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CREDO
Cultural Relations and Diplomacy

PROJECT REPORT

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN ACTION

The role of non-governmental actors in Italian intercultural relations

**Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence CREDO
Cultural Relations and Diplomacy
University of Siena**

Valentina Pettosini, University of Siena

Filippo Simonelli, University of Siena

Daniela Fazio Vargas, University of Manchester

Scientific Coordinator Pierangelo Isernia, University of Siena



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Questo rapporto illustra i principali risultati della ricerca sviluppata nell'ambito del progetto "Diplomazia Culturale in Azione: il ruolo degli attori non governativi nelle relazioni interculturali italiane", promosso dal Centro di Eccellenza Jean Monnet CREDO – *Cultural Relations and Diplomacy* dell'Università di Siena. La ricerca è stata realizzata con il contributo dell'Unità di Analisi, Programmazione, Statistica e Documentazione Storica della Direzione Generale per la Diplomazia Pubblica e Culturale del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, in applicazione dell'art. 23-bis del DPR 18/1967. Le riflessioni e i risultati qui presentati riflettono esclusivamente le opinioni degli autori e delle autrici e non rappresentano necessariamente le posizioni del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

This report presents the main findings of the research carried out within the framework of the project "Cultural Diplomacy in Action: the role of non-governmental actors in Italian intercultural relations", promoted by the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence CREDO – *Cultural Relations and Diplomacy* at the University of Siena. The research was conducted with the support of the Unit for Analysis, Programming, Statistics and Historical Documentation of the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, pursuant to Article 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The reflections and results presented herein solely express the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



**Ministero degli Affari Esteri
e della Cooperazione Internazionale**



SINTESI ESECUTIVA

Questo report è il prodotto di una ricerca condotta nell'estate del 2025 sulla diplomazia culturale italiana, con un focus specifico sulla componente musicale di quest'ultima. Il report parte dalla constatazione dello status unico di cui gode l'Italia nell'ambito della diplomazia culturale grazie al proprio soft power, ereditato da secoli di storia. Questo suo status è confermato da indicatori come il Global Soft Power Index, che vede l'Italia piazzarsi regolarmente nella top10 della classifica globale. La tradizione musicale ricopre un ruolo centrale nella composizione di questo straordinario repertorio, spaziando dalla tradizione belcantistica di eredità settecentesca, alle tradizioni locali e alle più recenti sperimentazioni artistiche. Ulteriori riconoscimenti, come l'inserimento proprio del canto lirico italiano tra i patrimoni culturali immateriali dell'umanità dell'UNESCO, rafforzano questa percezione, ponendo la musica al centro dell'attenzione nel discorso culturale nel paese. La ricerca pone particolare attenzione sulle interazioni tra settore pubblico e privato e confrontando l'azione delle istituzioni italiane con quelle europee. Il report, attraverso un'analisi di dati pubblici sullo stato dell'arte delle relazioni culturali internazionali e una serie di interviste ad attori rilevanti del settore, delinea una panoramica della situazione attuale, mettendo in luce la struttura legata agli Istituti italiani di Cultura all'estero evidenziando gli attori principali che costituiscono il network di riferimento del sistema pubblico. Un campione di rappresentanti di queste realtà è stato poi coinvolto in una serie di interviste in forma anonima a cui è dedicata la seconda parte del report. Le istituzioni, differenti per dimensioni, risorse e ambito d'azione, operano all'interno e all'esterno del sistema culturale centralizzato nazionale, contribuendo alla diffusione del patrimonio musicale italiano – sia storico sia contemporaneo – alle sue intersezioni con altri linguaggi artistici e al ruolo della disciplina nel definire la diplomazia culturale del Paese. Tuttavia, secondo i professionisti del settore sentiti, le strategie e le reti esistenti rischiano di non sfruttare appieno le opportunità più ampie per consolidare ulteriormente la posizione internazionale dell'Italia. Infine, proponiamo un confronto tra queste istituzioni, il loro approccio, i risultati che ottengono e i relativi limiti con una serie di attori privati diversi che operano in altri paesi - o a livello sovranazionale - in Europa, al fine di ricavare una serie di potenziali insegnamenti per gli operatori culturali internazionali italiani, che vanno dal rafforzamento degli strumenti finanziari, della loro certezza e replicabilità nel tempo per permettere attività di programmazione di maggior respiro, ad attività di formazione specifici per il personale amministrativo delle istituzioni pubbliche e private, al fine di rafforzare meglio ciascuno dei due mondi e promuovere potenziali sinergie tra di essi.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of research conducted in the summer of 2025 on Italian cultural diplomacy, with a specific focus on its musical component. The report begins by noting Italy's unique status in the field of cultural diplomacy thanks to its soft power, inherited from centuries of history. This status is confirmed by indicators such as the Global Soft Power Index, which regularly ranks Italy in the top 10 globally. Musical tradition plays a central role in the composition of this extraordinary repertoire, ranging from the bel canto tradition of the 18th century to local traditions and more recent artistic experiments. Further recognition, such as the inclusion of Italian opera singing among UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage, reinforces this perception, placing music at the centre of cultural discourse in the country. The research focuses in particular on interactions between the public and private sectors, comparing the actions of Italian institutions with those of their European counterparts. Through an analysis of public data on the state of the art of international cultural relations and a series of interviews with key players in the sector, the report outlines the current situation, highlighting the structure linked to Italian Cultural Institutes abroad and the main players that make up the public system's reference network. A sample of representatives from these organisations was then involved in a series of anonymous interviews, which are covered in the second part of the report. The institutions, which vary in size, resources and scope of action, operate both within and outside the centralised national cultural system, contributing to the dissemination of Italy's musical heritage – both historical and contemporary – its intersections with other artistic languages and the role of the discipline in defining the country's cultural diplomacy. However, according to industry professionals, existing strategies and networks risk failing to fully exploit broader opportunities to further consolidate Italy's international position. Finally, we propose a comparison between these institutions, their approach, the results they achieve and their limitations with a range of different private actors operating in other countries - or at a supranational level - in Europe, in order to draw a series of potential lessons for Italian international cultural operators, ranging from strengthening financial instruments, their certainty and replicability over time to allow for more far-reaching programming activities, to specific training activities for the administrative staff of public and private institutions, in order to better strengthen each of the two worlds and promote potential synergies between them.



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CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN ACTION

The role of non-governmental actors in Italian intercultural relations

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy, once a centralised and national prerogative, has today become instead characterised by a multi-stakeholder process, involving an increasing number of non-governmental actors besides governmental spheres (Isar, 2016: 264). Traditionally, earlier definitions of cultural diplomacy conceptualized it as a deliberate instrument for enhancing a state's soft power within the framework of foreign policy, while simultaneously distinguishing international cultural relations as a separate sphere characterized by the spontaneous flow of cultural exchange driven by non-governmental actors. (Isar and Triandafyllidou, 2020: 393). Societal shifts and alterations in the structure of intercultural relations blurred the distinction between the two terms; currently, a critical mass of actors and influences plays an expanding role on the international stage, promoting values and interests with diversified strategies (Barroso, 2014).

This context raises questions about the right strategy for coordination and cooperation among the multitude of public, private, local, national, and transnational actors involved in cultural diplomacy (Carta, Badillo 2020: 81). Reflecting on the need to establish an institutional framework solid enough to mobilize various social actors intervening in cultural practices, and at the same time

elaborate a framework in which states can design, guide, and implement their cultural diplomacy strategies (Carta and Higgott, 2020: 5; Katzenstein, 1996), various national strategies can be found at the European level among member states, developing alongside community initiatives. While, for instance, France shows a strong level of centralization in cultural diplomacy strategies with significant governmental influence, Germany exhibits a higher degree of decentralization, with greater freedom for private actors in intercultural state relations (Carta and Higgott, 2020: 67-73).

The cultural sphere encompasses a wide range of fields, including the performative and applied arts, the audio-visual sector, cultural heritage, design, architecture, fashion, digital creative industries, food-related cultural practices, and music. Given the breadth of this domain, we chose to concentrate on music – one of Italy's most prominent cultural exports – narrowing the scope of the research in order to provide a more complete analysis of the sector and set the basis for future analysis on the broader field. The significance of music in cultural diplomacy has caught the attention of different scholars (Statler, 2012; Franklin, 2019). Authors like Grätz & Höppner (2020) have noted that music, as a universal language, serves as a vital tool for bridging ideological divides and fostering mutual understanding, particularly relevant in light of the numerous crises facing the world today. Similarly, Shain Shapiro (2020), the founder of the consulting



network Sound Diplomacy, has also expressed the potentially universalising effects of this artistic expression by noting that "[it] is the only art form that transcends class, gender, and generations" (p. 46). Given these unique characteristics, it is not surprising that various researchers are exploring the effects of music in forging communities in contexts marked by division (Bartleet and Higgins, 2018) or fostering international solidarity in times of conflict and political turmoil (Fugeille, 2020). Other scholars have noted that music can aid in rebuilding the social fabric, especially where traditional language fails to express (Rodríguez-Sánchez & Cabedo-Mas, 2017), while others have emphasised that, as a social interaction, it is not possible to comprehend the effects of music without looking at the broader economic and political practices in which it is embedded (Crossley, 2019).

Precisely, the interconnectedness and interdependence of musical actors have led to the recognition of the European music sector as an "ecosystem". This ecosystem comprises a diverse range of participants, including musicians, policymakers, and digital entities, all of whom contribute to the production, distribution, and consumption of music (Music Moves Europe, 2025). To fully understand this ecosystem, it is essential to study not only the individual actors but also the system as a whole, one that is dynamic and adapts to the contemporary pressures and the various crises affecting the world nowadays. With this in mind, our project seeks to examine the role of key Italian actors in international cultural relations. This is with the aim of understanding how they operate within the wider European system, and to identify lessons from other European countries that can be applied to Italy.

We aim to determine the primary actors, patterns, and structural characteristics of the phenomenon, in order to identify the most suitable strategy for each state through a deeper understanding of the national and executive necessities of the actors involved. This aims to define a coordination strategy to address potential weaknesses and enhance its strengths. With this precise objective in mind, this research seeks to identify the actors operating in the field of music, exploring their participation in shaping the Italian international cultural offer. The goal is to suggest possible strategies and policy to improve coordination between public and private institutions, leveraging culture as a soft power tool and promoting a more effective structural approach to cultural diplomacy.

In detail, the questions to be answered are as follows:

1. *Who are the most active non-governmental actors in Italian music diplomacy? In which areas do they operate, and with which tools?*
2. *What impact do they have on intercultural relations and the perception of Italy abroad through music?*
3. *What governance and collaboration models exist between the government and non-governmental actors?*
4. *How can Italian music diplomacy strategies be improved through the involvement of these actors?*

While music diplomacy has captured the interest of various academics, it remains an area that needs further development. This report serves as an initial step in what may become a long-term project aimed at understanding how music can impact various



policy areas. Mariana Mazzucato (2025) emphasises the public value of art and culture, arguing that these are not only stimulating economic growth, which counters the broader societal tendency to undervalue these sectors and lead to financial cuts, but also for their ability to foster the imagination needed to drive social and political change. Similarly, Bastian Lange (2018) have highlighted the importance of integrating creative industries with international cultural policy, bridging the dichotomy between culture and economy, in the name of a foreign policy activity where creativity, inclusion, and transnational networking are at the heart.

Methodology

To address the research questions, the study was conducted in several phases. In the first phase the most active actors in intercultural relations and in the promotion of Italian culture abroad, with particular attention to the role of music were identified. To this end, the research team carried out a preliminary mapping of major musical events held in European capitals between April 2024 and April 2025. The majority of these events were coordinated, organised, sponsored, or publicised by the Italian Cultural Institutes (IICs). This mapping also enabled the identification of the most active Italian non-governmental actors in musical promotion abroad, highlighting major stakeholders and key players.

Building on this, we next conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with primary actor clusters that play a key role in cultural promotion abroad. Special emphasis was placed on case studies of best practices, as well as on forms of public-private and private-private collaboration, prioritising a bottom-up

perspective in light of the importance of “non-official polyphonic processes from below” (Sassatelli, 2009: 195).

Given the comparative objectives of the research, a similar approach was then applied to European non-governmental organisations operating in the same field, both in Italy and in other European countries. Their inclusion provided further insights into sector-specific dynamics and national strategies, again privileging a bottom-up perspective.

Building on this multi-layered analysis, the research pursued three main goals: 1) to define the main challenges and opportunities that emerge in cultural relations and music diplomacy; 2) to identify areas where greater involvement of non-governmental actors could enhance the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy policies through a best practice analysis and, lastly, 3) to strengthen Italy’s musical diplomacy strategy, focusing on a more integrated and coordinated collaboration between state and non-state actors.

Identification and preliminary mapping: What does Italian music sound like abroad?

In this study, we seek to explore the potential for developing an Italian strategy in musical cultural diplomacy. By assessing the current state of Italy’s cultural diplomacy network in relation to music – through a mapping of the activities carried out, sponsored, and promoted by the Italian Cultural Institutes (IICs) – we were able to identify recurring patterns and existing strategies. Italy’s cultural arsenal is undeniably complex and represents a key component of its soft power in international relations. As evidenced by the Global Soft

Power Index published by Brand Finance, Italy has ranked first worldwide in the Culture and Heritage indicator for two consecutive years (Brand Finance, 2024, 2025). This data reflects the strong integration of Italian cultural production within the international arena. Yet a fundamental question remains: what is it that Italy actually brings to the world?

The preliminary mapping that was conducted for the research succeeded in reaching two separate objectives:

- 1) It provided guidance on identifying key actors in the field and made clusters of players emerge.
- 2) It contributed to providing a general overview of the major international trends concerning Italian music, with specific information on genre preferences and events redistribution, collaborations and preferences.

IICs-sponsored and promoted events

The events database has been collected through the IIC's official websites, by filtering the period between April 2024 and April 2025. The data include events, partners, the latter origins, the type of organisation (if non-governmental, governmental, local, or international organisation) and the music genre of the organised event.

The selected sample of 25 IICs corresponded to the number of active institutes on the European continent (See Appendix). A total of 323 events in the period considered in this report were retrieved, with heterogeneous distribution among the different IICs, ranging from 30 events promoted by the Bucharest Institute of Italian Culture to only 3 organised by the Institute in Valletta.

From the events database for the selected time frame, it was possible to identify the most frequent music genres sustained, supported, sponsored or promoted by IICs. As Table 1 shows, classical and opera are the most frequent genres of music that get performed across all the European states, followed by jazz, traditional folk music and neo-folk.

Table 1. Top played genres

Genre	Number of events	Percentage on total
Classical	167	30.6%
Opera	87	15.9%
Jazz	65	11.9%
Traditional folk music and neo-folk	32	5.9%

Identifying the origins of IICs' partners can provide insights into genre choices and partnership preferences. According to the data, partnerships in music events primarily occur through IICs participation in local-based initiatives (e.g., festivals). Overall, collaboration in music events mostly occurs with local partners rather than Italian, as Figure 1 shows.

Collaboration distribution with local (where IIC are based), Italian or third origin actors

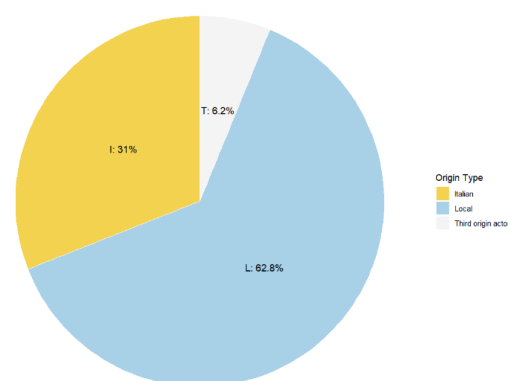


Figure 1. Collaboration distribution with IICs

After identifying the partners' origin, it was possible to determine that:

- When the partners are from Italy, the collaborative initiatives mostly focus on Classical music (46.4%), Opera (20.7%), Jazz (10%) and, lastly, traditional folk music and neo-folk (6.4%).
- When the partners are instead from the IICs hosting country, although Classical music (34.2%) and Opera (17.6%) keep their major role, traditional folk and neo-folk gain more prominence (11.6%).

These data suggest an inherent interest of Italian actors to promote music excellence from high-brow sectors and strengthen the image and linkages with a historically rooted tradition that benefits from international recognition as well, while when local partners are more actively involved more interest is shown in promoting what can be considered as more inherently part of the popular cultural baggage.

External contributors, both local and Italian, play a major role in the definition of the Italian Institutes of Culture's actions. Analysing the selected IICs provisional and consolidated budgets from 2022-2024 (MAECI 2022, 2023, 2024), it is possible to note that music events – already in the planning stage – account for an average 20% of the yearly events' and activities' budgets of the Institutes; simultaneously, budget documentation shows a yearly overall average external contribution of €30.000 from external contributors, corresponding to a duplication of the allocation of resources in music planning and promotion starting from the organisational stage.

Looking at the nature of the majority of actors involved in these initiatives, and at the nature of this collaboration (private-to-public or public-to-public), it was possible to determine that most of the actors collaborating for musical events with IICs are from the non-governmental sector active in the field, as reported in Figure 2.

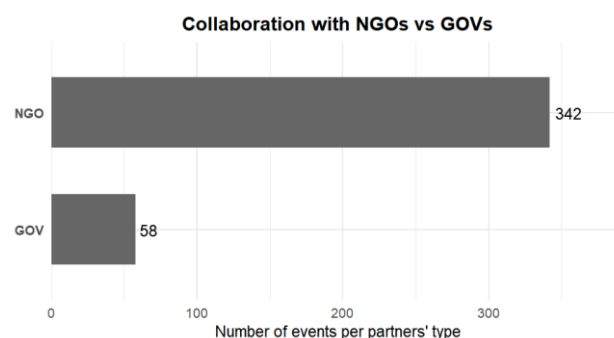


Figure 2. Collaborations' type

A closer examination of the organized events revealed several key actors that regularly collaborate with various Italian Cultural Institutes (IICs) across Europe and play an active role in promoting Italian music abroad. At this stage, the research focused on exploring these actors' activities within Italy's music diplomacy landscape through direct interviews with relevant stakeholders. The aim was to identify best practices and provide concrete examples of how to enhance the international promotion of Italian music in a competitive context, while also acknowledging existing limitations and potential areas for improvement.

Best practices: Italian excellencies abroad

Based on the mapping illustrated above, a set of interviews with major stakeholders in the field – both in Italy and at the European level – were carried out. They report which



practices are more frequent in the promotion of Italian musical heritage and provide some guidelines on how to engage within the field. Network diplomacy seems to play a significant role, emphasising the role of interest groups, social groups, and individuals in defining government priorities and more transparent strategies for public and cultural diplomacy (Metzl 2001; Ang et al. 2016; cf. Flew and Hartig 2014). For this reason, expanding the study of diplomatic networks and development with a bottom-top perspective serves as a precious perspective in advising and defining a more comprehensive agenda based on the current necessities of the sector.

In our interviews, several best practices emerged from the viewpoint of different non-governmental actors. In the following sections, we discuss some of these best practices, showing off the role played by non-governmental actors in cultural diplomacy and intercultural relations.

1. Internationalisation, public sector and NGOs capacities – a successful combination

The analysis clearly shows that non-governmental actors are indispensable contributors to Italy's cultural diplomacy. Associations, foundations, consortia, and networks complement governmental action by filling critical gaps in flexibility, innovation, financial sustainability, and outreach. Their initiatives show a distinctive ability to combine strategies of internationalisation with grassroots engagement, thus building cultural bridges that extend beyond institutional frameworks. This bottom-up approach allows Italian culture to be promoted not only as a

national asset, but also as a shared and dynamic practice of dialogue with international audiences.

Available experiences illustrate how the origins, structures, and flexibility of non-governmental organisations enhance the impact and reach of cultural promotion. By investing in human capital, strategically localising financial resources, and streamlining bureaucratic procedures, these organisations facilitate the successful implementation of cultural events and engagement activities. At the same time, their expertise fosters public-private collaboration, strengthens competitiveness, and contributes to the consolidation of common strategies.

A notable case is provided by CIDIM – *Comitato Italiano Nazionale Musica*, which has demonstrated remarkable capacity in delivering high-impact international events, building on more than forty years of experience. CIDIM's effectiveness lies in its comprehensive approach to planning and organisation, rooted in expertise, professionalism, and an extensive network. As our respondent highlights: "CIDIM guarantees to embassies, consulates and IICs an artistically significant product. [Our] product is 100% logistically ready-made, covering visas, logistics, and tax contributions. [...] A great [part of the] success is the combination of guaranteed artistic quality with effective administrative management" (Interview n. 2, 11/09/2025).

CIDIM's international efforts are reflected in numerous collaborations with ministerial and governmental partners, underscoring the value of sustained partnerships. This case shows how the ability of NGOs to invest in administrative and managerial capacity can significantly



increase productivity and efficiency, while also providing public authorities with a reliable and well-structured system for international cultural promotion.

2. Innovation through cultural programming

A distinctive characteristic of non-governmental cultural diplomacy is the focus on innovative programming. Several organisations deliberately choose to stage rare or forgotten repertoires, thus presenting a less conventional image of Italian culture while simultaneously highlighting its richness and diversity. Such practices not only attract new audiences but also reinforce Italy's image as a country able to combine heritage preservation with creative experimentation. By innovating in programming, non-governmental actors contribute to renewing cultural narratives and preventing Italy's international image from being perceived as static or exclusively tied to its traditional "grand classics."

At the same time, an innovative and culturally enriched programme can serve as a means of greater engagement for the public, going beyond the simple consumption. As an example, the activities undertaken by *Accademia Chigiana di Siena* emphasises how the most in-demand repertoires are usually not publicly displayed because "they may be considered difficult to perform", yet "Difficult for whom? It is the effort that is put in. The problem is that excluding a priori certain choices automatically excludes the auditors, hence collectivities are excluded because of effort-based issues" (Interview n. 1A, 07/07/2025). At the same time, a more considerate approach can be called out: "Music is not a universal language", because if so, we

would only consider tonal and Eurocentric production; there is a need to shift the paradigm. Chigiana has made a treasure of cultural exchanges since its foundation in 1932:

Music is not a universal language; it carries a richness that must not be erased. Even when it comes to the interpretation of Western repertoire – which is fundamentally the focus of the Accademia – it is important to recognise the contribution that other cultures can bring to one's own culture. (Interview n. 1B, 07/07/2025)

From a training and educational perspective, Accademia Chigiana – in its international experience – carried out such principles. Very recently, Accademia Chigiana inaugurated the European Music Week in Riyadh, thanks to the initiative of the project Chigiana-Farnesina (i.e., *Giovani Talenti Musicali Italiani nel Mondo*) and the Italian Embassy in Riyadh. Our interviewees outlined how musical perception is influenced by cultural perspectives:

What was very interesting was facing an audience that, apart from the Westerners, was an authentically Arab audience. They were experiencing a type of music that was not established for them, meaning it was not part of their culture, also because the whole world... The entire musical culture of Saudi Arabia is now starting to have the opportunity to express itself, and so on. From this point of view, it is interesting to be part of a developing path that is nonetheless aware of their traditions. In these new schools, where there is a



component of Western music, they maintain the teaching of their own instruments, their traditions, and their methods, which creates an interesting dialogue. We therefore always try to approach this kind of challenge, being proactive in finding points of contact with these traditions. This is why, at Chigiana, we are also strongly promoting the study of various musical cultures. From this perspective, the series of concerts called *Tradire*, is very interesting. There is still a “non-tonal Italy”, even today. If we think about traditional music from Sardinia or the Easter songs in Sicily, we are in a realm that has nothing to do with tonality. (Interview n. 1A, 07/07/2025)

In this way, innovative cultural programming functions both as a platform for experimentation and as a bridge between traditions, communities, and audiences. By embracing repertoires that are rarely performed, culturally hybrid, or non-tonal, organisations like Accademia Chigiana challenge both performers and listeners to expand their musical horizons, fostering a dialogue that transcends national and stylistic boundaries. Such approaches highlight the dynamic nature of Italian culture: it is at once historically grounded and forward-looking, capable of preserving heritage while integrating global influences. Ultimately, innovation in programming transforms cultural diplomacy into an active, participatory practice, where the audience is invited not merely to witness, but to engage with, the evolving narratives of Italian music. This dual commitment to artistic excellence and intercultural exchange demonstrates how non-governmental actors play a pivotal role in shaping Italy’s image abroad, ensuring it is

perceived as both creative and culturally responsive.

3. Capacity building and professional development

Training and education are recurrent components of best practices in non-governmental activities in the field. Many projects are designed around workshops, masterclasses, and exchange programs for young artists and cultural professionals. This dimension is crucial because it ensures that cultural diplomacy is not limited to one-off events but is anchored in long-term investment in human capital and exchanges. By fostering capacity building, these initiatives empower new generations of cultural practitioners who can operate in transnational contexts, thereby guaranteeing the sustainability and continuity of Italian cultural presence abroad. The integration of training within cultural diplomacy initiatives also strengthens ties with universities and research institutions, both in Italy and internationally.

Italy is indeed considered an excellence in musical training for its advanced academic offer. All our respondents placed great emphasis on the role of capacity building and the necessity to advance professional development as prerequisites for promoting Italian cultural excellences.

The interviews highlighted that effective cultural diplomacy requires structured pathways to professionalisation. Initiatives like the CIDIM’s and Accademia Chigiana’s, such as *Giovani Talenti Musicali Italiani nel Mondo*, in partnership with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, exemplify this approach, providing young musicians with mentoring, performance opportunities, and international



exposure, while going beyond exploitative commercial practices. As noted by our respondents, these programs bridge gaps in the Italian music ecosystem, helping young talents gain experience with orchestras, international festivals, and diverse venues – from European capitals to distant cities in Asia and the Americas – thus increasing their competitiveness on a global scale. Other relevant initiatives, such as the UNESCO-backed *Transcultura* program, demonstrate that training is not limited to Italian citizens: international students also benefit from scholarships, immersive study, and cross-cultural engagement, creating inclusive pathways for global exchange.

4. Network building and strategic partnerships

Generally, respondents stressed the broader institutional dimension of these initiatives: training and professional development cannot be isolated from organisational modernisation, and strategic networking. The sustainability of Italian cultural diplomacy relies not solely on individual talent but also on the ability of institutions to coordinate internationally, leverage private sponsorship, and integrate contemporary methods of communication and outreach. In this sense, non-governmental actors play a dual role: nurturing the next generation of artists and cultural managers, while also innovating the structures and strategies through which Italy projects its culture abroad. This can be exemplified, for instance, by the active collaboration between CIDIM and Accademia Chigiana. Collectively, these practices underline a vision of cultural diplomacy that is dynamic,

inclusive, and forward-looking anchored in education, yet always attentive to the evolving challenges and opportunities of a globalised cultural landscape.

Strategic partnerships and networking facilitate a more efficient resource management, usually in a pragmatic and collaborative way. For example, artists contribute time and expertise, organisations provide platforms and spaces, and institutional partners may contribute with budget expansion. This approach has proven effective in rapidly scaling projects up while creating meaningful partnerships without relying exclusively on large sponsorships. Interviewees noted that emerging initiatives aim to systematise clusters of artists and institutions, combining Italian classical musicians with those already sensitised to international cultural work, and connecting them with national ministries and international organizations, including UN agencies. Projects like the Euro Mediterranean Music Academy (EMA) leverage music not only to foster awareness of global issues but also to activate educational and participatory programs for youth, promoting a pro-active role of culture in shaping global debate.

Challenges and structural limitations: NGOs perspectives in the field

The analysis also highlights recurring structural weaknesses. Non-governmental actors frequently face severe financial constraints, with funding that is short-term, fragmented, and unpredictable. This undermines continuity and limits the potential for long-term impact. Depending on the ambitions and objectives of specific projects –



particularly those involving rare or unconventional repertoires – public institutions, both local and national, as well as international partners, can help mitigate the friction caused by private-sector priorities. They may do so by providing a reliable basis for investment in innovative-driven initiatives, while enabling more nuanced programming for broader audiences.

However, this context also generates inequality among actors and raises entry barriers for younger or smaller organisations. The same dynamics affect international competition, influencing Italy's positioning in the global cultural landscape. Internally, these initiatives often rely on individual commitment and personal passion, which are indeed key to success (Interview n. 5A, 08/05/2025). Yet, the relevance and scalability of projects represent crucial operational considerations for achieving long-term impact. Individual drive is essential, but geographical and economic disparities remain significant factors shaping the distribution of resources and capabilities both within Italy and internationally.

Respondents underscore the role of the *Fondo Nazionale Spettacolo dal Vivo* (FNSV) – originally known as Fondo Unico Spettacolo (FUS) - Italy's primary public funding mechanism for live performing arts, covering theatre, music, dance, circus, and multidisciplinary projects, and managed by the *Direzione Generale Spettacolo* (tr. Directorate General of Performing Arts) of the Ministry of Culture. While the FNSV is a critical funding instrument, its allocation criteria do not distribute themselves homogeneously across Northern, Central, and Southern Italy, resulting in major productive clusters and

significant territorial disparities (Como et al. 2025). Notably, “CIDIM works to achieve territorial rebalancing by sending high-level artists to concert seasons that could not otherwise afford them. This aims, above all, for economic reasons, to enhance the quality of musical programming through touring concerts.” (Interview n. 2, 11/09/2025) The FNSV, funding trends show a shrinking role of this source of financial support for Italian actors. At the very beginning of its allocation in 1985, FNSV accounted for 0.08% of national GDP. Today, this ratio is down to 0.02%, a decline that is further magnified by a comparison with other European countries, that spend approximately 1% of GDP on culture. These trends are confirmed by the Fondazione Di Vittorio (2025) report on the live performing arts and cinematic sectors, highlighting how cultural budget to GDP ratio decreased in the last forty years (Como et al., 2025). Economic disparities impact cultural workers' professional opportunities, while at the same time preventing international competitiveness: as noted by a respondent, “we should be on a slightly higher level than where we currently stand” (Interview n. 3, 30/06/2025). The grants received for tours abroad are lower compared to those received by colleagues in other European countries: as a result, Italian orchestras touring internationally tour more limitedly, whereas American, French, and German orchestras with higher public financial support enjoy a wider geographical reach. Additionally, non-governmental organisations operating internationally are exposed to changing funding streams: the operative necessity to adapt to financial constraints may impact the content and specificity of their work, by focusing on meeting the needs of external funders instead of pursuing a homogenous

operative strategy (Brown, 2020: 413). With brand-identity being susceptible to alterations, the overall impact of their activities and outreach may thus be affected.

At the same time, although the potential number of artists to select is significantly larger, the actual pool to which support is actually allocated remains limited. Italy – to some extent – underutilises its globally recognised cultural actors:

What we should and could use more effectively is the voice of individual artists who have great visibility and resonance worldwide. [...] We rely far too often on a few well-known figures like Andrea Bocelli, when we could rotate a wider variety of artists representing different parts of society and the world. This digital engagement is currently limited, creating a parallel gap between the State and the artistic community. While artists must maintain autonomy, it would be beneficial if part of this community actively supported the State, presenting a more contemporary image of Italy than that conveyed through traditional cultural diplomacy. (Interview n. 5B, 22/08/2025)

This observation underscores how programming choices, both in live tours and in digital representation, shape Italy's international cultural profile and the long-term impact of its cultural diplomacy, while advocating for more resonance for contemporary artists' voices.

Moreover, the lack of systematic coordination among different stakeholders – such as public institutions, NGOs, and private actors – leads to duplication of efforts and missed

opportunities. On one hand, the absence of shared network platforms serving to inform active actors in the field prevents coordinated organisation and long-term impact in international initiatives.

On the other hand, institutions of different sizes should approach their international outreach accordingly: many Italian theatres and cultural institutions claim international ambitions, yet often without articulating concrete multi-year strategies on themes such as sustainability, inclusivity, and internationalisation: institutions should assume responsibility together with local and national authorities to design distinctive, identity-driven projects. Besides recognising different capacities, such measures could foster diversification of approaches, avoiding overlapping initiatives that offset collective impact. Moreover, most respondents stressed the need to focus on a “fully 360-degree approach”, ensuring that “our institutions are truly international. In the end, an international organization should not only be international when the curtain rises; it should operate with an international mindset across all segments and levels of its activity.” (Interview n.5B, 22/08/2025)

European perspectives and approaches

The Italian experience of non-governmental cultural diplomacy offers valuable room for comparison with the wider European perspective, where collaborations across borders and the circulation of cultural initiatives contribute to shaping a common cultural space. We selected different case studies for the European context as they



provide different approaches to the same issues in order to gather the widest selection possible of best practices to learn from: interviewing international partners together with national respondents with intense international experience, this research identified three different European experiences. Firstly, the Irish case provides a relevant example of public-private partnership and efficient collaboration; secondly, the French case testifies the innovative private perspective into changing the cultural offer in the field by investing in enhanced flexibility and identity-branding. Lastly, the European Music Policy Exchange project - composed of several European stakeholders - shows the importance of the network in the primary identification of best practices in the international music field, through exchange and cooperation.

Ireland and the pivotal role of the Irish Embassy

The Wexford Festival Opera, with the active support of the Irish Embassy, exemplifies how diplomatic institutions can work hand in hand with cultural actors to strengthen ties between countries. The embassy acts as a facilitator, ensuring the recognition of cultural initiatives that go beyond bilateral exchange, while fostering a competitive system.

We have a very diverse and international audience, mostly from English-speaking countries – England, Ireland, the United States, Canada – as well as from Germany and Italy. Our institutional relations, therefore, try to follow the direction from which our public comes. Each year, we present our Festival

abroad not only for publicity, but also to seek potential sponsors and donors. Almost two-thirds of our budget comes from donations, both corporate and private. The direct contact with potential sponsors is fundamental, and we often meet them through cultural centres and diplomatic institutions. Irish embassies worldwide are very well organized, they give strong support to the arts, and we have always found great hospitality and help. (Interview n.3, 30/06/2025)

This experience shows how embassies can serve as cultural messengers and platforms for outreach, enabling festivals to reach international audiences, strengthen sponsorship, and secure visibility. The model also extends to artistic exchange: “The Wexford Factory [Young Artist Program] was twinned for several years with the Bolshoi Academy. [...] The Irish Embassy in Moscow organised a whole week to present the Festival, inviting many Irish expats. We regularly find this kind of support in New York, Buenos Aires, and Rome.” Such practices reveal how embassies, when actively engaged, can multiply the effects of non-governmental cultural action, ensuring both institutional visibility and private support.

At the same time, Wexford’s case highlights how smaller European countries can play an active role in supporting their artists abroad: “Irish embassies worldwide are very attentive when their artists perform outside Ireland. For them, it is a matter of pride [...] In Berlin, at Classical:NEXT, the annual conference on the future of music, and Ireland had its own stand – one of the few European countries to have a national stand.” This highlights the critical role



of strong institutional support in reinforcing and enhancing the presence of cultural actors within international cultural markets.

France: between international promotion and exchange

Similarly, the *Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française*, based in Venice, Italy, plays a crucial role in promoting French repertoire internationally. Its activities demonstrate how cultural foundations can combine research, performance, and international promotion to reintroduce underexplored repertoires. Such practices underline the importance of specialised institutions in safeguarding cultural heritage while innovating formats for global audiences. One of the distinctive features of Bru Zane is its research department dedicated to lesser-known repertoires. Its work is enhanced through other instruments, such as the Bru Zane discographic label, which permits larger project outreach and dissemination of such repertoires. Besides scholarly research, focused on French romantic production, concert performances and full stage productions are internationally presented, defining a functional multi-step approach not only ensures artistic quality but also maximises international reach. By cultivating an extensive international network of partners with different nations, the organisation advances its mission while, at the same time, cultivating cultural exchange and cultural diplomacy at the individual level of analysis.

EMPE - a European epistemic network

Networking and coordination are essential practices in intercultural relations. An instructive example of European cooperation in cultural policymaking is provided by the

European Music Policy Exchange, a transnational initiative coordinated by the Center for Music Ecosystems and the Music Cities Network (see Music Moves Europe, 2025). The project's main objective, originating from the post-pandemic scenario, was to establish a shared methodological framework for understanding, assessing, and promoting the role of music in European urban governance. Through a multi-scalar and multi-actor approach, EMPE connected more than 60 local authorities, policymakers, and cultural professionals from across Europe to identify good practices and develop evidence-based recommendations for more effective music policies at both municipal and national levels, collected into the official publication *European Music Cities Policy Handbook* (2023). EMPE has sought to explore the economic, social and cultural value that music has had in European cities, particularly in relation to initiatives related to equality, diversity and inclusion, climate change, education and employment, tourism and the broader economy. In addition to highlighting music's ability to reach wider audiences, raising both financial support and awareness and persuading potential supporters (see also: Balasinski & Mathieu 2006; Roussel & Banerji 2017), the project emphasises how the music ecosystem functions as an incubator for solutions to the pressing challenges faced by contemporary societies. According to our respondent, EMPE and its guiding handbook "fostered the emergence of a wide range of interconnected themes around music, ultimately framing it as a positive instrument for building resilient cities and communities." The collaboration between cities, public administrations, and private stakeholders across Europe may foster what one can be described as a "great capacity for innovation"

(Interview n. 6, 30/09/2025). These hybrid forms, styles, and patterns of collaboration - which connect local and global elements and processes - sustain the aspiration to build a broader global community that transcends state and national borders, while simultaneously highlighting Europe's distinctive collaborative strength (Isar and Triandafyllidou 2021).

Voices in the spotlight: recommendations for public institutions

Based on the analysis here conducted, , several recommendations can be made to maximise the role of non-governmental actors. These recommendations focus chiefly on how public institutions can effectively enhance the impact of non-governmental actors and foster stronger public-private collaboration.

Strategy and planning support in international perspective

- 1) Strengthening stable funding mechanisms that allow organisations to plan strategically rather than endure project by project.
- 2) Enhancing dialogue and coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors would prevent fragmentation and encourage synergy. The establishment of digital platforms to share best practices, connect stakeholders, and monitor ongoing projects would increase transparency and foster learning across different contexts.
- 3) Actively promoting diverse initiatives abroad, positioning them as exemplary cases of Italian cultural innovation.

By adopting these measures, Italy could consolidate its role in International Cultural Relations while leveraging the energy, creativity, and international networks that non-governmental actors already bring to the field.

Artists' and cultural workers' support

- 4) Labour mobility and the circulation of artistic expertise within Europe play a crucial role. Promoting exchanges, facilitating mobility, and providing incentives for artists and technical staff (e.g., scenographers, costume designers, etc.) to return to their home country can both enhance human capital and showcase Italian excellence abroad.
- 5) The role of youth and of emerging artists should be a strategic priority, in coordination with other Ministries and governmental entities. Efforts should focus on supporting professional development following formal education and training, while simultaneously fostering international mobility, ensuring that attention is given both to the next generation of talent and to well-established Italian artists.
- 6) Support the development of new technical roles that respond to emerging needs, in line with present requirements. Current times demand new professional profiles, including expertise in technological, digital, and sustainability fields, which can be integrated into nationally based cultural institutions.

Advanced training for public administrative staff

- 7) Strategic research-driven international initiatives should address specific geo-cultural needs, providing evidence-based insights to inform cultural diplomacy

strategies tailored to each country of application. By aligning research with local cultural contexts and priorities, these activities can enhance the effectiveness of Italy's international cultural engagement, strengthen bilateral relationships, and promote Italian artistic and cultural excellence abroad.

- 8) Strengthening the human and professional resources and skills of Italian cultural institutions, consulates, and embassies, particularly in the management of cultural programming and administrative functions. Officials often oversee a wide range of cultural activities while simultaneously handling administrative and accounting tasks for which they may not have specific expertise. Establishing dedicated administrative, logistical, and technical support positions would enhance operational efficiency, ensure high-quality cultural programming, and facilitate smoother coordination of international projects, tours, and events. Strengthening internal capacities would allow Italian cultural institutions abroad to fully leverage their cultural and diplomatic potential.

Digital sphere

- 9) Developing and expanding a strategic digital communication approach that balances a coherent vision of Italian cultural identity with space for individual artists. Such a strategy can both strengthen Italy's national cultural branding and enhance the visibility and international recognition of contemporary Italian artists.
- 10) Strengthening institutional infrastructure, recognising that accurate and timely information is crucial for effective promotion. Enhanced capacity in

communication, and logistical support can improve the reach and impact of Italian cultural initiatives abroad.

Future research and perspectives

Despite the growing recognition of culture as tool of soft power and diplomacy, the academic literature still offers limited systematic analyses of how specific musical practices and networks function as agents of international cooperation and cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy studies and intercultural dynamics could benefit from further refinement in policy and strategy design across different cultural sectors, taking greater account of existing fragmentation. Moreover, existing studies tend to focus either on national strategies or on individual case studies, often neglecting the trans-scalar dynamics that emerge when polyvocal collaboration operates across borders. This gap highlights the need for a more integrated theoretical and empirical approach capable of capturing the complexity of music's role both as a social connector and as a diplomatic medium.

The cases examined in this report illustrate that the convergence of artistic creativity and institutional frameworks can generate innovative forms of cultural governance and policy experimentation. However, these experiences often remain under-documented and under-theorised, especially regarding their long-term impact on resilience, inclusion, and policy transfer. Future research should therefore aim to better conceptualise the role of non-governmental actors as well as to analyse in depth forms of hybrid collaborations not merely as isolated cultural initiatives but as part of a wider ecosystem of transnational governance that redefines the boundaries



between the public and private spheres, between local action and global ambition. In this perspective, investigating the intersections between music, non-governmental actors, and partnerships could significantly advance our understanding of how cultural ecosystems contribute to innovation and community building, while reaffirming a national global presence. Moving in this direction would provide a valuable evidence-based set of lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen the role of culture - specifically music - as a strategic resource for sustainable and inclusive international cultural relations.

Conclusion

This research has tried to discuss strengths, weaknesses and potential opportunities of the current Italian approach to music diplomacy, with a specific focus on the linkages between public actors and private institutions, both domestically and abroad. The overall picture shows a system that enjoys a high degree of credibility, thanks to the branding of Italian culture in general and Italian music in particular, as well as a strong pre-existing network of Italian cultural institutions alongside the country's diplomatic outposts. This network seems to be lacking a clearly defined operative strategy. Individual organizations, as Brown (2020) has put it, "have distinctive ways of carrying out their work, but it is important to place them within broader national organizational fields; the parameters of an organization's work are made much clearer in the context of a national field".

Moreover, there are still some lacking features that are especially perceived as critical by external observers and practitioners: some

degree of unwillingness to innovate among the private actors that enjoy a special relationship with the diplomatic network; an excessive reliance on well-known cultural figures at the expenses of new talents and, lastly, difficulties to integrate key contemporary themes not only in the artistic offer but also in the message conveyed by institutions and their potential role in shaping global debates. None of those problems is impossible to overcome, however, and we highlighted some policy recommendations to do so. Each institution provides a series of different recommendations with differences and nuances based on each ones' peculiarities, but almost everyone of the interviewees agrees on: the very existence of this section, built entirely on the considerations and feedback from interviewees, constitutes a recommendation in its own regard: integrating better private stakeholders, both institutional and from the various NGOs that operate in the sector, can lead to a meaningful and effective integration of a bottom-up approach. The approach employed in this study is not case-specific, and can be generalized to other countries in order to come up with a more detailed comparative analysis along with meaningful insights from other international actors as well.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the participants who made this research possible by sharing their insights, competence and experiences. We are particularly grateful to M^o Francescantonio Pollice, M^o Paolo Petrocelli, Dr. Viviana Bianchi, M^o Andrea Pecchio, M^o Nicola Sani, M^o Stefano Jacoviello, M^o Francesco Brianzi for their time.

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Appendix

The IICs' events database from the preliminary mapping (see section *Identification and preliminary mapping: What does Italian music sound like abroad?*) has been collected from 25 active European IICs' official websites, by filtering the period between April 2024 and April 2025. Specifically, the selected sample corresponds to the following institutes:

- Greece - Italian Cultural Institute of Athens
- Netherlands - Italian Cultural Institute of Amsterdam
- Germany - Italian Cultural Institute of Berlin
- Slovakia - Italian Cultural Institute of Bratislava
- Belgium - Italian Cultural Institute of Brussels
- Romania - Italian Cultural Institute of Bucharest
- Hungary - Italian Cultural Institute of Budapest
- Denmark - Italian Cultural Institute of Copenhagen
- Ireland - Italian Cultural Institute of Dublin
- Finland - Italian Cultural Institute of Helsinki
- Malta - Italian Cultural Institute of La Valletta
- Portugal - Italian Cultural Institute of Lisbon
- Slovenia - Italian Cultural Institute of Ljubljana
- United Kingdom - Italian Cultural Institute of London
- Spain - Italian Cultural Institute of Madrid
- Norway - Italian Cultural Institute of Oslo
- France - Italian Cultural Institute of Paris
- Czechia - Italian Cultural Institute of Prague
- Bulgaria - Italian Cultural Institute of Sofia
- Sweden - Italian Cultural Institute of Stockholm
- Austria - Italian Cultural Institute of Vienna
- Lithuania - Italian Cultural Institute of Vilnius
- Poland - Italian Cultural Institute of Warsaw
- Croatia - Italian Cultural Institute of Zagreb
- Switzerland - Italian Cultural Institute of Zurich