

# London and UNESCO's “Global Symphony”

What it means to be a City of Culture

# London and UNESCO’s “Global Symphony”: What it means to be a City of Culture

London’s music community has hit a high note on the world stage. In late 2021, London (Ontario) earned the prestigious designation of UNESCO City of Music, becoming the first Canadian city to receive that. This title isn’t just a fancy label, it’s a recognition of London’s rich musical heritage and a ticket to a global network of creative cities. “This designation reaffirms that London is an international hub for music and culture. We are home to incredibly talented artists, songwriters, producers, sound engineers, venue and festival operators and world-renowned music education programs,” said then London Mayor Ed Holder. In other words, the world now sees what Londoners have long known: music is at the heart of the city’s identity and economy. In fact, London’s live music sector supports nearly a thousand jobs and hosts thousands of concerts each year, contributing about \$600 million to the local economy. Becoming a City of Music is a moment of pride, but it’s also a springboard for potential and connectedness in challenging times.



## The UNESCO Creative Cities Network: A Global Family of Culture

What does it actually mean to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network? Essentially, London is now part of a worldwide family of cities that put creativity first. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) was launched in 2004 to promote cooperation among cities that see culture and creativity as drivers of sustainable urban development. Today, the network spans over 300 member cities across around 90 countries (as of 2025). These cities aren’t all about music; they



specialize in various creative fields like literature, film, crafts and folk art, design, gastronomy, media arts, and of course, music. London now stands alongside global capitals of culture from every continent, all sharing the UNESCO vision that creativity can shape a better future.

Being part of this network is a prestigious honor. It signals that London's cultural scene meets UNESCO's high standards and that the city is committed to nurturing it further.

**Members of the Creative Cities Network share a belief that culture “*provides meaning, and a sense of identity and continuity*” in society, not just economic value, as former UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura put it.**

For London, joining this group puts its music on a global platform and opens the door to international collaboration. Glasgow's experience is a great example: Glasgow was one of the earliest Cities of Music (designated in 2008) and has found that the network “places [its] music on a global stage and at the heart of international music discussion, advocacy and promotion”. Now London, too, can lean in on this designation to benefit from that global spotlight.

### What Does Being a “City of Music” Mean in Practice?

Wearing the UNESCO “City of Music” badge comes with both opportunities and responsibilities. First, it's a recognition that London has a vibrant, diverse music ecosystem that spans from education to production to live performance. But it's not just an award to hang on the wall; it's a commitment to keep investing in music as a tool for urban development and cultural vitality. By accepting the designation, London has agreed to UNESCO's expectations for Creative Cities.

Member cities commit to *share best practices, develop partnerships that promote creativity and cultural industries, strengthen participation in cultural life, and integrate culture into urban development plans*. In short, London is expected to be an active player: collaborating with other cities, fostering innovation in its cultural policies, and contributing to global agendas like the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

This means London will be regularly participating in the Creative Cities Network activities such as annual conferences, workshops, and joint projects as well as the exchange of ideas and learning from peers around the world. There are now dozens of UNESCO Cities of Music (59 of them as of 2023), and each brings unique experiences. London can both teach and learn: for example, Glasgow's designation led it to encourage more collaborations between local music organizations and those in fellow Creative Cities, and Kansas City's City of Music status came with a detailed four-year strategy to leverage its jazz heritage for community development. As part of the network,



London will be expected to report on its progress and initiatives, ensuring that the title leads to action on the ground, not just bragging rights.

## Opportunities and Benefits: From Local Stages to Global Spotlight

What's in it for London to be a UNESCO City of Music? In a word: opportunity. The designation can amplify and support the city's music sector in several exciting ways:

- **Global Visibility:** The UNESCO label instantly raises London's profile on the international stage. It tells the world that London isn't just *any* city, it's a culturally vibrant place worth watching (and visiting). This kind of global visibility can boost tourism and attract international events.

**As London's Music Industry Development Officer Cory Crossman noted, becoming a UNESCO City of Music “*elevates London's brand nationally and internationally*”**

and provides greater outreach through UNESCO's network of creative. In practical terms, London may now find it easier to draw global audiences and media attention for its festivals, concerts, and artists. For example, UNESCO recognition helped put Liverpool's music scene on the map for travelers, confirming the city's legendary status from The Beatles era to today. Liverpool's UNESCO City of Music title (achieved in 2015) reinforced that music is “an important driver of its local economy, generating more than £70 million in annual turnover. This attracts both tourists and investors.



- **Cultural Exchange and Partnerships:** Membership in the Creative Cities Network is a two-way street. London can share its own best practices and homegrown talent with the world, and in return, tap into a vast pool of ideas from other cities. The network encourages cities to team up on projects and events. Hannover, Germany, for instance, prides itself on being “a team player” in the network, “working together with Creative Cities all over the world, exchanging ideas and sharing knowledge, inspiring and being inspired”. What could this mean for London? As part of this creative family, London can now more easily partner with cities worldwide, whether to co-produce an event, share music education programs, or jointly promote issues like music’s role in social inclusion.
- **Innovation and Learning:** Being a City of Music gives London access to a knowledge-sharing network. Challenges that one city faces; another may have solved in a creative way. Whether it’s strategies for supporting musicians’ livelihoods, boosting music tourism, or using music education in schools, London can learn from others’ successes (and mistakes) and adapt those ideas locally. This cross-pollination of ideas can spark new initiatives in London. For example, seeing how Bogotá built a strong network of free public festivals and music education programs might inspire London to expand its community concerts or youth music training. UNESCO’s network is essentially an R&D hub for cultural policy, where London now has a seat at the table.
- **Attracting Investment and Funding:** Culture can be a powerful economic engine, and the UNESCO designation can help rev it up. With the world’s eyes on London’s music scene, there may be more interest from sponsors, businesses, and government agencies to invest in cultural infrastructure and events. The title adds credibility when applying for grants or pitching new projects and it shows that London meets international standards in the arts. Other Cities of Music have seen tangible boosts: Bogotá, after being named City of Music, gained recognition as a “*major center of musical creation and activity in Latin America*” which has helped it attract international festivals and music businesses. Kansas City secured about \$2 million per year in local funding for neighborhood cultural events and festivals, in line with its creative city strategy.

**While UNESCO itself doesn’t write a check, the designation often galvanizes local and regional leaders to back the arts more strongly. It can also encourage private investment.**

For example, venues, studios, and tourism all stand to gain from the raised profile. In tough economic times, this can diversify a city’s economy.





- **Supporting Local Artists and Institutions:** Perhaps the most important benefit is how this designation can energize London's own music community. It shines a spotlight on local artists, from big-name acts to emerging talents, and validates the work of music educators, studios, and venues. With new partnerships and projects, artists might get opportunities to perform abroad or collaborate with international peers. At home, the City of Music status can be a rallying point that builds pride and encourages audiences to engage more with local music. Cities of Music often launch new programs to ensure the title has local impact.

For instance, Glasgow created initiatives to increase access to music for all citizens and supports a community choir as part of its inclusive approach. In London, this could mean more community concerts, music workshops in neighborhoods, or artist residencies that involve the public. The UNESCO branding can also help local institutions (like orchestras, festivals, or music halls) in their outreach and fundraising. The City of Music honour reinforces that identity and can translate into continued support for those who make the music happen.

## Harmony in Hard Times: Culture as a Source of Resilience



Importantly, London's new status comes at a time when the city (like many others) has faced economic headwinds. Global challenges such as trade tariffs and international instability can hit local industries and sow uncertainty. In these difficult times, leaning into culture is not just about feel-good entertainment; it's about resilience and renewal. History has shown that cities known for heavy industry or manufacturing (like Glasgow or Liverpool in the U.K.) turned to their cultural assets to reinvent themselves in the post-industrial era. Music, in particular, can unite communities and attract new forms of investment when traditional avenues falter. UNESCO explicitly promotes



“music as a tool for socio-economic improvement and cultural diversity” which is a philosophy very relevant to current times.

For London, being a City of Music can help buffer the rough patches by diversifying the economy and strengthening social ties. Cultural tourism, for example, can bring in revenue if other exports are hurt by tariffs. International collaborations can keep dialogue going even when politics make nations drift apart. And on a human level, music can boost morale and community spirit during hardships. The UNESCO Creative City designation gives London a platform to double down on these cultural strengths. It’s a signal to investors and creatives alike that the city is *open for cultural business*. Roda Muse, Secretary-General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, highlighted that London’s experience and community support for culture mean it will be *“contributing to the vitality of the local economy and advancing sustainable urban development”* as a new Creative City of Culture. In challenging times, that contribution is invaluable and helps keep the city’s heartbeat strong and its people connected.

Officials in other UNESCO Cities of Music echo this sense of culture-as-lifeline. When Kansas City, USA joined the network, local leaders saw it as a chance to uplift historic jazz neighborhoods that had been neglected.

***“Partnership with UNESCO is an opportunity to draw international tourists... and reinvest in historic African-American neighborhoods where Kansas City jazz began,”*** explained Jacob Wagner, a Kansas City planner.

In his view, the designation can channel new resources to “diamonds in the rough”, meaning talented communities that haven’t yet reaped the economic rewards of their cultural investment. This perspective resonates for London as well: the City of Music title can help ensure that those who have carried the city’s music legacy for years (artists, organizers, educators) finally get the broader recognition and support they deserve.

## Learning from Fellow Cities of Music: Inspiration and Examples

London is not embarking on this journey alone. Many cities have flourished under the UNESCO City of Music banner, each in their own way. Here are a few inspiring examples of how other Cities of Music have leveraged the designation:

- **Liverpool, UK (since 2015):** Famous as the hometown of The Beatles, Liverpool has long been a music powerhouse. Becoming a UNESCO City of Music helped Liverpool underscore the importance of music in its post-industrial revival. The city recognizes



creativity as a key to economic renewal, and it shows, because music now contributes over £70 million annually to the local economy. The UNESCO title bolsters Liverpool's global reputation, attracting music tourists and investors. City officials noted that the designation *confirmed what locals already felt*: "Liverpool is and always will be a music city. Since the title, Liverpool has hosted major events like the MTV Europe Music Awards and even the Eurovision Song Contest in 2023, using those moments to build community pride and showcase its cultural influence. The city also invests in music education and industry, ensuring the beat goes on for future generations.

- **Glasgow, UK (since 2008):** Glasgow was the U.K.'s first City of Music and has embraced music as a tool for urban regeneration. The city's legendary music scene spans from Celtic folk to cutting-edge rock, with around *130 music events every week* filling pubs and concert halls. With the UNESCO designation, Glasgow set out clear goals: be iconic (celebrate its musical excellence and heritage), be accessible (get more people involved in music), be supportive of musicians, and be collaborative globally. Fifteen years on, Glasgow remains an "active contributor to the international UNESCO Creative Cities and proudly aligns its music initiatives with social goals like inclusion and even climate. The payoff? As Time Magazine once dubbed it, Glasgow became "Europe's secret capital of music," proving a city can transform its image through.
- **Bogotá, Colombia (since 2012):** In South America, Bogotá stands out as a cultural beacon. Named a City of Music for its incredible diversity (from traditional Colombian rhythms to an avant-garde classical scene) Bogotá has turned music into a driver of social progress. The city hosts a multitude of free public festivals (like the famous Rock al Parque, one of the largest free rock festivals in the world) and invests heavily in music education and infrastructure. UNESCO praised Bogotá's "*outstanding infrastructure for the creation and promotion of all music genres*" and the many spaces it provides for performance. This has positioned Bogotá as a "*visible platform in international [music] circuits*," drawing artists and fans from around the world. The City of Music status has also encouraged research into music's impact on the city: officials in Bogotá have measured how music functions as a "*catalyst of our cultural and creative economy*," reinforcing policies that support musicians and venues. By integrating music into public policy (even in areas like education, environment, and gender equity, Bogotá exemplifies how the UNESCO designation can be used to boost social cohesion and international profile simultaneously.
- **Hannover, Germany (since 2014):** Hannover earned its City of Music title thanks to a robust music industry and a knack for collaboration. It's a city where the classical music





world meets rock, electronic, and jazz. Historically, Hannover was where the first vinyl record and first CD were manufactured! Hannover has leveraged the UNESCO network to strengthen its global links. The city thrives on being a “networking city of music,” eagerly hosting international music fairs and inviting artists from other Creative Cities to perform. This international approach has tangible economic benefits: Hannover connects creative businesses with overseas partners and has positioned itself as an attractive spot for cultural investment by highlighting its high employment in the music scene. To celebrate 10 years in the network, Hannover even launched a “Social Cohesion through Music” initiative, emphasizing music’s role in bringing people together across different. Through innovation (like experimenting with new performance formats) and education (partnering its music schools globally), **Hannover shows that being a City of Music can mean being a laboratory for creativity that boosts both community spirit and the economy.**

- **Kansas City, USA (since 2017):** Kansas City which is renowned for its jazz legacy used the UNESCO City of Music designation to shine a light on its African-American cultural heritage and drive neighborhood revitalization. The city’s Creative City strategy explicitly centers on leveraging its 18th & Vine Jazz District, the historic cradle of KC jazz, as a backbone for sustainable community development. Plans have included creating a “Jazz Corridor” connecting music venues and heritage sites, and developing policies to support musicians and music businesses in underserved areas. City leaders saw the UNESCO honor as a chance to market Kansas City’s story globally and locally: *“It’s time to recognize [our musical history] at home,”* said one urban studies director, noting that many local cultural gems needed reinvestment. Since joining the network, Kansas City has indeed drawn more international attention to its jazz festivals and museums. Perhaps most striking, during the period it was the only U.S. City of Music, Kansas City doubled down on sharing its music with the world. Officials proudly stated, “we expect to take this on the road and do a number of things that will highlight our history, and why we have the designation we have”. In doing so, they not only attracted tourists off the beaten path, but also uplifted local cultural practitioners who had kept jazz alive through hard times.

Each of these cities offers a lesson for London: a UNESCO City of Music designation is what you make of it. It can be a catalyst for community-building (Glasgow’s inclusivity, Hannover’s social cohesion theme), a magnet for visitors and investment (Liverpool and Kansas City drawing global crowds), and a framework for policy innovation (Bogotá’s integration of music into social



programs). The common thread is that the title helped galvanize both the city government and the local community around a shared vision of cultural growth.

## Pride, Potential, and Connectedness



As London steps onto this international stage, there's a palpable sense of pride and excitement in the air. **The UNESCO City of Music designation is a celebration of all the people who have contributed to London's musical story: the artists who pour their soul into performances, the educators who train the next generation, the entrepreneurs who run venues and festivals, and the fans who pack local shows with energy and love.** It's also a vote of confidence in London's future: a belief that by investing in culture, the city can thrive even in uncertain times. *"Given London's first-hand knowledge of the role of culture in the municipal development context... "We are pleased to welcome a new partner contributing to the vitality of the local economy and advancing sustainable urban development,"*said Roda Muse of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, applauding the city's achievement. There is a sense that London's music will not only continue to enrich local lives but also play a part in global dialogues that range from cultural diversity to economic innovation.

For the average Londoner, what changes might be noticeable? Over time, you might see more international artists collaborating with locals, new festivals or events spurred by this recognition, and perhaps a stronger presence of music in community programs (think music in parks, libraries,



schools). You'll definitely see the UNESCO City of Music logo stamped on city promotions, a reminder that your city is part of something bigger. It's a source of civic pride to know that London is counted among the world's creative capitals. And for those working in the music scene, it's a badge that can open doors, whether it be securing a gig in a sister city abroad or simply convincing a skeptic that, yes, music really matters here.

In the end, being a UNESCO City of Music is about connectedness. London is now connected to a worldwide network of creative cities, connected more deeply to its own cultural community, and connected to a vision of development that harmonizes economic, social, and artistic goals. The title doesn't solve every challenge overnight, but it provides a powerful instrument to play a new tune of possibility. **As London strikes up this new chord, residents can feel proud that their city's melody will echo far beyond its borders, joining a global symphony of cities that believe in that believe in culture's power to transform.**

