Ghent, vibrant Music City

Initial draft for a strategic music policy

IMPORTANT NOTE: *This text is an* ***initial draft*** *for a strategic music policy, which means that* ***nothing has been finalized or decided yet****. This starting document serves as a* ***working draft****, intended to collaboratively arrive at a final proposal.*

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1. Introduction

Music, a fundamental part of urban culture, plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of community, strengthening city identity, and stimulating economic growth. A well-thought-out music strategy contributes to an inclusive, dynamic, and innovative city.

The dynamic music life in Ghent, together with other cultural disciplines and sectors, forms the backbone of its urban identity. In 2009, Ghent became the first Belgian city to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Since then, Ghent has held the title of Creative City of Music, and the interaction between established music institutions and emerging initiatives, between formal and grassroots music education, and between festivals and small music cafés, has only increased. Ghent continues to breathe music and evolve as a music city.

The Ghent music scene is a strong yet simultaneously vulnerable ecosystem, with all its components maintaining and reinforcing one another. Every part of it holds crucial value. For Ghent to continue to have enough oxygen to grow as a music city, it is necessary to regularly reflect on what has been, what is, and what is (still) missing. This involves exploring blind spots, challenges, and opportunities, with the necessary introspection and reflection—while taking into account an ever-changing context and world. This exploration, its findings, and developments within and around the sector have led to this initial draft for a Ghent music strategy.

This initial draft outlines the direction of a city **music strategy for Ghent**, one that

- provides space for both professional musicians and amateur performers,
- embraces cultural diversity,
- offers sustainable infrastructure for music practice and experience,
- ensures participation from all layers of Ghent's public,
- and provides the oxygen needed for a vibrant music ecosystem.[1]

It serves as a framework to realize widely felt potential, giving an extra push to the cultural flywheel that keeps our city in motion.

Actors from the music ecosystem[2], both public and private/commercial sectors—have, over the years, contributed to the thriving music scene reflected in this draft. Within their means, and in cooperation with the city and its capacities, they help shape, direct, and implement the strategy.

[1] The focus group would like to adopt the following definition: A music ecosystem is the interplay of dynamics between various stakeholders such as artists, music education, festivals, concert halls, clubs, music cafés, arts organizations, socio-artistic music initiatives, independent projects, record labels, promoters, managers, recording studios, production service providers, through which music creation and experience are made possible.
The focus group also considers the nightlife sector as part of the music ecosystem.

[2] See footnote 1.

2. Context: Factord & Trends[3]

A number of important findings, factors, and trends form the basis for this strategy:

- the need for greater resilience in the sector during times of crisis[4] (e.g., COVID-19);
- the demand for more available infrastructure and public space (e.g., varied performance venues, informal meeting spaces for musicians, etc.);
- the need[5] for better support for music artists (both professional and non-professional);
- increasing pressure on cultural funding in general[6], and on music as a source of income for artists in particular;
- new challenges in terms of presentation, production, and experimentation;
- new challenges related to digitization and creative processes;
- the need for improved support for the music industry[7];
- pressure on music education;
- pressure on music experience due to strict or unmet conditions (e.g., noise regulations, organizing requirements, night transport, a more selective audience, administrative and financial barriers, the disappearance of performance spaces, etc.);
- the administrative burden;
- the commitment to fair practice and fair pay for everyone involved in the music ecosystem;

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[3] In developing the strategy, findings from various activities, reports, surveys, and discussions were taken into account at the local, regional, supra-local, and international levels:

- through music consultations at the local, supra-local (music cities consultation by VI.BE), and international levels (UNESCO Creative Cities of Music network);
- through various sector mappings and research on music and the arts, such as those conducted by Kunstenpunt (2019). In the fall of 2025, a new music sector mapping will be presented by VI.BE. The findings from that mapping will be incorporated into this strategy as soon as they become available;
- through relevant projects such as Soundroutes by De Koer;
- through the trajectory of the Nightlife sector (2019–2025), which led to the creation of the Nightlife Council. This council will be restructured in 2025.

[4] Through capturing signals from the sector via various surveys by the Ghent Arts Council (Gents Kunstenoverleg), it became clear from the council's inception and during the pandemic how precarious the status of artists is and how fragile the sector remains. Regarding the nightlife sector, Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences conducted a study in 2021 on the impact of Ghent's nightlife. The conclusion: before the COVID-19 outbreak, Ghent's nightlife generated considerable local economic revenue, with the nightlife sector bringing in over 285 million euros in 2019.

[5] Through the research process 'Repeteren in Gent', carried out by VI.BE on behalf of the Ghent Arts Council (Gents Kunstenoverleg) and Democrazy (2021), and through https://cultuur.stad.gent/nl/zalen-ruimte/culturele-infrastructuur

[6] Through the processes related to the bid for "Ghent, European Capital of Culture 2030." During this process, the Cultural Strategy 2040 was approved by the previous city council. Also, through signals and findings from the ongoing exercise to optimize the support policy, conducted by Ghent's Department of Culture..

[7] Through desk research, with thanks to the comparative study by Virgo Sillamaa (Tallinn) and the music strategies of various UNESCO Cities of Music (such as Liverpool, Belfast, etc.), the knowledge wiki page of Kunstenpunt, the publication "Music is the Answer: Inspiration Guide for Local Music Policy" by VI.BE, "A Music Plan for Antwerp", various research by Dr. Mart Willekens (UGENT), participation research by VI.BE, and Shain Shapiro's "This Must Be the Place – How Music Can Make Your City Better."

- market saturation due to (1) an ever-growing pool of professional musicians, and (2) new technologies such as AI, which make music creation highly accessible;
- demographic changes in Ghent.[8] In a super-diverse city like Ghent, alignment of the music sector and the musical ecosystem is necessary with a highly dynamic and rapidly changing (youth) population and their experiences and needs regarding cultural engagement—in this case, musical engagement. The pursuit of a more inclusive music ecosystem remains essential: one that embraces and reflects the super-diversity of our city across all layers and levels of its existence.

With the strategy below, we aim to address, among other things, the following challenges:

- promoting mutual networks and peer-to-peer support within the sector, both artistically, technically, and business-wise;
- the development and professional support of talent and artists;
- increasing opportunities for high-quality creation and presentation;
- striving for a more inclusive music sector;
- special attention to invisible music and hidden music communities;
- increasing music participation and experience, including a focus on audience development (with special attention to niches within the music scene).

With the strategy below, we also want to focus on the following opportunities:

- a holistic approach, a cross-sectoral method, and as much cross-pollination as possible between different city departments (across various policy domains), potentially including the appointment of a music officer and a dedicated music council (music board);
- making learning opportunities and musical learning environments within the music ecosystem visible and broader, to increase general connection with the sector;
- intensifying interaction between Ghent residents and music artists in organizing cultural events and creating performance opportunities;
- further development of music tourism and unlocking its potential economic return;
- supporting new and existing music companies and networks;
- increasing collaboration, knowledge building, and best practices that can serve as examples for the wider sector and other cities/municipalities—by setting up, collecting, and sharing these practices.

[8] Source: City of Ghent (2024), An Environmental Analysis for Ghent 2024.

Every action within this strategy must start from the reality of a **super-diverse city**, where **inclusion is not an option but a necessity**. Nearly half of Ghent's youth have migration roots, a demographic fact that is still insufficiently reflected in the musical landscape and the surrounding structures.

A survey by Burgerplicht and Gents Kunstenoverleg (2020) among more than 400 Ghent residents with migration roots showed that many feel moderately represented within the professional cultural offerings. They experience barriers such as poor accessibility, communication, and recognition. Because music was often mentioned as the first reference to cultural experience, these findings also apply to Ghent's music ecosystem.

The call is clear: **make the music landscape more inclusive and accessible through structural renewal and equitable collaboration**. Whether it concerns Ghent residents with migration roots, people with disabilities, neurodiverse profiles, women, queer individuals, or people living in poverty, the pursuit of equality, accessibility, recognition, connection, and active participation of all Ghent communities must be woven throughout and form the foundation of all objectives in Ghent's music strategy for the future.

3. Strategy Objectives - Summary

This city music strategy aims for a city where music is a central element of cultural, social, and economic life. It is an inclusive strategy that makes room for all musical voices and practices, encourages collaboration, and creates a sustainable and inspiring environment for music practice and music experience.

This **strategy** for an urban music policy

- aims for a city where music is a **central element** of cultural, social, and economic life;
- results in an **inclusive policy** that provides space for all musical voices and practices, **stimulates collaboration**, and creates a **sustainable and inspiring environment** for music practice and experience;
- serves as a **clearly supported framework** for all stakeholders in Ghent's music ecosystem, with a **central role for music artists**, firmly anchored in city policy and the urban fabric;
- formulates **strategic long-term objectives** (beyond legislative terms) that keep Ghent (and the greater region) globally relevant, resilient, healthy, and attractive as a music city.

4. Strategic Objectives

4.1 Ensure the long-term development, growth, and diversity of the musical ecosystem in the city

4.2 Nurture and guarantee the development and growth of music artists

4.3 Achieve the growth, development, and distribution of a sustainable music programming with an international appeal in the city and the greater Ghent region

4.4 Increase the development of diverse musical talent from all communities in the city by fostering greater collaboration between the music and education sectors and better aligning educational offerings with needs

4.5 Build a sustainable and strong network of music infrastructure for development, production, presentation, participation, reflection, and experimentation in the city and the greater Ghent region

4.6 Build knowledge through longitudinal research in collaboration with knowledge institutions that provides direction and substantiation for strategic plans

1. Ensure the long-term development, growth, and diversity of the musical ecosystem in the city

A robust ecosystem contains a wealth of niches where different types of musical practices can emerge, survive, and flourish. Differentiation arises when there is no monoculture, but rather a diversity of forms, styles, contexts, and communities are given space. From a policy perspective, this requires an attitude of ecological curiosity, where diverse genres, contexts, and practices are supported, the interaction between scenes, disciplines, and generations is encouraged, and small initiatives are allowed to grow.

a. Map the musical ecosystem.

b. Assemble a music council that represents the breadth, layers, and expertise of the sector as well as possible. This council will help develop the strategy and action plan, oversee its implementation, and act as an ambassador for the city locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

c. Create a local information desk, both virtual and physical, that broadly informs the sector content-wise and helps with networking, acquiring information and contacts, providing useful resources, etc. (taking into account the need to reach the wider Ghent region). Do this in coordination with existing support and information points. Communicate clearly about all existing support available for the Ghent music sector.

d. Strengthen collaboration between various government agencies and support points (local and regional) to promote and support the sector as a priority for the city (in terms of economy, urban development, education, etc.).

e. Create focus on music creation and presentation within urban renewal projects and urban infrastructure policy.

f. Stimulate employment within the musical ecosystem.

g. Set up live data exercises (both qualitative and quantitative) with the goal of ongoing annual data collection to monitor progress and observe changes and trends within the sector, city, and region.

h. Encourage a participatory approach where residents are involved in planning music activities and strengthening music initiatives in their neighborhoods.

i. Develop a policy that reduces the ecological impact of music production and events.

j. Promote a gender-equal and inclusive music climate and encourage the representation of the superdiverse city population in all layers of the musical ecosystem—not only on stages, festivals, and music programs but also in workplaces and decision-making spaces. Invest in role models.

k. Create conditions to make the music sector resilient to disruptive global or regional crises.

l. ...

2. Nurture and guarantee the development and growth of music artists

The artist forms the core of the musical ecosystem, where diversity among artists is crucial: different styles, perspectives, life stories, and practices are the drivers of cultural innovation. Therefore, music policy should focus on protecting and stimulating this diversity rather than on output or success. An encouraging music policy provides space for both established and emerging artists, regardless of style or reach, and sees raw ground as fertile soil: even non-market-oriented practices are potential sources of innovation. Such a music policy regards time as a growth tool: slow development is not failure, but leads to depth.

a. Create an overview of existing workshops and initiatives, identify blind spots, and ensure sufficient collaboration, coordination, and connections with and to music workshops and creative incubators.

b. Provide ample learning opportunities for the continuous development of music artists, offer space for peer-to-peer learning and mentorship, and stimulate residency programs.

c. Create sufficient accessible presentation opportunities aimed at a diverse programming.

d. Ensure an environment where the principles of fair practice and fair pay apply, so that music artists can build sustainable careers.

e. ...

3. Achieve the growth, development, and distribution of a sustainable music programming with an international appeal in the city and the greater Ghent region

International appeal is a positive byproduct of a strong local system, not a goal in itself. What grows authentically from intrinsic quality and collaboration is more sustainable than promotion-driven branding. Export policy should therefore be rooted in a healthy foundation. What is well embedded locally deserves to be exported through international exchange in an equal partnership.

a. Promote Ghent as a music city among its residents.

b. Develop a strategy with the tourism sector in Ghent to put Ghent as a music city on the world map, where music tourists can 1/ stay engaged before and after their visit to Ghent, and 2/ be continuously informed about the city's offerings via screens and print materials in hotels and other key locations.

c. Develop a musical tourism concept that focuses not only on local music history but also on contemporary music experiences and trends (heritage, alternative tours, grassroots tours).

d. Support musical city events with international appeal and host international music events as a city.

e. Establish a clear vision, policy, and plan for the use of the UNESCO status Ghent, Creative City of Music, and stimulate international cooperation.

f. ...

4. Increase the development of diverse musical talent from all communities in the city by fostering greater collaboration between the music and education sectors and better aligning educational offerings with needs

Talent development is a cumulative process, supported by the transfer of skills, access to culture, and social recognition. By connecting formal education, informal learning spaces, and practice communities, the foundation is broadened on which musical excellence and skills can grow. Every young person should have access to musical experiences, regardless of background, to start their musical journey. Educational institutions and music practices form shared learning environments with room and attention for peer learning.

a. Lobby and advocate for the protection of music education and access to music for children and young people within the formal school curriculum as well as within informal and non-formal learning environments.

b. Develop a map where every citizen can find the starting point for their musical journey, with attention to music from different cultural traditions and languages, and space for multicultural expression.

c. Invest in the musical development and participation of individuals and communities, with attention to people in vulnerable or socially disadvantaged positions.

d. Develop a plan to better and more coordinately utilize existing and often underused resources in schools and other community spaces (equipment, studios, etc.) throughout the city.

e. Focus on employment opportunities for music artists upon graduation.

f. ...

5. Build a sustainable and strong network of music infrastructure for development, production, presentation, participation, reflection, and experimentation in the city and the greater Ghent region

Physical infrastructure is the habitat of musical life. Every ecosystem requires places where new ideas can take root, fail, and evolve. Spatial distribution, accessibility, and multifunctionality are crucial in this. Venues become growth hubs, and infrastructure evolves flexibly within a non-hierarchical network where small, medium, and large spaces reinforce each other.

a. Create an open-source information hub for the sector to share resources, guidance, information, availability, etc.

b. Create new venues (temporary or permanent). Focus on incentives through subsidies or tax benefits for organizers and cultural institutions.

c. Create attention for music creation and presentation in urban renewal projects and the city's infrastructure policy.

d. Collaborate with various city departments and authorities to ensure proper support in organizing music activities and festivals, both indoors and in public spaces.

e. Work together with the Nightlife Council to ensure a safe music experience.

f. Encourage financial and other support models that enable small-scale venues to optimize or own their buildings, rather than renting and risking landlords changing the building's purpose.

g. Promote dialogue and financial and other support for music venues to ensure optimal sound policies.

h. ...

6. Build knowledge through longitudinal research in collaboration with knowledge institutions that provides direction and substantiation for strategic plans

Ecosystems evolve slowly. Therefore, policy must be based on long-term observation and open data sharing. Research enables the recognition of patterns, the detection of early signals, and adaptive adjustments. Insights gained from quantitative and qualitative data are shared with the sector and community. Research and knowledge sharing lead to policy feedback loops and contribute to maintaining a dynamic flow in the evolution of the musical ecosystem.

a. Create a (supra)local open-source information hub for the sector to share resources, guidance, information, knowledge, etc.

b. Develop a digital map (mapping) of all players in the music scene as a specific part of Open Creatives.

c. Set up live data exercises (both qualitative and quantitative) with the aim of recording annual, continuous data collection to monitor progress and observe changes and trends within the sector, the city, region, and internationally.

d. ...

5. Preliminary Conclusion

This proposal for the Gent Music Strategy emphasizes the importance of music as a core element of urban culture, contributing to community spirit, city identity, and economic growth. Gent, as a UNESCO Creative City of Music, has a rich and diverse musical ecosystem that supports both professional musicians and amateur artists.

The strategy focuses on strengthening the sector's resilience, improving infrastructure and public spaces, and promoting inclusion and diversity. It also addresses challenges such as funding, digitalization, and fair practice. Through collaboration among various stakeholders and policy domains, Gent aims for a sustainable and inspiring music environment. This strategy calls for a holistic approach and transversal working, with a focus on talent development, music education, and international visibility. Ultimately, the strategy envisions a city where music is a central element of cultural, social, and economic life, with space for all musical voices and practices.

NB: This note was created within the **music focus group**, formed on the initiative of the **City of Gent**. The purpose of this working document is to provide a starting point for an inclusive music policy for Gent, which can be further circulated within the sector for input and discussion. The following actors participated in the initial brainstorming session:

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- Yannick Peeters.
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