

MUSIC

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**Not many know the historic city of Bologna was appointed UNESCO Creative City of Music back in 2006. This writer undertook a journey in a quest to uncover the city's musical heritage.**

# TUNES OF BOLOGNA

When in Bologna, the lively capital of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, you repeatedly hear that music is an important part of its cultural identity. Music is your constant companion everywhere; in museums, squares and the elegant porticoes that the city is famous for. Bologna emanates an unexpected dynamism and edginess, almost raw in its character.

While tourists flock to Venice, Milan, and Florence, Bologna quietly slips under the radar. It retains all of its authenticity; it is mostly Italian that you hear as you sit on the steps below the imposing but unfinished facade of the Basilica of San Petronio to people-watch or as you climb the 498 rickety wooden stairs of the 12th century Torre degli Asinelli, one of Bologna's two towers (Le Due Torri).

**This spread:** A view of Le Due Torri.

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Bologna feels like the kind of city where ideas, art and culture aren't just birthed but are also constantly evolving. It thrives with the youthful energy of students, who fill its medieval squares at all hours of the day and night with political debate, passionate street theatre, open-air concerts and after-hours revelry. But Bologna isn't just another student town; it is home to the oldest university in Europe founded in 1088 CE and has always been a powerhouse of cultural and artistic exchange.

In Bologna, a melody is never far away. The sounds of cello, violin, guitar and saxophone waft from street corners into busy squares, quaint gelaterias and the city's regal porticoes, their arches offering almost 40 km of respite on days of bright sunshine or rain. Squares bear names such as Piazza Verdi, named after the Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi. Wandering around Bologna's city centre is like being in a movie scene where modern life plays out against a historic backdrop and the background score changes every day; one day, it's classical and the next, jazz.

The city's relationship with music isn't new; Bologna became a leading cultural centre around the 12th century and its musical heritage only grew more illustrious over the centuries since. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it became home to institutions such as the Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna, the opera house Teatro Comunale, and the Museo internazionale e biblioteca della musica (International Museum and Library of Music). The town has also been home to distinguished musical personalities such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, André Grétry and Carlo Broschi (also known as Farinelli), who either studied, taught, or worked in Bologna at some point. In 2006, Bologna was named a UNESCO Creative City of Music in further recognition of its contribution to music as a host for international festivals, concerts, residencies and events.

**From top to bottom:** The buzzing Piazza Verdi, named after the Italian opera composer, Giuseppe Verdi; The city boasts a large student population giving it a youthful vibe; Catch melodies waft in from all directions in Bologna.





## MUSIC



**Top:** The opulent interiors of the Teatro Comunale di Bologna.  
**Above:** A few of the portraits at the International Museum and Library of Music.

### TREASURE TROVE OF MUSICAL HERITAGE

The International Museum and Library of Music is perhaps a fitting first stop to understand the magnitude of musical history in Bologna. Housed within Palazzo Sanguinetti, under frescoed ceilings dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, the museum is the remarkable collection of Padre Giovanni Battista Martini (1706–1784), a Franciscan friar and eminent music composer and teacher who also headed the prestigious Accademia Filarmonica, with rooms organised by artists and periods.

The astounding bit is that Father Martini accrued an extensive collection of documents, manuscripts, letters, treaties, signed musical scores, opera librettos, portraits, and musical instruments that trace the history of music through the centuries, never having set foot outside of Bologna! How? By using his connections to the most renowned musicians of the time, several who were or had been his students.

“In the 18th century, if you were a musician, you were kind of obliged to come to Italy,” says Enrico Tabellini, in charge of communication and events at the museum, as he guides me around the collection of manuscripts. “It was the Golden Age of Italian music. You would come to learn how to compose music the Italian way and to learn Italian, the language of music everywhere,” he adds.

“Everyone knew that if you wanted to have a lesson with Father Martini or seek his advice, you had to bring him a book. That is how he built this collection. He was considered the Google of music in the 18th century,” explains Tabellini.





**Left:** Musical instruments and documents at the International Museum and Library of Music. **Right:** The affable luthier, Bruno Stefanini at his workshop.



Then, he began to ask for portraits of his students and the most talented musicians of the time. "If Father Martini was the Google, this collection would be the Facebook," jokes Tabellini as he draws my attention to the selection of portraits from the original collection of over 300, including the likes of Johann Christian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi and soprano Farinelli.

He points to an original portrait of a 20-year-old Mozart. "There's a funny story about Mozart," he confides, "a mystery, still unsolved today." He talks of a 14-year old Mozart coming to Bologna in 1770 to study under Father Martini in the hope of enrolling in Accademia Filarmonica, the 18th-century Harvard of music, and earning the coveted title of 'Maestro Composer'.

To be successful, one had to pass a particularly challenging exam that is still administered to hopeful applicants today, and involves composing an original piece of music. "Mozart composed just one piece for the exam," says Tabellini, "that he supposedly aced in thirty minutes, but there are three different versions of it, of which two are here," he points to two documents encased in the glass display. The first, he explains, signed by Mozart, is full of mistakes, while the second, now believed to be a revision by Father Martini, is free of mistakes. The third, an exact copy of the second, but in a different handwriting was the one submitted to the commission and is still preserved by the Accademia Filarmonica. "So what probably happened is that Mozart cheated!

And so, there is hope for everyone," smiles Tabellini.

#### IN CONVERSATION WITH A VIOLIN-MAKER

After looking at myriad antique musical instruments at the museum, such as violas, serpent and kithara, I am curious about the heritage of luthiers in Bologna, the artists who build and repair stringed instruments. The luthiers' tradition of Bologna originated from the lute and slowly extended to other instruments. Instruments crafted in Bologna were regarded in high esteem and coveted by the finest musicians in the region and Europe.

I head out to meet with one of only four professional violin makers that now remain in the city, expecting the hint of self-importance that is often fittingly found in guardians of old skills and traditions. Instead, dressed in a crisp white shirt under a brown apron that perfectly matches the brown violas, violins, wooden shelves and tools, and off-white walls of his workshop, Bruno Stefanini greets me with a warm smile and talks candidly, as if to an old friend.

Of his 35 years as a professional violin maker who builds and repairs violins, violas and cellos, Stefanini says, "Violin-making school lasted four years and was a special project with the idea to preserve the tradition in Bologna for the future. Everyone knows about the city of Cremona and its famous luthier Antonio Stradivari (the man behind the famous Stradivarius violin), but very few know of the long and strong tradition here in Bologna."





**Left:** The impressive Piazza Maggiore bathed in evening light.

**Below:** Violinist Flavia Grottanelli belts out mellow music on Via Ugo Bassi.

“The old tradition comes from the passage – from teacher to pupil, when you go to a teacher’s shop and you sit with him, he doesn’t teach, he just passes on his knowledge,” he says of how new schools are structured differently. At age 19, it was clear that he wanted to become a *violinaio* or violin maker and it helped that he knew how to play the instrument, a prerequisite for the programme, “I thought, maybe I’ll become a better violin maker than a mediocre violin player.” Crafting instruments for professionals is a real labour of love; it takes him a month to build a violin and three months to build a cello, working eight hours a day. Of Bologna’s musical heritage, he says, “Of course, when you relate it to violins, violas and cello, you think of classical music. But I grew up listening to rock and roll, and punk rock music. In the 1970s, Bologna was the hub of rock and punk music. There were hundreds of local bands formed by youngsters like myself when I was a teenager. It was very active music-wise.”

#### MUSIC ON THE STREETS OF BOLOGNA

It’s only my second day in Bologna, and I’ve happily spent several hours wandering around the city on foot, on an imaginary walking trail of real melodies belted out by musicians. There is the powerful ballad of a singer on the corner of the central square, Piazza Maggiore, who sings

to a huge audience gathered around her on a bright Sunday afternoon; the captivating sound of the violinist on Via Ugo Bassi, her curly locks swaying to the mellow music; and the handsome saxophonist at the next street corner, who plays to a small but smiling group of students. When I finally sit down with a glass of wine in my apartment that evening, easy jazz floats in through the open windows that look over Piazza Maggiore, and I can’t decide whether it’s me who’s following the music or the other way around. ■



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#### QUICK FACTS

##### CURRENCY

1 Euro = 78.45 Indian rupees (approx.)

##### UPCOMING EVENTS

July 6–15: Varignana Music Festival, a summer classical music event that each year welcomes some of the most acclaimed international musicians in a series of stimulating concerts.

July 17–30: Since 1988 the Porretta Soul Festival, a tribute to Otis Redding has become the most prestigious European event entirely dedicated to rhythm & blues and soul music.

##### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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