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Enhancing Sustainability in Italian Opera houses

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the sustainability in performing arts, in particular in the context of Italian Opera houses, considering the way they are facing financial viability and how they can enhance social inclusion initiatives and increase public awareness to broaden the audience base. These dimensions of sustainability enable Italian Opera houses to fulfill their objectives and missions, including maintaining high productivity levels without compromising the quality of their artistic outputs or diminishing their engagement with local communities.

Methodology: The research adopts a mixed methods approach: literature review, desk analysis and quantitative analysis. Data will be collected through desk analysis and a field analysis, conducted through a survey.

Findings: The results indicate that the economic sustainability of Italian Opera houses has not been effectively attained, and that audiences cannot be expanded through the promotion of social inclusion and environmental sustainability. The study reveals several barriers that render Italian Opera houses less inclusive. For instance, current audiences perceive ticket prices and the locations in major Italian cities as significant obstacles to attending opera performances.

Limitations of the research: The research is limited by its specific focus on Italian Opera houses, which may not be directly applicable to other cultural sectors or regions.

Originality/value of the research: This study offers a perspective on sustainability, both in terms of the economic and financial viability of Italian Opera houses and in terms of the public's willingness to support Italian Opera houses that implement sustainable initiatives. It provides valuable insights

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for policy makers, cultural managers and opera and symphony foundations seeking to improve sustainability, inclusivity and audience engagement.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is an increasingly vital concept in today's world, impacting every sector from manufacturing to the arts. In the cultural sphere sustainability encompasses more than just environmental considerations. It integrates economic stability, social inclusivity, and cultural preservation, ensuring that these institutions can thrive and continue to enrich society for generations to come (Kovaitè, et al., 2022).

The topic is becoming extremely important and contemporary also in Italy where cultural institutions are embracing the approach of sustainability with a view to the United Nations Agenda 2030, that points out three main pillars: reconnect with nature; rediscover a sense of community, inclusion and belonging; support long-term economic growth without negatively impacting social, environmental, and cultural aspects of the community (Esposito, Fisichella, 2023).

In this context, Opera houses, also face unique challenges in achieving sustainability. They must balance the preservation of artistic traditions with the demands of modern audiences, all while navigating environmental responsibilities and financial constraints. Economic sustainability is a crucial component that serves as the foundation for the long-term viability of cultural organizations, predicated on their capacity to sustain economic and financial stability over extended periods. The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of resilience and adaptability in the cultural sector and has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and hybrid viewing experiences, enabling Opera houses, like many other cultural institutions to rethink their operations and find new ways to reach their audience and connect with a global one. Moreover, the shift towards sustainability is driven by a combination of regulatory pressures, audience expectations, and a growing ethical imperative within the arts community.

Sustainability in Opera houses is not just about reducing negative impacts; it also involves positively contributing to environmental awareness and advocacy. By integrating themes of sustainability into their programming and community engagement efforts, Opera houses could educate and inspire their audiences, fostering a deeper appreciation for both the arts and the environment.

Considering the above, two questions arise: 1. How can Italian Opera houses achieve financial sustainability? 2. How important are sustainability topics to audiences? 2.a To what extent do they benefit from the sustainability practices taken by Opera houses?

To answer these questions, this study conducts a literature review of sustainability in the cultural sector and a documentary analysis of the sustainability practices of Italian Opera houses. It also

investigates the perspectives of current and potential audiences regarding Opera houses and sustainability. Quantitative research aims to understand the public's views on sustainability practices and identify any perceived critical issues and gaps to offer suggestions to opera house management to address them.

The results have practical implications for Italian Opera houses if they really want to connect with their audiences on sustainability issues— this could also have implications beyond national border.

2. Understanding Sustainability in Performing Arts: Italian Opera houses

The concept of sustainability is complex, sometimes even ambiguous, and over time, distinct meanings have emerged with different contents but the same function: preservation.

To understand how sustainability and performing arts –especially theaters and Opera houses– are intertwined, it is useful to reiterate that Opera houses must reconcile the preservation of artistic traditions with the demands of the modern era, taking into consideration different dimensions of ecological, economic and social and cultural sustainability, to reduce ecological impact, improve financial viability, diversify organizational structures, and foster social inclusion (Pulido et al. , 2022). Considering *ecological sustainability* (Schmidt, 2021) this is crucial for reducing the environmental impact of opera productions. According to Roca et al. (2021), main drivers and limitations to improving the environmental performance of scenography include the use of sustainable materials and energy-efficient technologies. Opera houses can adopt practices such as recycling sets and costumes, using LED lighting, and minimizing waste. The Sydney Opera House, for example, has implemented a sustainable vision for the arts, focusing on reducing carbon emissions and promoting green practices (Silva, 2023).

Beer and Hes (2017) explore eco-creativity within conventional theatre production, highlighting the importance of integrating environmental considerations into artistic processes (Garrett, 2018). By adopting eco-friendly practices, Opera houses can not only reduce their ecological footprint but also appeal to environmentally conscious audiences. Such initiatives align with broader environmental goals, including the European Green Deal aim for a climate-neutral continent by 2050.

Economic sustainability constitutes a fundamental aspect for all entities within the cultural and creative sectors. Traditionally, economic sustainability serves as the pillar that underpins the long-term viability of cultural organizations, rooted in their capacity to maintain economic and financial equilibrium over extended periods. It is this dimension of sustainability that enables cultural enterprises to fulfill their objectives and missions, including maintaining high productivity levels without compromising the quality of their artistic outputs or diminishing their engagement with local communities.

This scenario underscores the necessity for collaborative endeavors with various stakeholders, including different types of organizations, to pool resources, explore innovative planning methodologies, disseminate culture through new channels, and engage broader audiences within the target regions (Besana & Esposito, 2019). Such collaborative efforts are essential for enhancing the economic sustainability of cultural enterprises, ensuring their continued relevance and impact in their respective territories (Fanelli et al., 2020).

This consideration is particularly salient in the post-pandemic era, where the entire cultural supply chain, and notably the performing arts sector -which is a fragmented sector-, is grappling with challenges to both cultural and economic sustainability. These challenges are exacerbated by financial constraints within the public sector and intensifying competition from other cultural and leisure institutions. While it is true that Italian Opera houses receive public funding- (Italian Fund for the Performing Arts, called FUS, and can rely on self-generated revenue from ticket sales, it is imperative to highlight that their survival and growth are contingent upon the quality of their planning, the intersectoral networks they can establish, and their capacity for co-design and leveraging digital platforms (Mich & Peretta, 2017).

Social sustainability within the opera community involves fostering inclusivity and accessibility. Engaging young audiences through innovative artistic programs is essential for the long-term viability of Opera houses (Cuenca, 2017). Programs targeting underrepresented youth groups and marginalized communities can enhance public awareness and foster a sense of belonging.

Killick (2020) also underscores the role of the arts in promoting intergenerational relations through community theatre. Opera houses can create inclusive spaces that encourage dialogue and cultural exchange among diverse audience groups. By collaborating with educational institutions and community organizations, Opera houses can develop outreach programs that promote inclusivity and cultural education.

In contributing to social sustainability, Opera houses, alongside theatres, foster inclusivity and accessibility, serving as platforms for cultural dialogue and community building. Social inclusion initiatives can broaden the audience base, particularly among underrepresented youth groups, and increase public awareness.

Additionally, social sustainability pertains to the relationships between Opera houses, territories, and society and is closely intertwined with cultural sustainability. Opera houses disseminate values and knowledge, contribute to developing human capacities oriented towards relationships, create inclusive contexts that facilitate dialogue and the exchange of new ideas, and enhance the potential for innovation. They provide well-being for individuals in terms of identity values, inclusion, cohesion, and emotional and cognitive growth (Edelman et al., 2016).

This concept of cultural sustainability involves initiating a virtuous cycle for creating values, attitudes, and behaviors within audiences. It is a form of cultural and regenerative sustainability that reveals the profound sense of an art form capable of contributing to the spread of a new regenerative human culture (Esposito, 2020).

Social sustainability involves fostering inclusivity and accessibility within the opera community. According to Cuenca (2017), engaging young audiences through innovative artistic programs is vital for the sustainability of Opera houses. Programs that involve underrepresented youth groups and marginalized communities can increase public awareness and foster a sense of belonging.

Moreover, Killick (2020) highlights the role of arts in promoting intergenerational relations through community theatre. According to that standpoint, Opera houses can create inclusive spaces that encourage dialogue and cultural exchange among diverse audience groups. By partnering with educational institutions and community organizations, Opera houses can develop outreach programs that promote inclusivity and cultural education (Giovanni et al., 2022).

Opera houses should contribute to social sustainability also by fostering inclusivity and accessibility which are crucial. In fact, ensuring accessibility not only aligns with social sustainability goals but also enriches the cultural landscape, fostering a more inclusive and vibrant opera community. By adopting inclusive practices, implementing assistive technologies, and engaging with diverse communities, Opera houses can become more accessible and welcoming to all individuals.

Furthermore, social sustainability concerns the relationships between Opera houses, territories, and society, and it is closely linked to cultural sustainability. Opera houses disseminate values and knowledge, contribute to the development of human capacities oriented towards relationships, create inclusive contexts that facilitate dialogue and the exchange of new ideas, and increase the potential for innovation. They provide well-being for individuals in terms of identity values, inclusion, cohesion, and emotional and cognitive growth (Edelman et al., 2016).

This is precisely what *cultural sustainability* entails: initiating a virtuous cycle for the creation of values, attitudes, and behaviors within audiences. It is a cultural and regenerative sustainability that brings forth the profound sense of an art form that can contribute to the spread of a new regenerative human culture, preserving and promoting diverse cultural expressions.

The different features of sustainability can perfectly coexist as different aspects of the same concept. It is possible, for instance, to simultaneously support social values and safeguard economic benefits; offer high artistic quality while managing economic constraints, minimize costs and support the ecosystem; maintain institutions and traditions and promote the safeguarding of cultural heritage. All elements interact to enhance not only current potential but also future potential. This leads us to affirm that sustainability is a dynamic concept that require also the adoption of innovative artistic production

models that balance tradition and modernity, can attract a broader audience and enhance cultural impact (Esposito & Fisichella, 2023).

Enhancing sustainability in Italian Opera houses requires a multifaceted approach that includes artistic innovations, inclusive engagement, and strategic management. By adopting sustainable practices and embracing new technologies, Opera houses can ensure their longevity and relevance in a rapidly changing world. Integrating eco-creativity, promoting educational initiatives, and leveraging digital technologies are essential steps towards achieving sustainability in the opera sector. These efforts will not only reduce the environmental impact but also enrich the cultural landscape, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable future for the arts.

3. The Eco-System of Italian Opera houses

The Italian Opera houses are cultural institutions of significant national interest considered to be the primary assets of Italy's operatic tradition

The regulatory framework is provided by Law No. 800/1967 (commonly known as the Corona Law) and Law No. 310/2003, which established the fourteen Italian Opera houses of significant national interest: Teatro Comunale di Bologna, Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Teatro Carlo Felice di Genova, Teatro Alla Scala di Milano, Teatro San Carlo di Napoli, Teatro Massimo di Palermo, Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Teatro Regio di Torino, Teatro Lirico Verdi di Trieste, Teatro La Fenice di Venezia, Arena di Verona, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia di Roma, Teatro Lirico di Cagliari, and Teatro Petruzzelli di Bari.

These fourteen Italian Opera houses exhibit considerable variations in performance, particularly regarding productivity and self-financing capacity, yet their offerings lack clear differentiation. Few Opera houses possess a distinct market positioning, and even when they do, they often fail to effectively communicate it to the market (Baggioni, 2000). Frequently, their market positioning is inherited, relying heavily on the theatre's historical image (Baggioni, 2000). Despite primarily operating in regional markets, these foundations hold high reputation and prestige, extending their potential market both nationally and internationally (Cori, 2004).

Similar to other performing arts entities, the Italian Opera houses possess a dual nature: on one hand, they operate within the market and adhere to the structural rules of business economics, resembling medium-large companies in terms of activity volume and staff size (Cori, 2004). On the other hand, they manage a "product" that serves social and cultural purposes, challenging to categorize with a clear exchange value and fulfilling institutional functions (Morelli & Fisichella, 2015).

Given their primary locations in Italy's major cities and the inherent uniqueness of opera as a non-replicable product, there has been an ideal territorial market division, allowing each theatre to operate

as a regional monopolist (Guerzoni, 1998). Only recently the notion of competition in this market has emerged (Morelli & Fisichella, 2015). As a consequence of this, communication in Italian Opera houses involved merely distributing the program historically (Trimarchi, 2002). But today, they must develop comprehensive communication strategies, identify stakeholders, and manage their brands. Furthermore, enhancing their effectiveness and efficiency is crucial to increasing product differentiation and augmenting the value consumers associate with their brands (Baggioni, 2000). This shift towards professional management practices has been termed the "managerialization wind" (Sicca & Zan, 2004).

4. Research Methodology

To address the research questions, a two-phase approach was employed. Initially, desk research was conducted to understand how Italian Opera houses are addressing sustainability through their economic data and reporting. Subsequently, to gain a better understanding of the audience's perspective on the sustainability efforts of the Italian Opera houses, a field study was conducted using a survey. The following sections describe the data collection and sampling, measures, and data analysis of this second phase.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data were gathered via a web survey distributed through email, student communities, and social networks (primarily WhatsApp) in June 2024. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling technique, leveraging the relationship networks of the researchers and their referral contacts (Patton, 2002). While this non-probabilistic method does not ensure the representativeness of the entire population, it is useful for large and unknown populations, allowing for the identification of homogeneous population members according to the researchers' criteria (Etikan et al., 2015). The final sample comprised 294 participants. The questionnaire was administered in Italian to ensure clear understanding of the questions and the research context by the respondents.

Measures

The questionnaire included the following measures:

1. *Perceptions of Sustainable Behaviors*: Participants were asked a single direct question (yes/no) regarding their perception of the sustainable behaviors of Italian Opera houses and their communication about these efforts.

2. *Importance of Sustainability Dimensions*: The relevance of two dimensions of sustainability (environmental sustainability, and equity and inclusion) was measured by asking participants to rate the importance of these dimensions for Opera houses.
3. *Support for Cultural Foundations*: Participants were asked how likely they were to support a cultural foundation that actively promotes sustainable practices. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).
4. *Socio-demographic Variables*: Additional information was collected on gender, age, geographical area, and cultural behaviors as opera house audiences (e.g., frequency, motivation, barriers) and as users of digital content.

Data Analysis

Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for all variables. The statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29.

5. Results

This section presents the main findings of the study.

Economic Sustainability and Reporting

In Italy, the primary financial support for the performing arts comes from the FUS, established by Law No. 163/1985. The percentage of FUS allocated to Italian Opera houses is determined annually by the Minister of Culture. Since 2017, more than 50% of the total FUS funding has been allocated to these foundations (Corte dei Conti, 2023).

In terms of value, contributions increased from over €190 million in 2010 to almost €183 million in 2020. In 2020, Teatro alla Scala in Milan received more than 16% of the FUS, followed by Teatro dell'Opera in Rome (9.9%) and Teatro la Fenice in Venice (8.6%). Other foundations received between 5% and 8% of the FUS.

Are Italian Opera houses economically sustainable in an autonomous basis? How much do the FUS and other grants affect their production value? The economic performance results indicate that contributions and grants constitute the largest part of the value production (Corte dei Conti, 2023). For instance, in 2019, contributions and grants amounted to €350 million, revenue from sales and services to €150 million, and other revenues to less than €50 million. Additionally, in 2020, state contributions accounted for 57% of the total, private resources for 14.6%, and local authorities for 28.4% (Corte dei Conti, 2023).

Audience Behaviors

The respondents were predominantly women (71%), aged between 18-24 (32%), with a high school diploma (38%), and residing in urban areas (63%). Most participants attended opera and symphonic performances rarely, about once a year or less (38%), and never engaged with the digital content of Opera houses (74%). Table 1 reports the key characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample key characteristics and cultural behaviours

Characteristics	%
Gender	
Female	71
Male	29
Age	
18-24	32
25-34	11
35-4	8
45-54	11
55-64	27
from 65	11
Area	
Rural	18
Suburban	19
Urban	63
Education	
High school diploma	38
Bachelor's degree	33
Master	21
Doctorate	8
Participation to opera and symphonic performance	
Never	33
Rarely (once a year or less)	38
Occasionally (2-3 times a year)	19
Frequently (4-6 times a year)	4
Regularly (more than 6 times a year)	6

Fruition of Opera houses digital contents	
No	74
Yes	26

Primary Data. N=292

Motivation not to attend/barriers

The study also assessed audience motivation not to attend (for those who are not yet part of the audience but may become so in the future) or to attend less than they would do (for attending audience) opera and symphonic performances. As showed in Table 2, the main motivation of the no spectators is the lack of interest (72%) while for actual audience' barriers to be more attending are: distance to location (41%), ticket price (39%) and lack of time (32%).

Table 2. Motivation not to attend/barriers (%). More option available.

Motivation not to attend/barriers	non-audience (n. 96)	audience (n. 196)
Ticket price	20	39
Location	16	41
Lack of interest	72	10
Lack of information	5	25
Lack of accessibility	2	4
Lack of time	15	32
Time conflict	Na	12
No barriers	Na	9

Primary Data.

Opera houses sustainability perceptions

The final section of the questionnaire aimed to gather the sample's perceptions of social and environmental sustainability in Italian Opera houses and their willingness to support them.

However, to what extent is sustainability relevant to them, and how does it influence their decision to support sustainable Opera houses? Table 3 presents the results for these items.

On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), respondents generally perceive that Italian Opera houses are not particularly inclusive (M=3.11; SD=0.97). Moreover, the enhancement of sustainability initiatives by Opera houses does not seem to be a significant factor in their decision to

support them ($M=3.55$; $SD=1.11$), with a slightly more positive inclination towards environmental sustainability initiatives ($M=3.68$; $SD=1.15$).

Table 3. Opera houses desiderate sustainability

Variables	M	SD
Relevance to environmental sustainability initiatives when choosing to support Opera houses	3.68	1.15
Willingness to sustain Opera houses that enhance sustainability initiatives	3.55	1.11
Perception of Opera houses as inclusive	3.11	0.97

Primary Data. $N=292$

5. Discussion

Opera houses encounter unique challenges in the pursuit of sustainability. They must harmonize the preservation of artistic traditions with contemporary audience expectations, financial constraints, and environmental responsibilities.

This study examined a comprehensive literature review on sustainability in the cultural environment, an analysis of the sustainability practices of Italian Opera houses, and a quantitative survey, this research aimed to elucidate public perceptions and highlight critical issues and gaps.

The results reveal that while sustainability considerations moderately influence respondents' decision-making processes, they are not the predominant factor. The relatively neutral perception of inclusivity suggests that Italian Opera houses need to address this aspect more robustly to align with audience expectations and enhance their support base. The variability in responses, particularly regarding ticket price and location, indicates the necessity for targeted strategies to cater to different audience segments.

The economic sustainability of Italian Opera houses is influenced by several interconnected factors, including the elitist nature of classical music demand, the time-intensive nature of cultural consumption, the rivalry of time resources, and the geographic accessibility of cultural institutions. Appreciating classical music requires substantial knowledge and cultural capital, cultivated over a long period, which limits the immediate broadening of its audience base, making it appeal primarily to a niche group (Scandizzo, 2000; Fuortes, 2001). High-culture goods like opera and symphony performances demand significant time investment, posing a high opportunity cost compared to more accessible leisure activities, thus making it challenging for these performances to compete for consumers' limited leisure time. The competitive nature of time usage necessitates that cultural

institutions offer compelling and accessible alternatives, such as flexible scheduling and enhanced experiences, to attract audiences. And the data collected from the non-audience segment of the sample confirm this.

Italian Opera houses exemplify multifaceted approaches to achieving sustainability and cultural impact. Considering the economic viability, these historic institutions benefit from a mix of State support, private funding and sponsorships, tourism revenue, and community engagement to maintain their high standards and extensive programming. By offering diverse programming and forging international collaborations, Italian Opera houses preserve and promote Italy's rich operatic heritage, significantly contributing to the cultural and economic vitality of their cities and regions. Geographic proximity also plays a crucial role to attendance, with easily accessible and networked cultural institutions being more appealing to local and tourist audiences (Jansen-Verbeke, 1986). Also for the sample, distance to location is a barrier to increase attendance.

In order to achieve social and cultural sustainability, Italian Opera houses run educational programs and outreach initiatives, trying to foster new generations of opera enthusiasts for ensuring long-term audience development. Furthermore, flexible ticket pricing, and diverse scheduling to attract a wider audience. Recovery plans often include strategies to enhance accessibility and audience engagement, such as diverse performance locations, digital platforms to live-stream performances for reaching global audiences and enhancing its financial sustainability for wider reach, and partnerships with educational institutions to foster early appreciation of classical music, create inclusive cultural experiences, ensuring long-term sustainability and relevance of these cultural institutions. But the data indicates that only nearly the 20% of the sample are users of the digital contents of the Italian Opera houses.

Moreover, the data indicates that sustainability, both social and environmental, has a moderate impact on the respondents' decision-making process. While not the most critical factor, it is not entirely disregarded either. The relatively neutral perception of inclusivity suggests that Italian Opera houses might need to address inclusivity more robustly to meet audience expectations and enhance their support base: the results suggest that while some audiences might prioritize these aspects highly, others do not consider them as significant. This diversity implies a potential for targeted engagement strategies that cater to different audience segments.

The scenario described above implies financial criticalities in the sector, to address which, since 2013, the Italian state has required struggling Italian Opera houses to submit a recovery plan. Among the state's demands are the reduction of technical and administrative staff and the rationalization of artistic personnel.

6. Conclusions and Future Directions and Recommendations

Advancing sustainability within Italian Opera houses necessitates a multifaceted strategy encompassing artistic innovation, inclusive engagement, and strategic management. By adopting sustainable practices and embracing technological advancements, Opera houses can ensure their longevity and relevance in a rapidly evolving global context. Integrating eco-creativity, promoting educational initiatives, and leveraging digital platforms are pivotal steps towards achieving sustainability in the opera sector. These initiatives will not only reduce environmental impacts but also enrich the cultural landscape, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable future for the arts.

This research underscores the imperative for Italian Opera houses to integrate sustainability deeply into their operational and strategic frameworks.

Future studies could further explore environmental sustainability, other aspects of audience segmentation and the specific impacts of various sustainability initiatives on audience engagement and financial performance. By continuing to adapt and innovate, these cultural institutions can remain resilient and relevant, contributing significantly to the broader goals of social sustainability. Embracing sustainability in all its forms will not only ensure the survival of Italian Opera houses but also enable them to thrive, continuing to enrich society with diverse cultural expressions and fostering a more inclusive and resilient community.

To attract and retain a broader audience, Italian Opera houses might benefit from enhancing their inclusivity and visibly promoting their sustainability efforts. Moreover, they might tailor marketing and operational strategies to different audience groups. Given the moderate but positive inclination towards environmental sustainability, these initiatives could be more prominently featured in their branding and communication strategies. For instance, targeted campaigns highlighting sustainability initiatives might resonate well with environmentally conscious patrons, whereas inclusivity efforts might attract those valuing social sustainability. The path forward is challenging, but with strategic planning and concerted efforts, the cultural sector can emerge stronger and more sustainable than ever before.

By prioritizing sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation, Italian Opera houses can set a global example for cultural institutions worldwide and ensure their longevity and relevance in a rapidly evolving global context.

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