisation was rebranded last year, launched a project with a triple objective: to repair the building, transform it into a centre of artistic excellence and educational outreach, and secure a sustainable future.

Called Doors Open and led by Toby Chadd and Tracy Long — respectively artistic director and chair of the combined organisation — the scheme is nothing if not ambitious. State-of-the-art theatre lighting and a fully moveable stage will be installed to enable the grand interior to be used in many different configurations, including in-the-round performances. The plan is to present not only concerts but plays and operas too.

Dated 1960s accretions, such as

tacky secondary glazing on the windows, will be stripped away or updated. The badly cracked 1960s copper roof will be repaired. The 18th-century galleries — great for snoozing unnoticed through 18th-century sermons but useless for seeing performances below — will have new tiered seating.

At ground level there will also be retractable tiers of seats. That will mean completely replacing the marble floor, which is cracked and not capable of supporting heavy loads. Below that the crypt restaurant will be rethought as a café with a more welcoming new entrance, so the place

contributing up to £5 million, Westminster city council is chipping in and a couple of private donors are already on board. Much more is needed, though, and the timetable is tight if the planned 18-month renovation (during which the building will be closed) is to be completed in time for a grand reopening at the end of 2028 — timed to coincide with the building's 300th anniversary.

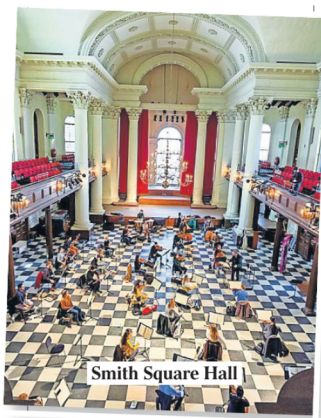
But at least architects have been appointed: the practice Burrell Foley Fischer, which specialises in renovating historic spaces for arts organisations. And Sinfonia Smith Square's patron,

Queen Camilla, has apparently agreed to support the fundraising. Which is appropriate because — if a famous legend is to be believed — a former queen was partly responsible for the building's unique shape. Before designing it Archer apparently thought it best to ask Queen Anne how she wanted the church to look. Not renowned for her interest in architecture she impatiently kicked over her footstool and snapped: "Like that!" Which is the reason, it's said, that Archer put towers on all four corners.

Either way, its imposing appearance and perfect location, a stone's throw from parliament, are going to be worked very hard in future to keep Sinfonia Smith Square solvent. Its managers are hoping that, beautifully refurbished, it will attract not only top-class musicians but also the sort of commercial hires that pay good money: fashion shows, for instance, or film companies looking for 18th-century interiors.

It has already been used by Ridley Scott for scenes in his 2023 film *Napoleon*. And I'm told a high-street chain has hired the building for a week to shoot its Christmas TV commercial. If all that helps to generate enough income to support important music education work — and ensure that one of London's finest buildings doesn't fall apart before our eyes — well, bring it on.

Admittedly, not everyone loves "Queen Anne's footstool". In his novel *Our Mutual Friend*, Charles Dickens described it as "a very hideous church ... generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air". But I bet he never heard a string quartet playing Haydn or a choir singing Handel inside it. For 17th and 18th-century pieces it offers the perfect match of architecture to music. Let's hope this visionary project enables music to resonate around it for centuries to come.



buzzes with life through the day as well as in the evening.

Most importantly, a disused caretaker's flat at the rear of the crypt will be refashioned as a "learning studio". That's so the Sinfonia's players can inspire local schoolchildren on a daily basis. But the studio is also intended to be a place where older people from the community can gather for music sessions. Westminster may seem to be a rich part of London but it has pockets of deprivation like any other inner-city area. The idea is that Sinfonia Smith Square can play a part in enhancing social interaction and combating loneliness.

All this will cost £22 million but the project's managers have made a good start on raising funds. The National Lottery Heritage Fund is

“Dickens hated it. Now the Queen will support its restoration