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Subsidizing ‘musiques actuelles’ in French-speaking Switzerland: mapping policy instruments and local arrangements

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine public subsidies for *musiques actuelles* (popular music) in French-speaking Switzerland. Drawing on mixed-methods research focusing on the 2017–2019 period, we employ the notion of public policy instruments to examine the modalities of public funding and its impacts on the music sector. To this end, we conduct a detailed analysis of the subsidies granted, identifying the beneficiaries and the amounts allocated. Our analysis highlights three findings. First, public support for musiques actuelles is fragmented. There is no coordination among funding bodies, and it is sector actors who, from below, produce coherence between policy instruments. Second, this fragmentation of funding leads to a scattering effect, making it difficult to support genuine professionalization among musicians but also in music venues and festivals. Third, support structures are completely absent from public funding. This absence reflects a lack of market awareness in the design of policies. In conclusion, we discuss the relationships between cultural policies and the structuring of the music market in French-speaking Switzerland.

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Cultural policies; popular music; Switzerland; public policy instrument; music industry

Introduction

In Switzerland, as in other European countries, the COVID-19 lockdown raised awareness of the complex and ambiguous relationships between music sectors and public authorities (Cannizzo and Strong 2022; Howard et al. 2021; Taylor, Raine, and Hamilton 2021). On the one hand, while entire parts of the industry ceased operations, many stakeholders received public funding support – not only artists but also music venues, festivals, and record labels (Gligorijevic 2022). On the other hand, despite this support, the situation exposed the sector’s precarity and highlighted the limitations of public subsidies and their inability to account fully for the economic reality of music markets. Unlike fields such as classical music or public theater, popular music sectors do not rely solely on state or private funding, and many actors struggle to generate an income that meets national standards (Perrenoud and Bataille 2019 OFS (2020); Pärli and Ecoplan 2021). This situation raises important concerns about subsidizing music sectors and potential state interventions to foster greater sustainability.

In Switzerland and other countries over the last three decades, popular music has gained recognition as a legitimate focus of public policy (Behr and Brennan 2014; Behr, Brennan, and

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Cloonan 2016; Laing 1999; Rutten 1993; Street 1993). Moreover, popular music has been at the heart of recent transformations in cultural policies, whether in support of cultural and creative industries (Baym 2011; Brown, O'Connor, and Cohen 2000; Sutherland 2013) or to enhance the attractiveness of urban centers (L. L. Gibson 2001; C. Gibson and Homan 2004; Krims 2007; Ballico and Watson 2020; Darchen, Willsteed, and Browning 2023). There is still little research, however, on public subsidies, their modalities, and their effects on popular music.

In this article, we extend discussion on the subsidization of popular music. We draw on mixed-methods research funded by the cantons of French-speaking Switzerland and piloted by the Fondation romande pour la Chanson et les Musiques Actuelles (FCMA) and PETZI – the Swiss federation of music venues and festivals (Camus et al. 2022) to map support for musiques actuelles in French-speaking Switzerland between 2017 and 2019.¹ The term 'musiques actuelles,' a category of public policy, is widely used in Francophone contexts, is challenging to translate into English. According to the French Ministry of Culture, musiques actuelles encompasses jazz and improvised music, traditional and world music, chanson, rock, and other amplified music genres like rap and electronic music (Ministère de la culture 2020). While it overlaps somewhat with popular music, musiques actuelles emphasizes creative composition over established repertoire. As a result, choirs, chorales, and brass bands were excluded from the scope of our research.

We use the notion of 'public policy instrument' (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007) to unfold the relationship between the music sectors and public authorities in French-speaking Switzerland. This approach avoids examining subsidy policies solely based on the actors' discourses and, instead, focuses on their effects. We show that while musiques actuelles have gained legitimacy in public debates on culture in French-speaking Switzerland, an analysis of funding practices reveals a more complex reality. Our findings identify precisely which actors benefit from subsidies, the relationships between the actors of musiques actuelles and public authorities, and the ways these instruments shape music sectors. This article thus contributes not only to the study of cultural policies in Switzerland but also to understanding relationships between popular music and the state.

In the first part of this article, we review the main ways the relationship between cultural policies and popular music has been analyzed. The second section introduces the concept of 'public policy instruments,' while the third section provides an overview of the cultural policy landscape in Switzerland. In the fourth section, we present the research methodology on which this article is based. The fifth section gives an overview of support and details the weight of various institutional levels that subsidize popular music. The sixth section analyzes the beneficiaries and modalities of support. The last section discusses three subsidy issues: fragmentation of support; a 'scattering' effect; and the lack of consideration for the market for musiques actuelles in French-speaking Switzerland. In conclusion, we defend the value of public policy instruments for thinking about state intervention in cultural sectors.

How to describe the encounter between the state and popular music?

In a pioneering article on 'popular music and the local state,' Street (1993) identifies four forms of 'direct influence' that local authorities have on popular music. First, local authorities are responsible for many regulations that impact popular music sectors, from the approval of a venue's capacity to club closing times. Second, local authorities, at least in the case of the late 1980s/early 1990s UK, play a role in regulating the property market and rents for music venues, record shops, instrument stores, and rehearsal spaces.² Third, local authorities fund and produce cultural events in which music plays an important role. Fourth, local authorities are the bearers of economic policies in which creative industries and music are sometimes integrated.

Each of these forms calls on distinct state services and competencies. They also sketch out different ways of looking at popular music as a public issue.³ These ways of thinking about possible encounters between the state and popular music are echoed in the literature. Numerous works have highlighted the effects of regulations, bans, and repression on the form that musical events take

(Ballico and Carter 2018; Frith et al. 2019; Verbuč 2021; Waksman 2022) and the importance of liquor regulations (Ballico 2021; Carah et al. 2021) and radio quotas (Counihan 1992; Hare 2003; Henderson 2008). For example, in their study of musical careers in Switzerland, Pierre Bataille and Marc Perrenoud found that musicians lack an unemployment scheme for intermittent workers in the performing arts. In France, in contrast, musicians can access an unemployment system designed for artistic jobs, covering periods when they don't have gigs. In Switzerland, underemployed musicians often supplement their performing or composing careers with teaching jobs (Bataille and Perrenoud 2021; Perrenoud and Bataille 2017).

Although these studies offer valuable results, they pay little attention to an essential aspect of cultural policy: subsidization. Only a few studies have highlighted its importance to music sectors (Homan 2013; Laing 1999; Sutherland 2013; Watson 2023). For example, in their research on France's live music video economy, Guibert, Spanu, and Ruden (2021) show that an independent, arts-oriented sector exists due to the particularities of French cultural policies. Indeed, financial support from the Centre national du cinéma and public television channels' obligation to provide cultural offerings have led to the consideration of concert recording as a means of capitalizing on the heritage of live performance and encouraging the creation of innovative content.⁴ On the one hand, these studies emphasize that subsidy policies are a key site for understanding how popular music is constructed as an object of public policy. On the other hand, they invite us to take a closer look at subsidy modalities and their effects on music sectors.

Studying subsidies as a public policy instrument.

This article extends this work by looking more closely at the subsidization of popular music and examining subsidies as public policy instruments. Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, 4) state:

A public policy instrument constitutes a device that is both technical and social, that organizes specific social relations between the state and those it is addressed to, according to the representations and meanings it carries. It is a particular type of institution, a technical device with the generic purpose of carrying a concrete concept of the politics/society relationship and sustained by a concept of regulation.

Lascoumes and Le Galès critically note that public policy instruments are generally considered either merely self-evident facts or a rational choice made because of prior framing during the design of public policies. They propose paying much closer attention to policy instruments, how they operate, and their consequences for stakeholders (including the state itself).

When examining the relationship between public authorities and popular music, this perspective encourages us to move beyond considering subsidies merely in terms of the total amount distributed. It invites a deeper exploration of the specifics: which actors receive what amounts for which projects. It also calls for an analysis of the practical arrangements that subsidies help establish. From this perspective, subsidies are not simply the result of a predefined policy; rather, they shape public action through adaptations or, at times, unforeseen detours. Furthermore, this approach provides an opportunity to explore often overlooked aspects of cultural policy, such as budgets, application processes, award committees, and more (Dutheil-Pessin and Ribac 2017).

Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004, 361; Halpern and Le Galès 2011) identify five types of policy instruments, including legislative and regulatory tools, that, as we have seen, have been studied extensively in the context of music sectors. Subsidies, however, fall under a different category: economic and fiscal instruments. According to Lascoumes and Le Galès, these instruments present the state as a producer and redistributor of wealth, aiming for collective benefit or social and economic efficiency. This form of state intervention characterizes what have been the major forms of public involvement in cultural sectors: first, the state acting as a patron of the arts, then as a driver of cultural democratization in the post-war period (Dubois 1999), and, more recently, as a strategic actor in an economy increasingly based on culture and creativity (Menger 2013; Schlesinger 2016).

From that point of view, several studies have explored the role of subsidization in understanding the relationship between the state and culture. For instance, in her study of grant allocation committees in France's live performance sector, Demonteil (2022) highlights a 'heteronomization' of artistic fields, describing a process by which a cultural sector increasingly comes under state control and shape by state-defined regulation and standards. Although decisions by these committees are ostensibly based on criteria of aesthetic quality or artist reputation, they are strongly shaped by the legislative, regulatory, and organizational activity of the state, which, according to the author, asserts its authority over cultural spheres. This relationship raises the question of the performative impact of public policy instruments on cultural domains. In this regard, grant distribution bodies contribute significantly to shaping a professional environment around specific forms of expertise (Charbonnier 2022). Oleksiak (2022) underscores this aspect in an article on the development of a transcultural musical project by the foundation Royaumeont, illustrating how application forms and funding structures significantly influence both the project's design and its potential for growth.

Aiming to understand the performative effects of funding instruments on the music sectors, we characterize popular music subsidization policy in Switzerland not through its official discourse or regulations but through its consequences. Therefore, here cultural policy – and more broadly the state – is not a pre-given entity but needs to be described and made explicit through its effects (Muniesa and Linhardt 2011). Data analysis will focus not only on total funding amounts – often the focus of the reports of national statistical institutes – but also on the specific funding modalities.

'Swiss cultural policy doesn't exist': cultural policies for musiques actuelles in Switzerland.

The existing literature highlights two main characteristics of cultural policies in Switzerland (e.g. Frey and Pommerehne 1995; Marx 2020; Moeschler 2011; Rössel and Weingartner 2015; Thévenin and Olivier 2018). First, 'Swiss cultural policy doesn't exist.'⁵ This famous quote is regularly used to illustrate the absence of a genuine federal cultural policy and the complexity of coordinating action among the various actors involved in supporting the arts. Marx (2017, 15) attributes this distinctiveness to two fundamental principles that underpin public action in Switzerland: federalism and subsidiarity. Subsidiarity holds that social and political issues should be addressed at the most immediate or local level capable of effectively resolving them. Thus, municipalities are viewed as primarily responsible, with higher levels stepping in only when necessary. In cultural matters, the federal government's primary responsibilities limit themselves to promoting heritage and cinema. Additionally, overlapping competencies among the various levels of government (confederation, cantons, municipalities) are common, leading to diverse local arrangements that vary from one canton to another (d'Angelo 2013; Marx 2017).

From this point of view, Switzerland presents a notably different model than countries like Canada (Sutherland 2013) and France (Dubois et al. 2012). In France, support for popular music is primarily channeled on a national level through the Scène de Musiques Actuelles (SMAC) label (Guibert 2007) and the Centre national de la musique, which blends state funding with revenue from streaming platforms and concert ticket taxes. In Canada, as Sutherland (2013) notes, while cities like Toronto and Calgary have made efforts to develop music industry policies, responsibility generally remains at the federal and provincial levels. In Switzerland, however, cities play a central role in funding culture (Thévenin and Olivier 2018). In 2019, the most recent year covered in our study, municipalities accounted for 49.1% of the total public cultural funding, compared to 39.7% from the cantons and 11.2% from the federal government. Specifically in music and theater, municipalities contributed 59% of public funding, cantons 38.8%, and the federal government just 2.1%.⁶

Second, musiques actuelles is a relatively new area of public policy in Switzerland. Unlike cinema (Moeschler 2011), there is no federal policy framework. Since the 1970s, public action has largely centred on music venues, with municipalities playing a key role (Raboud 2018; Steulet 2018). These policies have primarily focused on supporting and institutionalizing autonomous cultural centres

that emerged from urban social movements (Pattaroni 2020). More recently, Swiss cities are no exception to the creative turn in cultural policy, and festivals, in particular, were supported to enhance cultural attraction (Piraud 2017). Over the past decade, however, public support to popular music has faced new challenges mainly focusing on employment conditions (Benhamou 2022; Pärli and Ecoplan 2021; Perrenoud and Bataille 2019; PETZI 2017) and export subsidies (Feusi and Küttel 2011; Riom and Vidal 2017). Addressing these concerns has prompted the involvement of new actors beyond large cities, broadening the scope of public action toward popular music.

Materials and methods

This paper is built on two main components. The first quantitative component involves mapping the subsidies for musiques actuelles in French-speaking Switzerland between 2017 and 2019. In parallel, we organized two Open Labs (participatory workshops) with sector actors and representatives of cultural administrations.

Quantitative survey

To map support for musiques actuelles, we distributed a survey to the cultural administration of the seven French-speaking cantons, a panel of Swiss cities and the Loterie romande (LoRo) (see Figure 1). This questionnaire asked respondents to list exhaustively all subventions awarded between 2017 and 2019, detailing the recipients, the amount, and the type of subvention. These data allow us to go beyond aggregated figures, which are typically the focus of public funding statistics for culture, and provide an in-depth analysis.

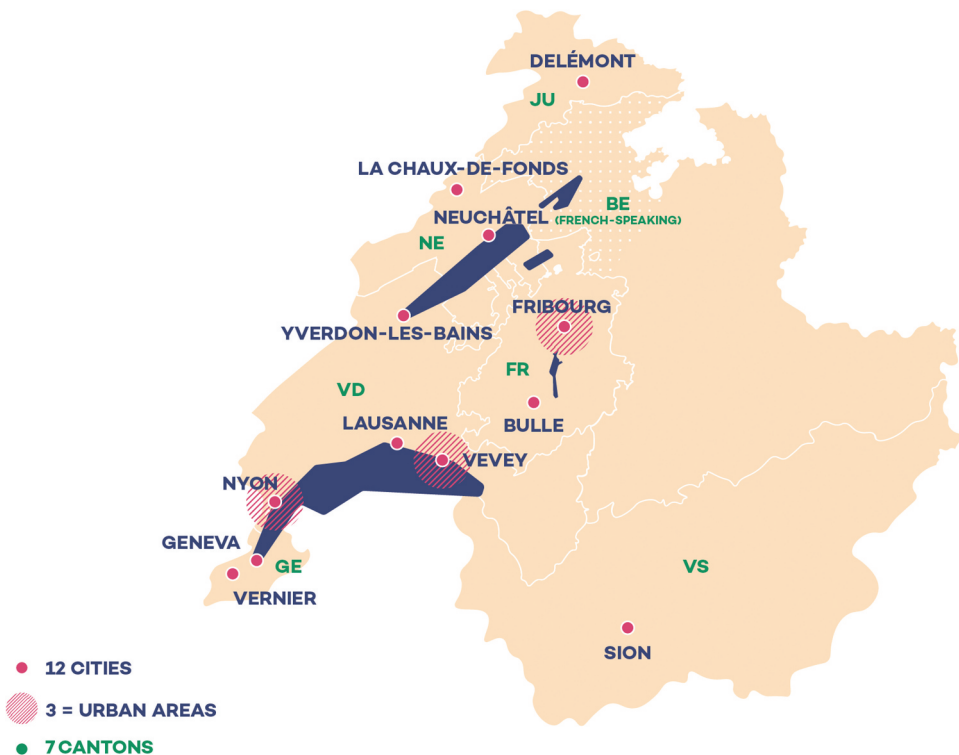


Figure 1. Map of surveyed cities and cantons design by KANULART design studio.

Each French-speaking canton responded to our survey. Moreover, for the canton of Bern, we gathered data from the Conseil des affaires francophones for the Biel region and the Conseil du Jura bernois. Bern is predominantly German-speaking. However, two districts – the Jura bernois and Biel – are French-speaking and have their own policies for promoting culture, especially francophone culture.

Alongside the cantons, we selected a panel of 12 French-speaking cities, along with their broader urban areas where applicable. This panel was chosen based on two criteria: main urban centers in French-speaking Switzerland and municipalities known for their policies supporting musiques actuelles. We reached out to the municipality of Biel/Bienne, but they were unable to provide the requested data. In addition to the cantons and municipalities, we collected data from the LoRo, a public utility foundation that operates lottery games in all six French-speaking cantons. The foundation distributes all its profits to nonprofit associations, particularly those active in the social, sports, and cultural fields. LoRo has a redistribution organization in each canton.

Data excludes classical and contemporary music, choirs, and brass bands. Additionally, as noted earlier, subsidies for music schools are treated separately from sector-specific subsidies in Swiss policy. While this funding plays a crucial role in the sector's organization, it is not included in our study. Furthermore, only direct subsidies were included in the analysis and the provision of premises or other forms of free support was not considered, nor were public authorities' expenses (such as cultural advisors' salaries or building maintenance). The data were coded based on four variables: type of aesthetic, type of beneficiary, type of subsidy, and supported activity (see [Appendix](#)).

Open labs

The Open Labs were organized in two phases. This collaborative innovation scheme is based on discussion workshops structured into thematic working groups (Mérindol et al. 2016). The first phase brought together 40 professionals representative of the diversity of the music sector to identify practical problems and issues and formulate support needs. The second phase brought together 22 representatives of public authorities who had participated in the quantitative survey. The workshop's aim was threefold: a) to analyze the issues raised in the field during the first phase; b) to enrich these elements by formulating the practical challenges public administrations face; and c) to come up with a joint action program. These two events allowed strong, shared findings to emerge and strengthened the common desire to improve current conditions in the field and in public policy.

First overview of subsidies for musiques actuelles in French-speaking Switzerland

This first section provides an initial overview of the subsidization of musiques actuelles. It describes our sample as well as the weight of the various funding bodies.

Average annual support, CHF 21 million

The data collated covers 2,253 subsidies granted between 2017 and 2019. These subsidies represent a total of CHF 63,362,164.⁷ The annual amount (around CHF 21 million) is relatively stable over the period studied (see [Table 1](#) below). This enabled us to calculate an average annual amount between 2017 and 2019, which will serve as the basis for the rest of this article. This first result underlines the continuity of supports for musiques actuelles from year to year. Nonetheless, we note that the number of subsidies is increasing from 703 in 2017 to 784 in 2019.

The average annual amount of CHF 21 million remains relatively modest in the landscape of cultural policies in French-speaking Switzerland. By way of comparison, subsidies from the cities and cantons of French-speaking Switzerland (excluding LoRo) for dance amounted to CHF 48 million for 2017 (Vuong 2019). Furthermore, in 2019, the Federal Statistical Office estimated total cultural spending by the cantons and municipalities of French-speaking Switzerland (excluding the canton of Berne) at CHF 1.3 billion.⁸

Table 1. Total amount and number of subsidies per year.

Year	Total amount in CHF	Number of subsidies
2017	20,603,143	703
2018	21,383,660	766
2019	21,371,361	784
2017–2019 average	21,119,388	751

In addition to the data we collected, musiques actuelles actors in French-speaking Switzerland also receive support from national institutions. The confederation-funded Pro Helvetia foundation provides between CHF 2 and 2.5 million a year of support for music of all aesthetic types for the whole of Switzerland (out of a total budget of around CHF 40 million). Swiss Music Export, the export promotion agency, provides an average of CHF 35,981 per year for artists from French-speaking Switzerland.⁹ Private foundations, such as the Swiss Cooperative Society for Music Authors and Publishers and Schweizerische Interpretenstiftung, also provide funding. These foundations' budgets remain limited, however (for more details see Camus et al. 2022). The Migros-Kulturprozent Foundation is also a significant actor in Swiss cultural policy (Moeschler 2009). This cultural funding initiative was established by Migros, one of Switzerland's major retailers. However, while in the 2000s and 2010s, the Migros-Kulturprozent broadened its support to include musiques actuelles, in recent years, its focus has shifted primarily to supporting the M4music festival (Migros for Music). This festival has become Switzerland's main professional event for popular music.

Actors involved in subsidizing musiques actuelles in French-speaking Switzerland

The graph below shows the distribution of support between cantons, municipalities, and LoRo (Table 2). The main portion of funding for musiques actuelles comes from cities and their urban areas (12.5 million annually on average, 59.32% of the total amount of subsidies recorded in our study). Alongside municipalities, lotteries play an important role (6.8 million annual average, 32.34%). Finally, the cantons play a minor role (1.8 million annual average, 8.34% of the total budget). This finding aligns with data collected by Federal Statistical Office, which includes lottery funds within cantonal expenditures; see below. However, the striking detail lies in the division between cantonal support and lottery funds. In the case of music, cantons are largely disengaged from providing direct support, with over three-quarters of cantonal funding coming from lottery contributions.

Second, there are significant disparities between cities and cantons. The chart below details the funding bodies' contributions in our survey (Figure 2). These are classified by canton. The average amounts per capita allow for a comparison on a common basis between cantons, municipalities and urban areas.

This chart shows the different arrangements in the various regions of French-speaking Switzerland. Broadly, all cantons contribute little to the support of musiques actuelles. Only the canton of Jura and the French-speaking institutions in the canton of Berne spend more than CHF 1 per inhabitant. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the small cantons contribute more in proportion to their population than the large ones. Except for the canton of Jura, cities play the leading role in funding musiques actuelles. Geneva and Lausanne provide even more support in absolute terms than their respective cantons.

Table 2. Average annual amount per institutional level.

Institutional level	Average annual amount in CHF	Percentage
Cantonal	1,762,170	8.34%
Communal (cities and urban areas)	12,527,434	59.32%
LoRo	6,829,783	32.34%
Total	21,119,388	100%

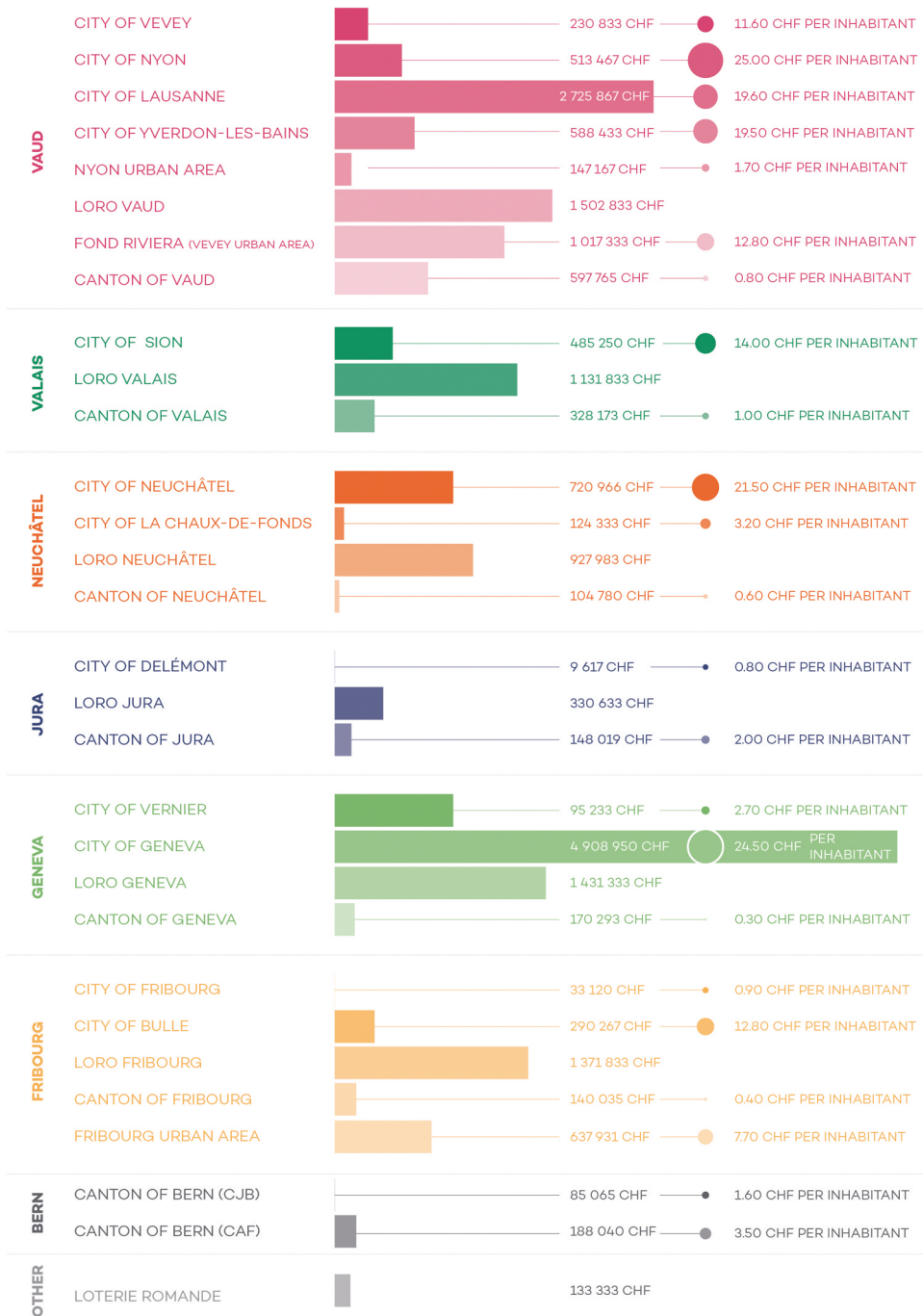


Figure 2. Average annual amount per funding body, CHF and CHF per inhabitant design by KANULART design Studio.

However, there is a very wide disparity between cities, even more so than between cantons. By analyzing the amounts per capita, we can identify three groups among the cities in our panel:

- Geneva, Nyon (with Région Nyon), Lausanne, Neuchâtel, Vevey (with Fonds Riviera) and Yverdon (more than CHF 19 per inhabitant)
- Sion and Bulle (between CHF 10 and 15 per inhabitant)
- Delémont, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Fribourg (with the Agglomération fribourgeoise) and Vernier (less than CHF 10 per inhabitant).

This classification is only partly related to the municipalities' population, suggesting that there are differences in terms of public-policy orientation. The cities of Nyon and Vernier illustrate this point. Despite its population (21,198 in 2019, making it the third-smallest city on our panel), the city of Nyon is the municipality that allocates the most resources to musiques actuelles per capita. This commitment may be explained by the city's historical relations with popular music (it is the location of the Paléo Festival, one of the two largest popular music festivals in the French-speaking part of Switzerland). In contrast, the city of Vernier, the seventh-largest in French-speaking Switzerland in terms of population, provides little funding for musiques actuelles. A qualitative analysis of each city's policies highlights the diversity of the public-policy instruments in place. Whereas large urban centers, such as Geneva and Lausanne, have defined instruments aimed at specific beneficiaries (grants for artists, performance contracts with music venues and festivals), this is not the case for smaller municipalities. These often have a general fund to encourage culture, and grants are awarded on an ad hoc basis.

Finally, the LoRo is an important source of funding in all cantons. In the cantons of Fribourg, Neuchâtel, Jura, and Valais, lotteries are the main source of support for musiques actuelles. It should be noted that lotteries only provide funding on a project-by-project basis. Furthermore, LoRo states that it does not pursue a 'cultural policy.'¹⁰

This section provided an initial overview of the funding landscape for musiques actuelles. On the one hand, these initial results highlight the importance of municipalities and lotteries. On the other hand, the situation varies greatly from one region to another, reflecting various local arrangements and orientations.

Who benefits from public subsidies?

This section focuses on the beneficiaries of popular music subsidies in French-speaking Switzerland. Based on a typology of the musical ecosystem in French-speaking Switzerland (Fondation CMA 2020), we identified four types of beneficiaries: artists, music venues, festivals, and support structures. This last category also includes labels and management companies. In this section, we show that the level and modalities of public subsidies are different for each of these beneficiaries.

Artists

The average annual amount of support for artists is CHF 1,954,554 (i.e. 9.3% of the total amount of subsidies recorded in our study). This amount is distributed between an average of 336 subsidies per year. The average amount of these subsidies is CHF 5,816, and the median

Table 3. Distribution of subsidies for artists.

Supported activities	Average annual amount in CHF	Percentage
Creation	1,127,277	58%
Diffusion	417,988	21%
Structuring	21,667	1%
Global support	27,123	1%
Non-categorizable	365,500	19%
Total	1,954,554	100%

is CHF 3,000. 97.73% are project-based. The graph above details the types of subsidized activity (Table 3). We were unable to identify a significant proportion of the amounts received from the lotteries (19%). The activity reports do not contain all the information about the tasks supported. With an average annual amount of just over CHF 1.1 million (58% of the total), support for creation accounts for more than half of the subsidies allocated to artists. This category covers not only composition work but also recording (by far, most projects supported), residencies and rehearsals. Support for diffusion (concerts, tours, and promotion) amounts to an average of CHF 417,988 per year, or 21% of the amounts allocated to artists. Finally, support for structuring and global support (which supports the creation and dissemination of a project) is minimal.

These low, one-off amounts reflect a dual reality. On the one hand, public support is often limited and not in line with the real costs of the projects undertaken. A close examination of the subventions studied, as well as discussions during the Open Labs, reveals that most subsidies received by artists are predominantly allocated for expenses like album production and travel costs for touring or hiring of support professionals. Therefore, these funds rarely cover wages for the musicians themselves. Moreover, in many grant documents, certain expenses – especially promotional costs – are explicitly excluded. As a result, the funding is limited to tasks considered closest to the act of creation (with the paradox that it is typically service providers, not the artists, who are compensated).

On the other hand, artists need to approach several funding bodies for the same project, which means a great deal of administrative work, sometimes very substantial in relation to the amounts finally obtained. The highly sporadic nature of the support does not allow for the comprehensive funding of a project over time. Instead, artists and their teams must fragment their funding requests, sometimes reapplying to the same funding sources multiple times within a single year. In addition, there is significant disparity between municipalities and cantons regarding the precise scope of these subsidies and what can be covered by them. This has two key consequences. Consequently, such subvention is closer to a support for amateur cultural activities more than professional endeavors – indeed, lists of grant recipients often include choirs and brass bands (two popular music practices in Switzerland) alongside artists pursuing professional careers.

These results underline the limits of existing public policy instruments to support career development and consolidation. In short, although artists can apply for subsidies to record their first low-budget album, financing ambitious projects (e.g. recording an album, then releasing and promoting it) or medium-term projects is much more complicated. Over the period studied, only the CMA Foundation (9 grants of CHF 10,000 per year on average), the city of Geneva (4 grants of CHF 20,000 per year), and the canton of Vaud (4 grants of CHF 15,000 per year, but mainly oriented toward improvised music) regularly met this need.¹¹

This can be explained by the cantonal administrations' weak commitment, which, in several cantons (Jura or Fribourg for example), is designated to support creation and artists with national and international exposure. Furthermore, although some cantons do offer grants, these instruments put musiques actuelles artists in competition with other artistic disciplines, and only occasionally do musiques actuelles artists benefit from them. This problem is mirrored at the federal level, where Pro Helvetia grants do not exceed CHF 10,000 (except for promising jazz musicians).

In conclusion, artists mainly receive project grants of small and fragmented amounts. There is little support for more substantial projects or annualized projects. This lack of support contributes to the difficulties of consolidating a career. The public-policy instruments in place do not allow for an increase in resources to support the development of artists' careers. Finally, promotion, music videos, composition and research, rehearsals, residencies, and structuring receive little or no support. In short, artists are treated more like 'super amateurs' who are allocated resources to carry out special projects or are rewarded with occasional prizes.

Table 4. Average annual support for music venues.

Institutional level	Subvention contract average annual amount in		Project-based average annual amount in		Grants and prizes average annual amount in		Total average annual amount in	
	CHF	Percentage	CHF	Percentage	CHF	Percentage	in CHF	Percentage
Cantonal	268,583	3,3%	96,528	1,2%	5,000	0,1%	370,111	4,6%
Cities and urban areas	5,550,866	67,8%	165,000	2%	0	0	5,715,866	69,8%
LoRo	0	0	2,097,800	25,6%	0	0	2,097,800	25,6%
Total	5,819,449	71,1%	2,359,328	28,80%	5,000	0,1%	8,183,777	100%

Music venues

The average annual amount of support for music venues is CHF 8,183,777, or 38.8% of the total amount of subsidies. This amount is distributed in 117 annual grants on average. The average amount of these grants is CHF 70,147, and the median is CHF 15,000. Although these amounts are much higher than for artist support, they must be considered in relation to music venue budgets. For example, public subsidies account for only a third of PETZI members' funding even though these are the most supported venues (PETZI 2017).

The table above details the type of subsidies music venues receive (see Table 4). It shows that venues are mainly supported by municipalities through subvention arrangements (two-thirds of subsidies received). LoRo support is provided solely on a project basis even though it accounts for a quarter of the total. Several Open Lab participants pointed out that these subsidies are mainly used to invest in infrastructure or one-off events, encouraging them to develop new projects rather than reinforce existing ones. Funding from the cantons is more ad hoc, accounting for only 4.6% of the total amount of subsidies recorded in our study.

A notable difference exists between municipalities that have adopted subsidy agreements and those that have not. These agreements typically result from local political mobilization (Raboud 2015, 2019) and efforts from municipalities to institutionalized music venues that emerged from urban social movements (Pattaroni 2020). These funds enable venues to offer permanent contracts and to professionalize booking, concert production, and communications. It is also worth noting that these formal agreements are exclusively municipal tools.

However, this does not prevent these actors from encountering major difficulties in ensuring suitable working conditions for their employees, as reported in the discussions at the Open Labs. These jobs also rely heavily on volunteer work. In addition, music venues encounter pressure on their budgets due to increased international competition and new demands related to the ecological transition. Several venues, for example, have undertaken renovations to improve security or reduce noise pollution. Finally, unlike classical music or theatre, apart from Les Docks in Lausanne, there are no public institutions dedicated to popular music concerts and most venues are non-profit organization.

Festivals

The average annual amount of support for festivals is CHF 8,414,416, or 40% of the total amount of subsidies. This amount is distributed in 258 annual subsidies on average. Their average amount is CHF 32,591, and the median is CHF 10,000. As in the case of music venues, the average and median amounts must be considered in relation to operating budgets. Moreover, apart from events organized directly by public authorities, subsidies cover less than half of the budgets of most festivals. That these amounts are lower than those for music venues may be partly explained by the lower proportion of subvention agreements.

Table 5. Average annual support for festivals.

Institutional level	Subvention contract average annual amount in CHF		Project-based average annual amount in CHF		Grants and prizes average annual amount in CHF		Total average annual amount in CHF	
	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage
Cantonal	189,933	2,3%	212 467	2,5%	0	0	402,400	4,8%
Cities and urban areas	3,591,397	42,7%	508,452	6%	0	0	4,099,849	48,7%
LoRo	0	0	3,917,167	46,5%	0	0	3,917,167	46,5%
Total	3,781,330	45,00%	4,638,086	55,00%	0	0,00%	8,419,416	100%

The table above details how festivals are supported (see [Table 5](#)). As with music venues, support comes mainly from municipalities and lotteries. However, lottery support is greater than for music venues, and a greater proportion of this support follows only a project-based logic. Open Labs highlighted the limitations of project-based funding. This type of support does not allow for a long-term vision. It contributes to the precarity of the professionals working in these organizations. Several participants also noted that this funding structure encourages recipients to make short-term investments – such as purchasing new equipment or organizing one-off projects – rather than investing in long-term initiatives or improving working conditions within their organization. While subvention agreements with festivals are less common, it is noteworthy that cantonal funding plays a larger role for festivals than for concert venues. Additionally, in contrast to music venues, several festivals, such as the Festival de la Cité in Lausanne, are directly initiated by public authorities.

Support structures

Labels and management companies are largely absent from public policies. We only recorded seven subsidies from 2017 through 2019. These were for special events (anniversary celebrations) or one-off awards. The average annual total of these grants was CHF 28,000. This lack of subsidies for support structure was discussed at both Open Labs. Support professionals spoke of the difficulty of earning income from their activity, particularly when working with emerging artists. This absence reflects a general distrust of the music markets (mainly recorded music but also live music), which resonates across the cultural policy instruments analysed. During Open Lab discussions with cultural administrators, several participants expressed a reluctance to intervene in the market, arguing that it falls outside their scope of action. Instead, they argue that culture policies should focus on creation and supporting non-commercial activities. This stance is also evident in the regulations of various subsidies, which exclude for-profit entities from eligibility, prohibit profits, and rule out funding for activities deemed non-cultural, such as marketing, promotion, or agency fees. National figures from the Federal Statistical Office reveal that funding from private enterprises makes up only a small fraction of cultural subsidies in Switzerland (around 6,8 %).¹²

Under these conditions, it becomes challenging not only for record labels or support organizations to apply for funding on their own behalf but also for them to secure compensation for their work through artist grant applications aimed at career development. Instead, they are obliged to concentrate on projects that can provide them with a minimum of short-term income, notably through radio royalties. They admit that this limits the aesthetics of the artists they work with, focusing primarily on those most likely to gain radio play.

Discussion

In this section, we highlight three main findings of our study: the fragmentation of public support, the scattering of subsidies, and the lack of market consideration in the design of instruments to support popular music. These elements provide a better understanding of the effects of existing cultural-policy instruments on the musiques actuelles sectors in French-speaking Switzerland. This approach allows us to characterize public support for popular music beyond a simple analysis of policy discourse. While *musique actuelles* has indeed become a legitimate focus of public policy, examining funding modalities and their impact on the sectors reveals a more nuanced picture.

The fragmentation of support

Our study shows that funding for *musiques actuelles* is not only provided by many funding bodies but that each of them applies different criteria. Some activities are funded in certain municipalities or cantons whereas others are not. Sometimes there are grants or budgets dedicated to *musiques actuelles*, and sometimes musicians are in competition with artists from other performing arts disciplines. In fact, funding commissions were repeatedly mentioned in discussions with both professionals and cultural administrators, highlighting the gap between the music sectors and public administrations.

This has two main consequences. First, the commissions often lack familiarity with the music sectors, making it difficult for them to consider the practical realities of working as a musician in Switzerland. One significant issue is the need for musicians to export their music. Unlike in theater (Christe 2023), the French-speaking Swiss market alone does not offer sufficient opportunities to sustain a career, so artists are compelled to export their music internationally. This requires investments in promotion and a supporting team – expenses that are often undervalued by public administrators (as mentioned above). Second, it is still rare for music sector representatives to participate in these commissions. This lack of expertise may mean fewer music projects are funded. Conversely, this disconnect also seems to discourage musicians from applying in the first place. Several cultural administrators expressed surprise at not receiving more subsidy applications from popular music musicians.

In the absence of strong coordination between funding bodies, the coherence of support in French-speaking Switzerland is the result of the strategic practices of actors from the sector. Open Labs has shown that, by learning to navigate the constraints of varied support systems, professionals build complementarity between public policy instruments. From this point of view, it is difficult to speak of a coherent policy in French-speaking Switzerland. Subsidy instruments remain largely dependent on local arrangements that are part of a singular relationship with *musiques actuelles*, as the case of the city of Nyon shows. Today, the only existing pooling tool is the CMA Foundation, financed by cities, cantons and lotteries. Its funding, however, represents less than 2% of total subsidies, and it is aimed solely at artists. In other words, these arrangements are constructed as a tactical response rather than an institutional strategy aligned with broader objectives.

A scattering effect

The fragmentation of support results in what might be termed a ‘scattering’ effect of subsidies, i.e. the distribution of small, scattered amounts to finance a multitude of beneficiaries without any coordinating framework. Over the period studied, the average grant was CHF 28,123 and the median CHF 5,000. These amounts are even lower for artists (see above). To fully appreciate this result, we need to relate these amounts to the actual production costs of the activities in question, whether it is an album recording or a festival’s operating budget. In many cases, these amounts are used to pay production costs or service providers while working conditions in the sector remain largely precarious (Pärli and Ecoplan 2021; Perrenoud and Bataille 2019; Riom and Perrenoud 2018). Furthermore,

the Open Labs have highlighted that subvention application budgets are largely underestimated and that the work applicants provide is rarely fully accounted for. This issue affects the field on two levels. First, because it is challenging for artists to secure compensation for rehearsal time, and even more so for creative work, funding applications tend to focus on production costs, discouraging the inclusion of musicians' labor and fair pay in budgets. Additionally, since projects often operate at a loss and the amounts requested are relatively modest, detailing the exact investment of beneficiaries can seem futile. As a result, submitted budgets tend to focus on how the requested funds will be spent rather than on the overall financial balance of the activity. The reliance on volunteer work further complicates matters, as it allows for an easy underestimation of the hours required. To address this, several stakeholders are now working to systematically quantify volunteer hours to make them more visible. Furthermore, following the model used in theatre (Christe 2023), discussions at Open Lab highlighted the potential of implementing subvention agreements as a solution. The example of music venues suggests that this is a promising direction to explore further.

The absence of the market

The final point to highlight is the lack of support for support structures (i.e. the actors who best understand the market and can help artists develop their business). This point is striking given that these structures exist and often do a great deal with little means. The result is that professionals face burnout as well as inability to make a living, which often leads them to stop their activity and exit the entire field. This phenomenon leads to a loss of skills, which in turn weakens the sector.

Cultural administrations' reluctance to approach support in market terms has significant implications for policy instruments, which tend to overlook this reality. This not only restricts funding for certain activities but also prevents support from being aligned with the sector's value chains. Public funds are generally provided as one-off subsidies with little consideration for long-term career development or incentives for risk-taking. Unlike in other sectors, there is also minimal support for entrepreneurship or export efforts.

In addition, our analyses underline the inability of the instruments, as they are conceived, to scale up over the course of an artist's career. There is a significant discrepancy between the needs of a production that aims to reach a wide audience, with export issues at stake, and the means made available. Considering that the stated aim of these policies is often to disseminate work, this is an important issue. Finally, current public-policy instruments are unable to promote the emergence of an economically sustainable sector, as is the case for cinema (Moeschler 2011). Our study shows that value chains are ignored in the design of public-policy instruments. Similarly, there are no mechanisms for market-based redistribution. For instance, few municipalities impose a tax on concert tickets, and when such taxes do exist, they are typically directed toward preventive campaigns, rather than being reinvested into the music sectors itself, as is the case in countries like France.

Conclusion: which policies for which music sectors?

In this article, we have mapped out the public funding for musiques actuelles in French-speaking Switzerland. More than simply adding up the resources allocated, we have sought to show that these instruments shape the music sectors. Artists are the beneficiaries who receive the largest number of subsidies. However, these represent less than 10% of the total budget allocated to musiques actuelles. This translates into very low average and median amounts. Subsidies provided to music venues are more substantial and more stable thanks to subvention agreements. However, these subsidies represent only a minority of their budgets. Festivals, for their part, are largely dependent on project-based funding. Finally, support structures are largely absent from support for musiques actuelles.

We can make three observations from these results to show how public funding shapes the music sectors in French-speaking Switzerland. First, unlike theater, there is not, strictly speaking, a public

sector. For artists, music venues and festivals alike, subsidies account for only a minority of their funding. These actors form an independent, associative third sector. Second, live music is the main way public authorities support popular music. As the Open Lab discussions revealed, cultural administrators are often uncertain about how to intervene in the recorded music market. One possible explanation is that they tend to use theatre as their primary reference point for understanding how *musiques actuelles* works, despite the significant limitations of this comparison.

Third, it is often emphasized that Switzerland is primarily an import market when it comes to music (Moon, Barnett, and Soo Lim 2010; Riom 2017; Rutten 1996). What emerges from our analysis is that policies play an important role in this situation. As it stands, public policy instruments fail to recognize music as an economic sector. However, the debates surrounding COVID-19 seem to have driven some changes. For example, the 'Kulturbotschaft 2025–2028' approved by the Federal Council in March 2024 highlighted the need to work for better compensation for cultural actors from digital platforms.¹³

These three conclusions offer a clearer understanding of popular music policies in French-speaking Switzerland. This sector exists only at the periphery of cultural action and does not constitute the focus of Swiss political authorities, who prioritize cinema at the federal level (Moeschler 2011) and theatre and dance at the municipal and cantonal levels (Christe 2023). Furthermore, unlike classical music, *musiques actuelles* lacks its own institutions (philharmonic halls and orchestras) whose funding, as public foundations, ensures a certain level of independence.

The approach developed in this article uses subsidies to examine the complex relationship between popular music and the state. This perspective goes beyond discussions focused solely on the financial amounts allocated by policy, allowing for an examination of the practical modalities of funding schemes and their tangible impact on the music sectors. It offers a deeper understanding of how subsidies influence artistic creation and industry development. Further research and comparisons with other regions or countries would be valuable, enhancing our understanding of how cultural policies for popular music are designed and implemented. Our findings provide a fresh perspective that moves beyond the policy intentions presented by administrations and governments, enabling an analysis of public policy instruments in practice and their consequences for the music sectors. As important questions are raised at the European level concerning platform regulation, copyright reform, and the remuneration of rights holders by music streaming platforms, the evolution of these policy instruments will play a crucial role in shaping the music market in the years to come.

Notes

1. French-speaking Switzerland includes the cantons of Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Valais and Vaud as well as the French-speaking parts of the canton of Berne. This territory is home to around a quarter of Switzerland's population (2,177,000 inhabitants in 2021).
2. On the links between music and the real estate market, see Picaud (2019) and Whiting (2023).
3. In a text from the same period, Rutten (1993) proposes formulating this question in terms of four problems: a) 'popular music as a problem' that needs to be regulated; b) 'youth as a problem, popular music as the solution,' which justifies certain cultural and social actions; c) 'popular music as a commercial product' that promotes the local economy; and d) 'popular music as high culture' that aims to promote cultural life.
4. La Blogothèque is certainly the best example of this special configuration, see Riom and Spanu (2023).
5. This sentence was uttered in 1997 by Ruth Dreifuss, then federal counselor in charge of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, to which the Federal Office of Culture is attached (quoted in Moeschler 2011).
6. Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office, public funding of culture: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/culture-medias-societe-information-sport/culture/financement/public.html#-1514623689>.
7. Based on the exchange rates of December 2019 (1 USD = 0,999 CHF and 1 EUR = 1,102 CHF), 63362,164 CHF is equivalent to USD 63,391,070 or EUR 57,542,332.
8. Swiss Federal Statistical Office, public funding of culture: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/culture-medias-societe-information-sport/culture/financement/public.html#-1514623689>.

9. This number is based on an analysis of the figures to which Swiss Music Export gave us access for our study. These were analysed separately and have not been included in the results presented here. For further details see (Camus et al. 2022).
10. Answer given when we contacted the organization for an interview.
11. Since 2022, the City of Geneva has been offering a two-year grant of CHF 50,000.
12. Swiss Federal Statistical Office, public funding of culture: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/culture-medias-societe-information-sport/culture/financement/public.html#-1514623689>.
13. The Kulturbotschaft is the main document guiding cultural policies at federal level.

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Albane Dunand Schlechten an advocate for the alternative music scene, she co-founded the club La Gravière in 2011 and managed it until the end of 2016, when she joined PETZI, the Swiss federation for clubs and festivals. Since early 2019, she has been the director of the Fondation romande pour la chanson et les musiques actuelles (FCMA). She also co-founded the label We Can Dance iT in 2016, which promotes a festive and egalitarian nightlife culture.

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Appendix

Table A1. Classification of support types.

project support	one-off support in response to a request for funding based on the presentation of a project
subvention	support arrangements established over time, sometimes within the framework of service agreements
contract	
grants and prizes	which include hybrid forms of support that are also generally one-off, but which in some cases can extend over several years. These types of support are often put out to tender or, in the case of prizes in particular, are used to reward certain beneficiaries.

Table A2. Classification of supported activities.

Artists	Creation	Composition, research
		Residence
		Repeat
		Recording (CD, Clip)
		Special projects
	Diffusion	Scholarship/Prize/Convention
		Concert
		Tour
		Marketing promotion
		Mentoring, networking, ad hoc training
Clubs and venues	Global support	Support for creation and distribution
	Non-categorizable	Lack of detail for categorization
	Operations	
	Infrastructure	
	Programming	
	Residence	
	Special projects	Anniversary, other publication
Festivals	Non-categorizable	Lack of detail for categorization
	Operations	
	Infrastructure	
	Programming	
	Special projects	Anniversary, other publication
Labels, structures and agencies	Non-categorizable	Lack of detail for categorization
	FCMA	
	Other	