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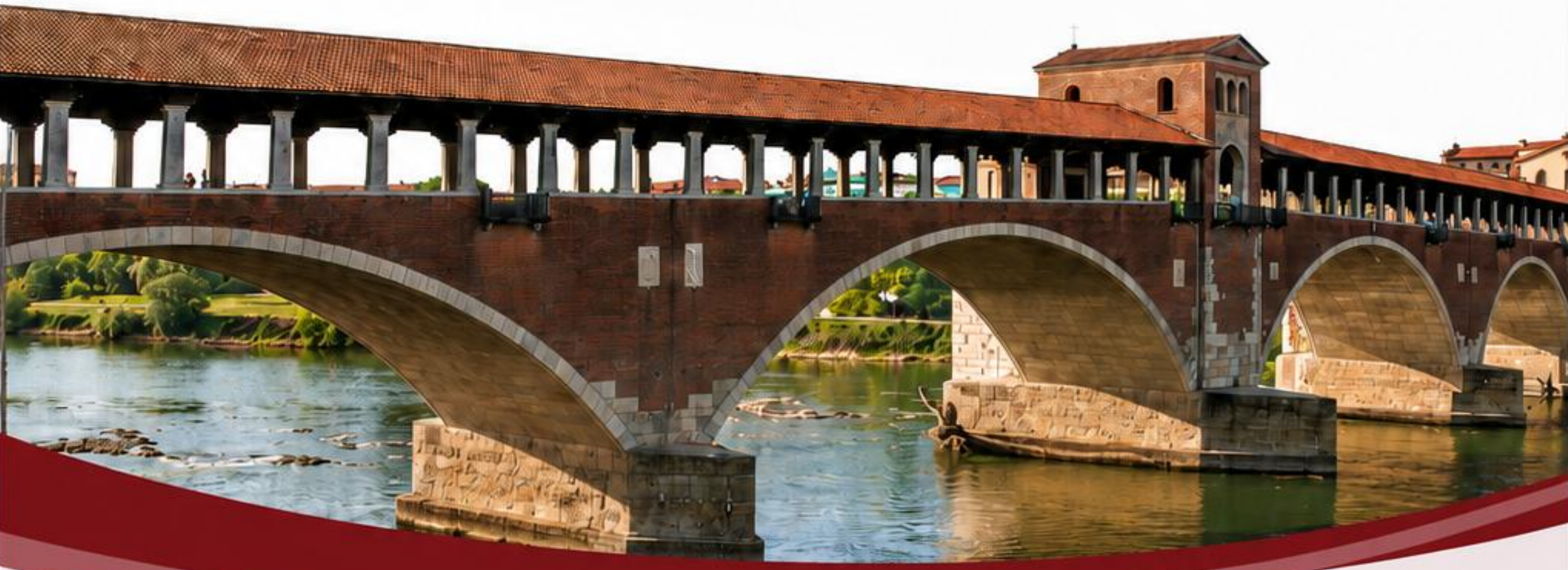

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Concert Societies and the Future of Classical Music. Organisational Models and Sustainability in Contemporary Italy

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Abstract. *Concert societies represent one of the longest-standing and most significant organisational forms in the dissemination of classical music in Italy. Historically deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of cities and often born from civil society initiatives, these institutions have played a central role in the musical programming of large Italian cities, as well as small towns, for over a century, promoting the circulation of artists and audience development.*

In the contemporary context, however, these interesting and hybrid entities are facing necessary organisational and managerial transformations due to shifts in cultural consumption patterns, evolving funding channels, and the need to develop new audiences. Despite their widespread presence and role, these cultural organisations have received little attention in the academic literature. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to a greater understanding of these entities by analysing their organisational and economic characteristics.

The research is based on an empirical investigation conducted through questionnaires and financial statements collected from a sample of 20 Italian concert societies active in 2025. The collected data were analysed using descriptive techniques to explore the relationships between organisational characteristics, economic size, production capacity, and audience composition.

Preliminary data analysis—which does not yet include an examination of financial statements—highlights significant heterogeneity among the organisations analysed in terms of economic size, production capacity, and programming models, as well as a sustainability model heavily dependent on public funding, ticket sales and season ticket revenues. At the same time, the analysis highlights a number of patterns in audience composition and governance structures, characterised by strong stability and limited turnover in artistic direction. Overall, these findings suggest potential evolutions in the governance models and management practices of concert organisations, particularly with regard to diversifying funding sources, developing audiences, and strengthening organisational capabilities to ensure sustainability and continuity over time.

Keywords: *Concert societies; cultural management; governance; audience development; economic sustainability*

Framing of the research. *Concert societies represent one of the longest-standing and most significant organisational forms in the dissemination of classical music in Italy. Established between the second half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century within a broader tradition of musical associations—which included academies, philharmonic societies, and cultural circles—they have played a fundamental role in promoting instrumental music and educating audiences about chamber music.*

From an organisational perspective, since their inception, concert societies have been organisations promoted by civil society and supported by local cultural elites, characterised by a membership-based or subscriber-based structure and ongoing artistic programming. This organisational model has, over time, favoured the dissemination of classical music even in cities lacking large, established musical institutions, contributing significantly to the development of Italian musical life and the circulation of artists from the 19th century to the present (Macchione, 2002; Carlini, 2006).

Historical studies of individual concert institutions show how these organisations have been a central element of the cultural life of numerous Italian cities for over a century, ensuring continuity of programming and strong local roots (Galla & Meneghini, 2010; Brighenti, 2012; Bossini, 2014).

From an organisational and economic perspective, concert societies can be considered organisations that manage portfolios of musical programs, whose sustainability depends - as also highlighted for other actors in the music sector - on the combination of artistic production, programming, and management of available resources (Mariani & Zan, 2011). In this framework, it can be said that they play a coordinating role between artistic production, cultural programming, and audience education, contributing to the structuring of local music markets and the circulation of artists. Their organisational model, based on a mix of public resources, private contributions, and member participation, represents a rather unique formula that combines civic initiative and professional management of artistic activities (Friel & Cavazzoni, 2014).

Despite their historical role in disseminating classical music and shaping local musical life, concert societies have so far been relatively understudied in the cultural management literature, which has devoted greater attention to other types of musical organisations, such as symphony orchestras, opera houses, and music festivals.

Like many other players in the "Classical Music industry" (Dromey & Haferkorn, 2018), however, concert societies are now called upon to innovate their organizsational models and audience development strategies to maintain their

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cultural and social relevance in a contemporary context of significant change in both demand (Kolb, 2001; Tong et al., 2016) and production and distribution (Dromey & Haferkorn, 2018). All of this, therefore, requires cultural organisations to develop new ways of engaging audiences and building cultural experiences (Kolb, 2013; Dollman, 2023) while also preserving their economic and organisational sustainability over time.

Purpose of the paper. *In this context, this study aims to contribute to the literature by analysing the organisational and economic characteristics of a sample of Italian concert societies active in 2025. Specifically, the study explores the organisational models and economic sustainability mechanisms that characterise these institutions, as well as their role in cultural production and distribution, and in audience building. Through this analysis, the article also aims to identify management recommendations to strengthen the sustainability and development of concert societies' activities in the contemporary context.*

Specifically, the research focuses on the following questions:

RQ1*. What organisational models characterise contemporary Italian concert societies?*

RQ2*. What are the main economic characteristics of these organisations, and what sources of funding support their activities?*

RQ3*. How do concert societies contribute to musical programming and audience building in the contemporary Italian music context?*

Methodology. *Our study adopts an exploratory research design based on the collection and analysis of primary data relating to the organisational, cultural programming, and economic characteristics of Italian concert societies. The research builds on a 2014 study of concert societies operating in Italy, which aimed to describe the role of these institutions in the musical life of the regions and to identify their main organisational and management characteristics (Friel and Cavazzoni, 2014). The survey, conducted in 2025, was designed by repeating and expanding the structure of the 2014 survey, also to allow for observation of the evolution of the Italian concert scene.*

Data collection was conducted by administering a structured questionnaire to a sample of Italian concert societies via Google Forms. The questionnaire, comprising 74 closed- and open-ended questions, was divided into several sections covering the main organisational and management aspects of the institutions analysed. Specifically, the questionnaire collected information regarding: (1) general characteristics of the organisation, including legal form and year of foundation; (2) organisational structure and human resources; (3) concert activity and artistic programming; (4) audience characteristics and audience engagement initiatives; (5) communication and promotion methods. To complement the organisational analysis with an assessment of the financial characteristics, the participating organisations were also asked to provide their main accounting documents for the previous year.

The selection of organisations involved in the survey followed the sample defined in the 2014 study, which included 25 Italian organisations. The 2025 survey included 20 concert companies, 14 of which were already in the original sample. This partial overlap between the two samples provides a potentially useful information base for future comparative analyses on the evolution of the organisational and financial characteristics of Italian concert companies. The data collected through the questionnaire and accounting documents were analysed using descriptive techniques, and the preliminary results are presented in the following section.

Results.

A descriptive analysis of organisational, economic, and management characteristics. *The organisations considered in many cases represent historic institutions of Italian musical life. 75% of the responding societies were founded between 1900 and 1989, 15% before 1900, and 10% after 1990. Among the oldest organisations is the Trento Philharmonic Society, founded in 1795, while the most recent organisation in the sample is Musikàmera of Venice, founded in 2016. Almost all societies have operated continuously over time, with interruptions limited mainly to the two world wars, and only 25% of the organisations reported periods of suspension of their activities. This data highlights the strong historical roots of concert societies in the Italian music system.*

From a legal perspective, the vast majority of organisations are established as associations, three are foundations; 60% have legal status, and approximately one-third have achieved Third Sector Entity (ETS) status.

Regarding infrastructure and material resources, most organisations do not have their own spaces: over 70% rent spaces for their concerts, while 20% provide free space. Only a small percentage own their own venues, and 90% of organisations use third-party musical instruments, indicating limited financial resources.

In terms of offerings, the organisations analysed offer a diverse musical program: in addition to traditional chamber music, 14 organisations offer symphonic repertoire, 13 choral performances, 12 jazz events, and 5 ballet performances. Only one institution in the sample maintains a program exclusively dedicated to chamber music, and it is interesting to note the near absence of early music in the programs. Overall, activities other than chamber music represent an average of 35.26% of the program, with a standard deviation of 23.33%, indicating considerable variability among organisations. Among the institutions with the greatest programming diversity are the Unione Musicale di Torino and the Società Aquilana dei Concerti.

During the 2023/2024 season, the analysed concert societies organised a total of 1,472 performances, averaging approximately 74 per organization; however, there is significant heterogeneity in production capacity among the institutions, and if some organisations have particularly busy schedules, such as the Mantua Chamber Orchestra with

250 events and Asolo Musica – Associazione Amici della Musica di Asolo with 168 events, others operate with more limited programs. Looking at the types of performances, 340 solo concerts and 861 chamber music concerts were organised, while the remaining events were in other musical genres (symphonic, jazz, dance, and others).

The analysis of production costs also highlights variability across the organisations analysed, with the average cost per performance in the 2023/2024 season at €5,434.

Regarding the composition of revenue, the central role of public funding in supporting concert organisations' activities emerges. Almost all of the organisations analysed benefit from contributions from various institutional levels, including the National Fund for Live Performances (FNSV), and regional and local governments funds. Alongside public contributions, the other main component of revenue is generated by the public through ticket and season ticket sales, which in many cases constitute a significant portion of the organisation's overall budget.

Conversely, revenue from sponsorships and other private funding sources is generally more limited and less widespread among the organisations studied this suggesting that the economic model of Italian concert societies remains predominantly based on a combination of public support and audience participation through ticketing and subscriptions, and that the use of structured forms of private fundraising appears less developed than for other cultural organisations.

Finally, the analysis of artistic governance highlights strong stability and low turnover rates in artistic leadership: only three organisations have an artistic director under the age of 50, and seven organisations have had no or only one artistic director change in the last twenty years. It is also interesting to note that 17 out of 19 organisations have a male artistic director.

Audiences and Communication Activities. *On the audience front, concert societies continue to rely on a system of members and season ticket holders. The average number of members is 72, with a standard deviation of 117.5, indicating a very uneven distribution across organisations. The highest number is recorded by the Fondazione Società del Quartetto di Milano ETS, with 423 members, while some organisations do not have a formal membership base. Looking at age, the audience is predominantly mature as the majority of members are in the 51-70 and over 70 age ranges, while the presence of young people under 25 appears marginal. Despite this fact, almost all organisations offer special offers for young people, including reduced or free season tickets.*

However, numerous efforts are being made in audience development and engagement. In addition to their concert programming, many organisations develop educational and outreach activities: 47% of organisations conduct training activities, while approximately 79% organize activities for or in schools, including educational concerts, workshops, and concert-lessons. Almost all organisations also promote initiatives to disseminate musical culture at their own offices or at partner institutions.

Regarding communication, all organisations have a website and use at least one social media platform to communicate with the public. Facebook remains the most popular platform, while Instagram is growing as a communication channel. A comparative analysis of followers on Facebook and Instagram (data from October 25, 2025) confirms the existence of different communication models. Facebook remains the predominant channel for most organisations: on average, Instagram followers account for approximately 45% of the Facebook base, with only two organisations recording a higher number of Instagram followers. Six organisations exhibit a nearly balanced profile between the two platforms (IG/FB ratio between 50% and 80%), a sign of a more mature and diversified digital presence, while seven remain heavily skewed toward Facebook (less than 30% followers on Instagram). Finally, four organisations do not have an Instagram profile.

These data give a picture of the digital transition in concert societies, and while Facebook remains the primary communication tool for a loyal, generally older audience, Instagram is emerging as a channel among younger organisations or those more oriented toward audiences under 35. Companies that invest in visual content, regular updates, and digital engagement strategies demonstrate a greater balance between the two platforms, signalling an evolution in their relationship with the public and a strengthening of the participatory dimension. Digitalisation thus emerges as an indicator of organisational capacity and openness to new audiences. The presence of multilingual materials, cultural content disseminated online, and integrated communication strategies demonstrates a growing focus on accessibility and the internationalisation of concert offerings.

A preliminary correlation analysis. *To further explore the relationships among the organisational, economic, and social dimensions, a correlation analysis was conducted using the quantitative variables collected via the questionnaire. The objective was to identify statistically significant relationships between economic-financial, production, audience composition, and internal structure aspects of the organisations. The analyses were conducted using the Pearson correlation coefficient, which measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two quantitative variables, with values ranging from -1 (perfect negative correlation) to +1 (perfect positive correlation). The adopted method considers only the available cases for each pair of variables (pairwise complete observations) to reduce the impact of missing data. Two areas of study were identified:*

1. *The financing and production area, which investigates the relationships between financial resources and artistic production capacity;*
2. *The social and organisational area, which analyses the connections between audience composition, youth presence, and staff structure. This division allowed for greater clarity of interpretation and a precise understanding of the internal dynamics within each area.*

In the financing and production area, the correlation analysis highlights a significant positive relationship between the main sources of public funding (FNSV, Municipality, Region) and parameters related to artistic production (number of performances, average concert cost, and the cost of the most expensive performance).

In particular, the companies that receive greater resources from the FNSV and local authorities are also those that schedule a greater number of performances and have higher average costs, a sign of a broader and more structured artistic programming. The positive correlation between the different funding channels (FNSV, Municipality, Region, and non-FNSV calls) suggests the presence of an integrated system of public support, in which entities that benefit from one source of funding tend to receive more than one. This confirms a tendency toward the concentration of resources in the most established entities.

An inverse relationship, albeit weak, is also observed between overall funding and the percentage of artistic costs to the total. This would seem to indicate that, as financial resources increase, concert societies tend to expand the organisational and management component (staff, promotion, facilities), reducing the proportion allocated exclusively to artistic costs. This trend suggests that the effectiveness of public support is not limited to the quantity of events produced, but also contributes to the quality and stability of cultural offerings in the area.

Regarding the social and organisational area, however, the correlation matrix highlights the relationships between the age composition of members, youth participation, and audience size, in relation to staff structure. The age groups of members (<25, 25–35, 36–50) show positive correlations, suggesting that organisations capable of engaging younger members tend to maintain a balanced demographic profile even in later age groups: a sign of turnover and continuity in the membership base.

The percentage of youth season tickets is positively associated with both the total number of season ticket holders and ticket sales, indicating that initiatives aimed at the under-30s not only foster loyalty among that segment but are also associated with a larger overall audience.

Regarding staff structure, the observed relationships between the number of temporary and permanent staff offer insights into organisational professionalisation: where a more structured workforce is present, there is generally a greater capacity to plan and support audience-oriented activities (season tickets and tickets). While not inferring causality, the covariation between youth attendance and audience indicators with staff structure suggests more mature organisational models in organisations with greater job stability.

Research limitations. *While these preliminary results reveal interesting and recurring characteristics of Italian concert societies, our study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it should be noted that this short paper focuses primarily on the questionnaire analysis and does not delve into the findings of the ongoing analysis of accounting documents. Completing this analysis will certainly allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of economic and financial sustainability of concert societies.*

The analysis is also based on a relatively small sample of Italian concert societies: although it includes several historically significant institutions from different geographical areas, the results cannot be considered representative of the entire population of concert societies active in Italy, which, among other things, predominantly refers to organisations in Northern Italy.

The research also adopts an exploratory design, based primarily on descriptive analyses. Consequently, the results provide an initial overview of the organisational and economic characteristics of concert societies, but do not allow us to identify causal relationships between the variables considered, which could be explored further in future developments of our research.

Managerial implications. *Despite the aforementioned limitations, the research findings offer some useful insights for reflecting on the management dynamics of concert societies in the contemporary context. First, the analysis highlights significant heterogeneity among the organisations considered, both in terms of economic size and production capacity. This suggests that there is no single organisational model for these entities, but rather a multitude of possible configurations, determined by the combination of available resources, organisational structure, and local roots.*

The analysis, however, suggests the emergence of different organisational orientations among concert societies. While some organisations appear to maintain a more traditional model, characterised by stable governance structures, established audiences, and a strong reliance on public support, others appear more production-oriented, with broader artistic programming and greater organisational complexity. A third group appear more focused on audience development and community engagement, investing more significantly in educational activities, digital communication, and initiatives aimed at younger audiences. These profiles should not be interpreted as rigid categories, but rather as different strategic balances between artistic mission, organisational structure, financial sustainability, and audience engagement.

For managers of cultural organisations, this implies the need to develop flexible management models consistent with the specificities of the local contexts in which they operate.

What appears to be transversal, however, is an economic sustainability strongly tied to the contribution of public resources, particularly from the National Fund for Live Performances and local authorities. This finding underscores the importance of strengthening institutional relationships with public bodies and, at the same time, developing revenue diversification strategies by expanding public-facing activities and activating private support and fundraising. In particular, developing more structured relationships with donors, foundations, and local businesses could be an *important lever for reducing dependence on public resources and supporting the continuity of artistic programming. In this sense, fundraising should not be considered merely as an additional source of funding, but also as a tool for strengthening relationships between concert organisations and their communities. All this, however, requires managerial capabilities extending beyond artistic programming alone. Financial planning and resource management, fundraising, communication, partnership development, and audience management emerge as crucial dimensions of organisational sustainability, requiring dedicated organisational resources and specialised professional competencies.*

Moreover, in the Italian context, obtaining Third Sector Entity (ETS) status may also facilitate fundraising activities and relationships with philanthropic actors through fiscal incentives.

Further insights emerge from the analysis of the correlations between the organisational, economic, and social variables considered in the study. First, the results suggest a positive relationship between the amount of public funding and the organisations' production capacity, measured by the number of scheduled performances and average costs per concert. This indicates that public support, for concert societies as well as other live performance organisations, not only impacts the institutions' survival but also contributes to the development of a broader and more structured artistic programming.

Second, the observed correlations indicate that organisations with a greater presence of young audiences tend to experience higher overall participation, as measured by the number of season ticket holders and tickets sold. This result, however, must be interpreted with caution, as it does not allow for causal relationships to be established and could be influenced by other factors, such as the size of the cities in which the organisations operate or the greater promotional capacity of more structured organisations. Nonetheless, the data suggest that strategies for engaging younger generations can be an important lever for strengthening concert societies' audience base.

Initiatives aimed at younger generations should therefore not be interpreted solely as educational or cultural missions, but also as long-term sustainability strategies aimed at encouraging audience renewal and strengthening participation over time.

This aspect appears particularly interesting also in light of the growing debate on the future of classical music and the ways in which musical institutions can expand and diversify their audiences. In this context, several studies highlight the importance of engagement and community relations activities as fundamental tools for fostering new forms of cultural participation and strengthening the bond between musical institutions and audiences (Dollman, 2023).

Finally, the findings suggest a relationship between staff structure and an organisation's ability to develop audience-oriented activities. Concert societies with a more stable organisational structure tend to demonstrate a greater ability to sustain programming and audience management activities. This highlights the importance of, where possible, investing in the professionalisation of organisational structures and the development of specific skills in cultural management.

Originality of the paper. *This study contributes to the literature on the management of cultural organisations by analysing a specific type of musical institution that has thus far received limited attention in management studies: concert societies. Despite their crucial historical role in disseminating classical music and shaping local musical life, and their widespread presence throughout the country, these organisations have rarely been the subject of systematic analysis.*

The originality of this study, therefore, lies primarily in its contribution to a better understanding of the functioning and activities of these organisations, which, like many others in the entertainment and music industry, currently face significant challenges to their survival, both in terms of audience regeneration and in securing the resources necessary for their operations. The study's originality also lies in its empirical approach, which integrates various analytical dimensions relating to organisational structure, artistic programming, audience characteristics, and the organisation's economic dimension. Specifically, the study combines analysis of data collected through questionnaires with an examination of the organisations' key accounting documents, allowing for an initial assessment of the concert societies' economic sustainability.

A further element of originality concerns the connection with a previous survey of concert societies conducted in 2014: the partial overlap between the two samples will allow, in future developments of this first short paper, a comparative reading of the data and will pave the way for future longitudinal analyses on the evolution of the organisational and economic models of Italian concert societies.

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