

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO LIVING HERITAGE: NGO PERSPECTIVES

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SAFEGUARDING THE MUSICAL ART OF THE HUNTING HORN PLAYERS:

A Co-Design Approach to Intangible Heritage Preservation

Alessio Re, Giulia Avanza, Francesca Favaro

Abstract

Between 2022 and 2025, a participatory co-design process was launched to support the safeguarding and transmission of the UNESCO-recognized *Musical Art of the Hunting Horn* in Turin, Italy. Facilitated by Fondazione Santagata for the Economics of Culture, in collaboration with the Accademia di Sant'Uberto, the initiative included the development of Safeguarding and Development Plans, alongside the *Sinfonie di Cultura* project, an initiative aimed at building collaborations with local stakeholders. These actions intended to strengthen community-led heritage practices while expanding stakeholder engagement and public visibility. Through a case study approach, the paper explores how participatory can support the safeguarding and development of intangible cultural heritage, while also revealing both the opportunities and complexities inherent in their application.

In 2022 a collaborative co-design process was initiated with Italian heritage bearers of the UNESCO-inscribed *Musical Art of the Hunting Horn Players* to develop a Safeguarding Plan, one of the first of its kind in Italy for an element of intangible cultural heritage officially recognised by UNESCO¹. The Plan aimed to outline concrete actions for ensuring the intergenerational transmission and long-term preservation of this distinctive musical tradition rooted in the Piedmont region.

As an extension of this safeguarding process, the *Sinfonie di Cultura* project was launched in 2024-2025 with the objective of exploring participatory approaches to cultural planning and heritage valorisation.

Together, these initiatives addressed multiple layers of heritage governance, from strengthening internal capacities and defining participatory models of decision-making to experimenting with inclusive, context-specific strategies for visibility, training and knowledge transmission. At the same time, they revealed underlying complexities in sustaining heritage communities over time, particularly in relation to intergenerational dialogue.

Rather than offering a prescriptive model, the experience highlighted the complexities of enabling communities to negotiate the meanings, functions and governance of their own heritage. This paper examines these dynamics, offering reflections on how participatory approaches may open up both opportunities and challenges within contemporary safeguarding practices.

The Musical Art of Hunting Horn Players

In December 2020, *The Musical Art of Hunting Horn Players* was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This recognition was the result of a multinational application submitted in 2014 at the Palazzina di Caccia of Stupinigi, with the support of France, Belgium, Italy and Luxembourg. In Italy, the heritage is represented by the *Equipaggio della Regia Venaria*, a group coordinated both technically and scientifically by the *Accademia di Sant'Uberto*².

This musical practice is distinguished by its fusion of instrumental and vocal qualities, emphasizing mastery of breath control, vibrato, projection and the capacity to interact with architectural acoustics. The hunting horn employed - the natural "Orléans" horn in D - remains the standard instrument and is still in active use. Historically designed for outdoor performance, the horn was meant to facilitate long-range acoustic communication, a function that continues to define its use today. Its connection with open air and nature gives rise to a soundscape that evokes the cultural memory of hunting traditions and elicits strong emotional responses in both players and listeners.

Founded in the mid-1990s, the *Accademia di Sant'Uberto* is a non-profit cultural association committed to enhancing the historical and artistic value of the UNESCO Site Residences of the Royal House of Savoy³. It promotes the concept of *loisirs de la cour* (courtly leisure) as a lens through which to interpret court life, particularly its soundscape, in which music held a central role. The revival of the *Festa di S. Uberto*⁴ at the Reggia di Venaria in 1996 marked a pivotal moment in the Accademia's efforts to reclaim and reinterpret this heritage.

That same year saw the reconstitution of the *Equipaggio della Regia Venaria*, intended to restore the tradition of playing the Orléans horn in D. This group now performs a diverse repertoire that includes traditional *fanfares de vènerie*, associated with mounted hunts, as well as pieces by composers such as Vivaldi and Rossini. Over time, their programming has expanded to encompass liturgical music, contemporary compositions and original fantasies. Members of the *Equipaggio* perform in 18th-century-inspired uniforms bearing the Savoy colors of scarlet and royal blue, accurately reflecting historical iconography from the Palazzina di Caccia of Stupinigi.

To further support the transmission of this heritage, the *Accademia di Sant'Uberto* organizes an annual training program devoted to the Orléans hunting horn, with instruction provided by members of the *Equipaggio* and complemented by baroque horn courses led by internationally recognized specialists. Hosted at the Accademia's headquarters in the Reggia di Venaria, these courses pay particular attention to the involvement of young students. Each cycle concludes with two major concerts - one in spring and another at Christmas - held at the Palazzina di Caccia of Stupinigi and the Reggia di Venaria.

Safeguarding, transmission and valorising of the Musical Art of the Hunting Horn

Heritage bearers have expressed the perception that the broader heritage community remains limited in scope and that local populations continue to possess only a fragmented understanding of this UNESCO element and the associated safeguarding initiatives. In response to this situation, they have identified the need to design strategies that both strengthen safeguarding efforts and embed the promotion of the heritage within the local context.

Within this framework, Fondazione Santagata for the Economics of Culture⁵ has played, and continues to play, a significant supportive role in the safeguarding, transmission and promotion of the *Musical Art of the Hunting Horn*, assisting the Accademia di Sant'Uberto through the development of three key activities in recent years:

- Completion of a detailed Safeguarding Plan (2022): through a process of reflection and strategic planning, the need emerged to reinforce the institutional and community-based structures necessary to implement effective safeguarding measures. This plan laid the groundwork for more systematic efforts to protect and maintain the tradition;

- Drafting of a Development Plan (2023): designed to equip the heritage community with the managerial and organizational competencies required for long-term sustainability, this plan focuses on enhancing the ability to manage transmission processes and secure access to essential resources. By means of this strategic framework, the *Accademia di Sant’Uberto* is able to develop the skills necessary to apply the measures outlined in the Safeguarding Plan, ensuring the preservation and dissemination of this cultural expression;
- Collaboration on the “Sinfonie di Cultura” project (2024–2025): in partnership with the *Accademia di Sant’Uberto*, this project seeks to promote and safeguard the musical tradition through a participatory methodology. Its objectives include not only protecting the heritage itself but also amplifying its cultural value within the community by actively involving stakeholders, local actors and practitioners in the process.

The methodologies employed in these initiatives - which are further detailed in the following section - are characterized by a participatory approach. This method places the practitioner community at the centre of the process, while also fostering dialogue with key stakeholders involved in the safeguarding and promotion of the UNESCO-recognized heritage element.

A Co-Design Approach to Safeguarding and Developing Intangible Cultural Heritage

The development of both the *Safeguarding Plan* and the *Development Plan* for the Musical Art of the Hunting Horn was carried out through a participatory process led by the community of practitioners. These heritage bearers played a central role in shaping the direction and content of the Plans, offering concrete guidance on several key areas: the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the valorisation of the tradition, the promotion of academic research and the establishment of participatory governance mechanisms.

As outlined above, a recurring concern expressed by members of the community was the perception that the broader network of heritage stakeholders remained relatively narrow, and that local populations continued to demonstrate only limited awareness and understanding of the UNESCO element and the associated safeguarding activities.

In response, the community identified the urgent need to craft strategies that would not only support the preservation of the heritage but also reinforce its rootedness in

the local context; this requires anchoring safeguarding efforts within the territory, increasing visibility among the general public and cultivating a deeper, more widespread engagement with the heritage at the community level.

One of the most significant challenges identified during this process was the necessity to broaden the audience beyond its traditional boundaries. Historically, the activities had primarily attracted a niche group of specialists and enthusiasts of the musical tradition. The community acknowledged the importance of expanding their reach to include more diverse publics, particularly young people and broader segments of the general population, thereby enhancing the inclusivity and resilience of the heritage system.

In light of this context, the ongoing project *Sinfonie di Cultura* was conceived as a direct extension of the co-design process undertaken for the Safeguarding Plan. Building on insights gathered during that earlier phase, the initiative seeks to develop strategies that not only ensure the long-term vitality and transmission of the intangible cultural heritage, but also align with the broader needs and priorities of the surrounding territory.

The project unfolds through several coordinated phases; the co-design process began with an initial workshop involving the Equipaggio della Reggia Venaria, which served as a space for collective reflection on how to expand or enhance existing activities. The goal was to increase the visibility of both the Accademia and the Equipaggio within the local area, while also identifying key stakeholders to be involved in the following phases. Building on this foundation, a series of follow-up meetings were held with the selected stakeholders, in collaboration with the Accademia and the Equipaggio, to explore potential forms of partnership and opportunities for shared cultural programming.

The process will culminate in a final evaluative session, where outcomes and reflections will be presented and discussed collectively. The insights that will emerge are expected to inform and strengthen the Accademia's educational and cultural initiatives moving forward. Finally, a comprehensive report will be produced, documenting the entire co-design process: its methodology, key outcomes and strategic recommendations for future development.

The anticipated outcomes of this process include the identification of concrete actions that can strengthen the ties between the *Accademia di Sant'Uberto* and the local community, enhancing both its visibility and appeal to a broader audience; the establishment of new partnerships beyond the *Accademia's* traditional network, as well as the reinforcement of existing relationships with relevant stakeholders; the development of enriched educational programs aimed at training new musicians in the art of the hunting horn, thus ensuring the continued transmission of this unique cultural practice; an overall improvement in the cultural vitality of the local area, with potential implications for quality of life.

These objectives will feed directly into the next phase of the *Sinfonie di Cultura* project, which will include an assessment of the cultural and economic impact of the initiative. This evaluation will be carried out through surveys distributed during public events and questionnaires administered to participants in the training activities, offering data-driven insights into the project's broader societal relevance.

Conclusions

The safeguarding trajectory undertaken for the *Musical Art of the Hunting Horn* between 2022 and 2025 offers critical insights into the evolving nature of community-based heritage practices. Far from being a mere technical exercise, the process has revealed itself as a space of negotiation: between generations, between institutional frameworks and local knowledge, and between preservation and adaptation.

The heterogeneous composition of the bearer community required a careful reconsideration of how participation was facilitated, prompting the adoption of inclusive tools and languages capable of engaging individuals across age groups and social backgrounds.

A central strength of this experience has been its commitment to shared authorship. Through co-design methodologies and dialogic planning, the initiatives actively rejected hierarchical models in favour of a more horizontal, participatory framework. This allowed diverse actors to contribute meaningfully, reinforcing a collective sense of ownership over the heritage element. Such an approach was not only

methodologically sound but also aligned with the ethical imperatives of safeguarding living heritage, in which communities are not the objects of intervention but active agents in defining their own futures.

Nonetheless, the process was not without challenges. Disagreements around priorities, generational differences in the perception of heritage value, and the complexities of institutional collaboration inevitably surfaced. These complexities, however, were regarded as constitutive parts of the work itself: as indicators of a living, contested and dynamic heritage.

An important lesson emerging from this case is the difficulty of defining and measuring participation. While community engagement is widely championed, its practical implementation often reveals a gap between intent and practice.

This initiative has underscored the importance of critically distinguishing between formal inclusion and substantive involvement. The most meaningful outcomes can be achieved when communities are not simply invited to participate but positioned as co-producers of knowledge, practice and decision-making.

The experience illustrates that effective safeguarding is not reducible to documentation or preservation. Rather, it involves nurturing a framework in which heritage can be questioned, transmitted and transformed through the active involvement of those who practice and sustain it. Facilitating community agency in heritage practices, while also accommodating internal diversity and the potential for meaningful external engagement, remains a complex and ongoing challenge within contemporary approaches to intangible heritage governance.

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¹<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/musical-art-of-horn-players-an-instrumental-technique-linked-to-singing-breath-control-vibrato-resonance-of-place-and-conviviality-01581>

² <https://www.accademiadisantuberto.org/>

³ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/823/>

⁴ Celebrated annually on 3 November - or on the first Sunday thereafter - the feast includes the liturgical performance of hunting horn music during Mass and a subsequent concert that engages large, diverse audiences

⁵ In June 2024, Fondazione Santagata has been accredited as NGO to act in an advisory capacity to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee. <https://www.fondazionesantagata.it/en/>

